

The Career of Robert Michelson, Merchant, Ship Master and Burgess of Kingston upon Hull 1464-1490

AUDREY M. HOWES

When Edward IV and Richard Duke of Gloucester returned from exile in Burgundy in 1471, the King's ship *Antony* was entrusted to Robert Michelson as the lodesman or pilot to steer the ship and the little fleet safely across the North Sea to landfall in England. Probably Robert Michelson was the most experienced mariner sailing from eastern England to the Low Countries at that time.

The first mention of Robert Michelson is in the custom accounts of Hull in March 1464, where his name is included as one of the merchants trading in wine, Swedish iron ore and herrings on the ship *Marie* of Hull.¹ In 1465 he is importing wine on the *Magdalen* of Camfere.² Later, in 1466, he is specifically mentioned as a merchant trading in Swedish iron ore on the ship *Christoffre* of Hull.³ In November 1466 he is described as a burgess of Kingston upon Hull and master of the ship *Christofer* of Hull.⁴ This establishes Robert as a burgess of Hull and a 'shipmaster' or navigator, and a merchant in his own right. It is possible that Robert traded as a merchant, or even as a part owner with shares in more than one ship, any of which he might command, and the custom accounts always state the master of the vessel not the owner.

Not only Hull merchants but merchants from York and Beverley were owners or part owners of vessels sailing out of Hull and these ships ranged in size from fifty tons to perhaps four or five hundred tons. They sailed mainly to the Low Countries across the 'narrow seas' to ports like Camfere (Veere), Westeinschouw (Westerschouwen) and Zierickezie (Zierikzee).⁵ Northern merchants used the great markets of Bruges and later Antwerp and exported cloth from Yorkshire to these centres where it was finished. As well as cloth, which was the main commodity, lead and grain also went out from Hull. Imports of a great variety of goods were recorded in the custom accounts, among them were wine, which had always been imported, but also dye-stuffs, ash and teasels, dried fruit and spices, and a wide range of manufactured goods for the home market.

By 1467 Robert was probably established as a merchant and a ship master among the merchant fraternity, and as an experienced and competent sailor as well. Few Hull ship masters were associated with one ship only, and they frequently changed after a year or two. As they were employed by the owners of

the vessels it could be suggested that the owners competed for the most experienced masters. Maybe by 1470 Robert owned as well as sailed his own ship and knew the coast of eastern England intimately, as well as the coast of the Low Countries and France.⁶ It is difficult to know where English ships were bound for after they left the port of Hull, as Hull custom accounts only recorded the ships' home port, and the next stage of their journey might be another part of the coast picking up merchandise before crossing the sea to the Low Countries. The custom officers also did not record the exact tonnage of the vessels and the Latin word for ship, *navis*, was the term used for all ships of whatever size or type.

In October 1470 Edward IV had fled from England with his brother, the Duke of Gloucester, and a few loyal friends to Burgundy. Louis of Gruuthuse extended his hospitality to Edward and Richard in The Hague and later at his house in Bruges. (The Duke of Burgundy did not officially recognise the presence of his brother-in-law Edward within his domain.)⁷ The two brothers must have met English merchants at Bruges and some of them lent Edward modest sums of money.⁸ Edward had been trading as a merchant himself,⁹ and it could be suggested that he was seeking allies among the merchant community that sympathised with the Yorkist cause. Robert Michelson came to the notice of Edward, how we do not know. Was he hired by the King as a navigator, or did he give his services free? The Duke of Burgundy was giving his grudging backing to a small flotilla of thirty-six ships, fourteen lent either by the Hansards or hired by Edward. With this small fleet Edward intended to set sail for the 'enterprise of England'.¹⁰

Robert Michelson was the lodesman on the King's ship the *Antony*, Mark Symondson was the master.¹¹ The ship belonged to the Burgundian Admiral Henry of Borselle, Lord of Veere, who was also the father-in-law of Louis Gruuthuse. Edward left Bruges for Arnemuiden on 19 February 1471, and embarked.¹²

It was now up to Robert to lead the little fleet of ships and about 1200 men back to England, but because of contrary winds they did not leave until 11 March. The weather was very stormy, North Sea storms especially in March and April can be treacherous, and Warkworth's *Chronicle* relates how the little fleet lost a ship, with horses.¹³ Eventually after trying to land in East Anglia, the weather forced them northwards towards the Humber. It is possible that Robert was heading for the shelter of the Humber estuary to escape the stormy weather which had now scattered the little fleet. Landfall was made after three gruelling days of tempest at the ruined port of Ravenser, the now vanished port at the mouth of the Humber.¹⁴ This landing in Lancastrian territory was a highly perilous operation, but on 15 March Edward was re-united with the rest of his fleet. Most of the ships could have been flat-bottomed and this enabled them to be beached anywhere along a coast that had sandy beaches.¹⁵ Large bands of armed men lay in wait for Edward, and Robert's home port of Hull refused to admit the King. What happened to the *Antony* and Robert we do not know, presumably he sailed the ship back to its home port of Veere. Eventually Edward bought her and the ship became one of several that he owned.¹⁶

Edward, now back on the throne of England rewarded services rendered and Robert was granted a hundred shillings a year for life on 13 February 1472, from

the custom and subsidies of Hull.¹⁷ This grant was continued by Richard III on 6 February 1484.¹⁸

Robert resumed his role of independent master, sailing out of Hull probably on his own ship the *James* of Hull. He is listed in the Hull customs accounts during this period 1471-1472. He left Hull on 4 November 1471, or thereabouts, with a cargo of grain and lead,¹⁹ and on this voyage misfortunes befell Robert and his ship, the crew and the merchants aboard her. They were captured by the French after a fierce conflict at sea, taken to France and had to be ransomed. Edward came to the rescue with a grant of sixty pounds in part payment of the ransoms of Robert and the merchants, out of the first moneys from the customs and subsidies of Hull. This grant was dated 13 February 1472.²⁰ A similar grant was made again in April 1475, from the customs and subsidies of the port of Southampton.²¹

By the end of February 1472²² Robert and his ship were back in Hull, but he left again in May with a mixed cargo, having been hired by burgesses of Kingston upon Hull.²³ This is the last time Robert is mentioned in the custom accounts of Hull until 1490. Nothing is known of his movements until May 1475, when he was commissioned by the King 'to take ships and vessels for the carriage of four thousand quarters of wheat for the victualling of the King's army to be sent to France for the recovery of that realm.' He was also to engage masters and mariners for the ships as well.²⁴ It is possible that Robert had been in the King's employ from 1472 on, but in fact no contemporary source exists to show this. Not until 1481 do we get evidence of him regularly being in the King's service. He is described as master of the King's ship called the *Mary*.²⁵ The King had other ships, namely the *Great Portingale*, the *Spanyard*, and *Mary Asshe*, the *Clement*, the *Prynse* and the *Mary of the Towre*.²⁶ Clearly the King had been trading with a small merchant fleet of his own, in all probability out of London, and very successfully too. He obviously chose the best masters to sail his ships. They are not listed in records as being in his service, but they may have been business partners and possibly even friends of Edward. In general Edward's trading activities have left very little trace.

Robert had a commission from the King for six months, dated 14 February 1481, to take mariners on the King's ship *le Mary de Towre*. He is described here as master, as the King was ordering an armed force to go to Scotland to resist his old enemy the King of Scots.²⁷ This commission also applied to other masters and ships belonging to the King. Richard, Duke of Gloucester, was the King's Lieutenant in the North and principal commander of this expedition. John, Lord Howard, was in command of the fleet for the operation at sea. Howard's own ship had as its master Robert Michelson, and this ship was one of fifteen, eight were to go to Scotland and the rest 'to keep the narrow sea.' After a short commando-type raid on the shipping in the Firth of Forth during the late summer of 1481, where eight ships were captured and others destroyed, Lord Howard was back in Harwich by the 17 August.²⁸ No doubt Robert played a major role in these activities, because on 27 November 1481 he was again rewarded by the King with an annuity of five pounds from the subsidies of the Port of London,²⁹ being at that time 'steersman' of the King's ship the *Mary de Towre* a three-masted ship.³⁰ If Robert had been the master of the *Mary Howard* at the time of the raid on the Firth of Forth this ship belonging to Lord Howard

was noted as having four masts and five sails each with a bonnet,³¹ indicating its large size. This is the last we hear of Robert from the Patent Rolls. In all probability Robert had been in the King's employ unofficially for the past ten years, helping Edward to amass a considerable amount of money from his trading activities.

Richard III confirmed the grant of the annuity out of the Hull customs in 1484 to Robert, but nothing is recorded about the other grants in the Patent Rolls. He also confirmed Edward's appointment in 1482 of Thomas Rogers as clerk of the king's ships.³² Robert it would seem was not employed by Richard III in any official capacity.

Little is known of Robert's career after 1482, but in 1490 what appears to be his name crops up again in the Hull custom accounts. He is master of the ship *Peter*, his name also appearing as exporting 'fourteen cloths not in grain'. Could this be the same man?³³ If so he would have been a ship master for about twenty-six years, and his age, roughly calculated, between fifty and fifty-five by 1490. In the absence of any records of his date of birth or early life, this is plainly only an assumption. It was a good age for a sea-going man to attain, especially as his career sailed in dangerous waters politically as well as literally.

Robert had served the Yorkist cause faithfully and was rewarded well by the King, and perhaps it was not politic for him to stay in England after 1485. Thomas Rogers, late one of the clerks of the King's ships of Richard III, was given a general pardon by Henry VII and his forfeited goods returned to him by 14 November 1486.³⁴ Could rumours of what was happening to the late King's associates have reached Robert so that he left England and perhaps even made his home abroad? This is only a suggestion as there is no evidence to support this hypothesis. No will has been found in the Diocese of York. Robert never owned or leased a house or land in Hull, according to the extensive records of the rentals and accounts of medieval Hull.

Robert Michelson's occupation variously described in documents as 'lodesman', 'master', 'steersman' and *nauclerus et ductor* needs some explaining. The navigation of a ship was a special task undertaken by a man trained in the craft of lodesmanship. Even if this person happened also to be the master of the ship his task as pilot was a separate obligation for which he received extra wages. Most navigational skills were probably transmitted by word of mouth and the personal training of a young mariner must have been of primary importance. Seamanship became very much a matter of individual skill.³⁵ At least five shipman guilds existed in England before the sixteenth century. The one in Hull by 1464 was a guild of ship-masters and mariners called the Holy Trinity Guild, so perhaps Robert's training had been in this Guild. To help in the art of navigation at sea, charts and compasses were used and a 'rutter', a pilot book, perhaps a corruption of the French *roulier*. With these aids a pilot was reasonably well equipped to navigate familiar waters. Time was recorded by sand-glass and a record kept in a log. Probably the pilot used the system of dead reckoning and most pilots would have been good at this. The moon also affected the tides, and this was determined by the rule-of-thumb method. Although Robert was often master and pilot he was specifically employed by the King as a pilot and rewarded for his skill as such. The terms 'lodesman', 'steersman', and *nauclerus et ductor* mean the man in charge of navigating the ship. The name 'master' was a word

used in the medieval sense as an official who exercised a general control in matters of administration and policy on board ship. The essential characteristic of the medieval system was its fluidity, and a far closer community of spirit existed in the medieval seaman.

Merchants' ships and mariners were also liable for naval service, as we can see from the commissions undertaken by Robert. The merchants' ships being used as transports, or being fitted up with fore-stern and top-castles as men of war. In fact it would seem that the preliminary to naval operations was an embargo on all shipping except fishing boats.³⁶

It could be reasonably suggested that Robert was called upon to serve as a navigator for Edward's ships because he was the best man for the job. It could also be suggested that in 1481 when Robert was master of the *Mary Howard*, the flag ship of John, Lord Howard, he was also navigator to the little fleet in the successful Northern expedition of the same year. It would seem that the King bought the *Mary Howard* for 1000 marks later that year from Lord Howard.³⁷

From the little evidence available Robert Michelson would seem to have been a very successful seaman. The aspects of his life set out in this short essay have only been examined at local and central government level. Research into the records of London or other English and continental sources might reveal more about this mariner, who came from Hull, gained the confidence of Edward IV and was not forgotten by him.

As a postscript: in the lay subsidy of 1524 there is listed in the Humber Ward of Hull a *Willus Michelson . . . in bonis xjs. xijd.* (worth 11s. 12d. in goods).³⁸

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Wendy R. Childs (ed.), *The Custom Accounts of Hull 1453-1490*. Yorkshire Archaeological Society Record Series, vol. 144 (1984), p.71.
2. *Ibid.*, p.73.
3. *Ibid.*, p.99.
4. *Ibid.*, pp.101, 112.
5. *Ibid.*, p.20.
6. Hull vessels brought wine from Bordeaux and pottery from south-west France from the Saintonge area.
7. Charles Ross, *Richard III*, London 1981, p.19.
8. Charles Ross, *Edward IV*, London 1974, p.160.
9. A. R. Myers (ed.), *English Historical Documents 1327-1485*, London 1969, p.291, no. 168. Also E. F. Jacob (ed.), *The Fifteenth Century 1399-1485*, Oxford 1961, p.591.
10. Charles Ross, *Richard III*, London 1981, p.20.
11. *Calendar of Patent Rolls 1467-1477*, pp.252, 303.
12. Livia Visser-Fuchs, Richard in Holland, 1470-1, *The Ricardian*, vol. 6, no. 82 (1983), pp.220-8.
13. John Warkworth, *A Chronicle of the First Thirteen Years of the Reign of King Edward the Fourth*, ed. J. O. Halliwell, Camden Society 1839, pp.13-14.
14. J. R. Boyle, *The Last Towns of the Humber*, Hull 1889, p.61.
15. R. C. Unger, *The Ship in the Medieval Economy 600-1600*, Montreal 1980, pp.163-169.
16. C. F. Richmond, English Naval Power in the Fifteenth Century, *History*, vol. 52 (1967), p.13.
17. *Calendar of Patent Rolls 1467-1477*, p.266.
18. *CPR. 1476-1485*, p.509.
19. *The Custom Accounts of Hull*, p.154.
20. *CPR. 1467-1477*, p.368.
21. *CPR. 1467-1477*, p.513.

22. *The Custom Accounts of Hull*, p.167.
23. *Ibid.*, p.169.
24. *CPR. 1467-1477*, p.526.
25. *CPR. 1476-1485*, p.240.
26. Richmond (see n.16), pp.12-15.
27. *CPR. 1476-1485*, p.240.
28. C. Scofield, *The Life and Reign of Edward IV*, London 1923, p.318.
29. *CPR. 1476-1485*, p.253.
30. Cora Scofield, *The Life and Reign of Edward IV*, vol. 2, p.414. It would seem that Edward had purchased this ship some time before the end of November 1481. According to Richmond 'Mary of the Towre' was already in Edward's hands by 1479. She was originally called the 'Caricon' (p.13).
31. J. P. Collier (ed.), *Household Books of John, Duke of Norfolk and Thomas, Earl of Surrey 1481-1490*, Roxburghe Club, London, 1884, p.3.
32. *CPR. 1476-1485*, p.242. Thomas Rogers appointed clerk of the king's ship, and also by Richard III, *CPR. 1476-1485*, p.533.
33. *Custom Accounts of Hull*, p.218.
34. *CPR. 1485-1494*, p.60, also p.70. Apparently Thomas Rogers was re-instated in 1486, as he was recorded as officer or keeper or clerk of the king's ships at 12d. a day wages.
35. Dorothy Burwash, *English Merchant Shipping 1460-1540*, Toronto 1947, pp.19-29, also p.9.
36. L. F. Salzman, *English Trade in the Middle Ages*, Oxford 1931, p.275.
37. Richmond (see n.16), p.14.
38. Hull Local Studies Library, Box reference L9, 702.