

Thomas Roger, Clerk of the King's Ships

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In my end is my beginning: I first wrote about Thomas Roger in my doctoral thesis fifty years ago.¹ I have not written of him since. Two things have prompted the present writing. First, I found in the Canterbury Oxfam Bookshop a copy of the *Camden Miscellany Volume XXIX*; one of the items, edited by Rosemary Horrox, is a Longleat manuscript, entitled by her 'Financial Memoranda of the Reign of Edward V';² secondly, a month or so later, Anne Sutton asked me to write a piece about Roger. Clearly (and not only coincidentally) I was bound to do something: this is that something.

The 'Financial Memoranda' had not been available to me in the early 1960s, and although I had read them on their appearance in 1987, I had disposed of my copy of the book and entirely forgotten their existence until rediscovering the volume this summer. They make for exciting reading for any Ricardian, indeed for any student of Yorkist England. I was particularly struck by the number of references to the king's ships and their importance to those who drew up the memoranda; the same applies to the man who administered them, Thomas Roger. I will begin with these references.

It is striking also what the priorities of those who drew up the memoranda were. The defence of Calais and Berwick and the keeping of the seas were their principal considerations (not, incidentally, any designs the Protector might have had on the throne); in other words, national defence. Sir Edward Woodville was the leader of the sea-keeping expedition; it was costly, as naval operations always were, always have been, and still are.³ Six of the late king's sixteen ships are mentioned by name; others unnamed were undoubtedly with Woodville. Among the five were the *Great Portingale*, bought in 1481 for the vast sum of £1000, the *Anthony*, which Edward IV had sailed in from the Low Countries in 1471 and bought shortly afterwards, and the *Grace Dieu*, a ship dating from the 1440s and rebuilt in 1473, a symbol of sovereignty from the time of Henry V, who also had a great ship of that name, and broken up in 1487 to be remade into Henry VII's *Sovereign*. The *Grace Dieu* was as much symbol as ship, a

¹ C.F. Richmond, 'Royal Administration and the Keeping of the Seas, 1422-1485', unpublished Oxford D.Phil. thesis, 1964. Thomas Roger is particularly noticed on pp. 433-444 and pp. 524-532.

² 'Financial Memoranda of the Reign of Edward V. Longleat Miscellaneous Manuscript Book II', ed Rosemary Horrox. *Camden Miscellany Vol. XXIX*, Camden Society 4th ser., vol. 34, The Royal Historical Society, London 1987, pp. 197-244.

³ 'Financial Memoranda', pp. 211, 220, 229, 234: nearer £4000 than £3000. Sir Roger Cotton in a carrack with 133 men equipped and victualled in the Thames Estuary may have been part of this force or some other (pp. 215-16): see under the transport of a French embassy out of Dover below.

symbol of Henry V we might say, so that Henry VII's remaking and renaming suggests he was wanting to break with the past rather than hark back to it: a significant gesture.⁴ The 'royal navy' was never sufficient to meet all the requirements of naval defence; privately-owned vessels formed the bulk of any sea-keeping fleet; they had to be hired, even when the task was as 'simple' as protecting ambassadors crossing the Straits of Dover. In May 1483 'a shippe of warre' was paid for 'the saufe gard of theym [a French embassy returning from Dover to Boulogne] over the see'.⁵

And so to Thomas Roger in the spring of 1483. He was paid his fee as clerk of the king's ships of £27 7s 6d by the customers of Dartmouth, who included Thomas Greyson, another man much occupied with seeing to naval defence in the West Country; he received £100 for an unspecified cause out of the customs revenues of Poole; he was paid £40 specifically for repairs to the *Anthony* 'and othir shippes', £20 for 'cabuls', and a further £8 'by a lettre under the signett' out of the customs of Sandwich.⁶ For more on the man who was pivotal in naval administration we must turn to the thesis.

He first comes to our notice in the 1460s. In 1462 he was master of the earl of Warwick's ship *Giles*; in 1468, as master of the *George of London*, owned by William Heryot, wealthy draper of London, he was captured by Danzigers in the Sound; in 1470 he captained Warwick's *Christopher* and during the Readeption the *Katherine Warwick*.⁷ First described as a mariner of East Greenwich in 1461, he was called a fishmonger in 1477, and in his will of 1488 he called himself citizen and vintner of London, both signs of his importance to men of these wealthy companies of London. He was only one of a number of seamen important in royal naval activity after 1475, and not perhaps foremost among them, but in 1480 he was appointed clerk of the king's ships, a post that had been in abeyance for many years; just how many is unclear, for one Peter Bowman was named to the post in 1464 but never received a single

⁴ The *Great Portingale*: 'Financial Memoranda', p. 238; Richmond, Thesis, p. 482. The *Anthony*: 'Financial Memoranda', pp. 218-9, 230; Richmond, Thesis, pp. 471-73, the ship was the special responsibility of Thomas Roger, he having been its purser and master; he was very probably still the latter. The *Grace Dieu*: 'Financial Memoranda', p. 230 ('Also the Gracedue to be rememberd that she perisshe not') and p. 237, where it is disclosed more than £70 had been spent on her: she was a costly item in any royal budget, and had been all her somewhat unseaworthy life; see Richmond, Thesis, as good as *passim* but especially pp. 475-78.

The three other king's ships mentioned in the 'Financial Memoranda' were the *Bark of Newcastle* (being repaired) p. 218, the *Carvel of Eu* (captained by the redoubtable John Davy) p. 219, and the *Caricon*, a purchase of 1478 never used as a fighting ship only as a (royal) cargo carrier, p. 239.

⁵ 'Financial Memoranda', p.239. The warship was almost certainly the *Christopher of Sandwich*, captained by Richard Lockwood in 1482 (as in 1483): TNA, E404/77/3/41.

⁶ 'Financial Memoranda', pp. 218, 219, 236, 238.

⁷ Richmond, Thesis, pp. 435-36, p. 378 footnote, and p. 388, an even more extensive footnote, and *Hansisches Urkundenbuch (HUB)*, ed K. Kunze *et al.* 11 vols, Halle and Leipzig 1876-92, vol. 9, nos 478, 519.

disbursement from the exchequer for any task in the succeeding years.⁸ There are two reasons for this. First, the king only had one sea-going ship, the *Margaret*; the other, the *Grace Dieu*, is unheard of between 1463 and 1471. Secondly, the earl of Warwick with a fleet of a dozen or so ships appears to have been managing English naval activity such as it was before the debacle of 1468 in the Sound; thereafter John, Lord Howard became prominent and stayed so for the rest of Edward's reign, most notably in the war against Scotland in 1482, when observing the military single-mindedness of Richard, Duke of Gloucester, he became his man (until death). The career of Thomas Roger was no doubt delayed by his attachment to Richard, Earl of Warwick, and his non-attachment to John, Lord Howard; by 1480, however, his worth had been recognised and because by then the king had what might justifiably be called a 'fleet' of eight ships Thomas was chosen as the man to oversee their maintenance.

Although his patent of appointment was dated 12 December he had been acting as clerk since 1 August 1480; he was to be paid from that date at the rate of a shilling a day for himself and sixpence a day for a clerk and at two shillings a day when riding about the business of preparing and equipping ships.⁹ War with the Scots had been decided on by the end of 1480: the appointment of Roger was undoubtedly connected with that decision. Nonetheless, lacking any of his accounts and with the informative Tellers Rolls also being wanting for Easter and Michaelmas terms of 1481 his role in the activity of that year is obscure. The *Howard Household Books* fill the gap so far as John, Lord Howard's naval expedition is concerned, and we know of a second fleet patrolling off the Thames and in the Straits led by Avery Cornborough. At least five king's ships were involved in one or other (or perhaps both) of these forces, but of the part taken by Thomas Roger we are ignorant.¹⁰ The following year is different: though we are still without his accounts there is greater evidence of his hectic involvement in the naval aspects of the Scottish war. In the course of 1481 the number of king's ships had doubled, from eight to sixteen, most, if not all, purchased: in 1482 Thomas Roger was the man in charge of a royal navy.¹¹

⁸ Richmond, Thesis, pp. 433-35.

⁹ Richmond, Thesis, p. 437: the references to what was a complicated retrospective procedure are given in a footnote.

¹⁰ Richmond, Thesis, pp. 361-5. There was a third force at sea off the west coast of Scotland; it was commanded by Sir Thomas Fulford: TNA, C 81/1390/10. The king reviewed the Howard and Cornborough fleets at Sandwich; guns were fired in salute and the trumpeters of the *Grace Dieu* received five shillings (for blowing a fanfare) on Corpus Christi Day, 21 June 1481: Kent Record Office, Sandwich Borough Records, Treasurers Accounts, 1481-82, F at 7 (they were numbered fifty years ago). William Combersale, a rival to Thomas Roger where occupation about the king's ships and naval action is concerned, was busy this year, but then with a war to be fought it was all hands to the pumps (so to speak).

¹¹ Richmond, Thesis, pp. 440-42. He was, for example, responsible for the royal ship *Prince* throughout its active service in 1482; she had as many as 360 soldiers aboard for six weeks at one

We know he kept accounts. In May 1482 they had been audited, or rather those he had kept over the period 1 August 1480 to 2 February 1482 had been.¹² It is most unlikely that a similar audit was carried out in May 1483: there is no sign of one in the 'Financial Memoranda'. We have seen in that document, however, that Roger was acting (and paid) as clerk of the king's ships, and there is further such evidence in British Library Harleian MS 433 for 1484.¹³ A pardon of 30 January 1485 which included such debts as he owed the crown probably relates to his continuing in office, for on 24 March 1485 he was granted for life the office of keeper and clerk of the king's ships, his riding expenses being increased by a third from two to three shillings a day. Thomas Gale, the other customs officer at Dartmouth with Thomas Greyson, was to be associated with Thomas Roger in the office, but it was Thomas Roger who did the work in the few remaining months of Richard's reign.¹⁴ There were far fewer king's ships to be seen to, Sir Edward Woodville being chiefly the culprit when he disappeared over the horizon in 1483 with the *Trinity* and the *Falcon*; despite Richard III buying three ships and possibly acquiring others as prizes in the sea war against Brittany, there were apparently no more than ten in 1483 and only eight in 1484. Nevertheless, there seems no reason to doubt my judgement of fifty years ago that Richard would have continued his brother's 'development' of a royal navy: Bosworth delayed that process until the reign of Henry VIII.¹⁵

Thomas Roger, after receiving a pardon in November 1485 was reappointed clerk of the king's ships in February 1486. He continued in office until his death two years later, when he was replaced by a former colleague, William Combersale.¹⁶

What of Thomas's other life? Not much can be said, at any rate not by me, and most of what follows stems from his will, the first medieval will I ever consulted: in the basement of Somerset House in the original bulky register on a winter's afternoon in 1960.¹⁷ Apart from the will (to which we will come in a

point, 300 for a month at another; she was berthed at Ipswich undergoing repairs for three weeks at some other time: TNA, E 405/70.

¹² For the complexities involved in the documentary journey towards this statement, see Richmond, Thesis p. 439, footnote.

¹³ *BL Harleian MS 433*, ed R. Horrox and P. Hammond, 4 vols, London 1979-83; I have not the published version by me. For Richard's reign, see Richmond, Thesis, pp. 524-27.

¹⁴ Richmond, Thesis, pp. 527-28.

¹⁵ Richmond, Thesis, pp. 533-41. C.F. Richmond, 'English naval power in the fifteenth century', *History*, vol. 52 (1967), p. 13 nn. 22, 24.

¹⁶ Richmond, Thesis, pp. 528, 532. For the reign of Henry VII, other authorities need to be consulted; alas, I am unacquainted with the scholarly work of the last fifty years.

¹⁷ TNA, PROB 11/8, f. 72, for a microfilm copy of which I am grateful to Linda Clark at the History of Parliament. My 1964 reference was PCC 8 Milles, p. 72: Thesis, p. 531. The will is dated 25 February 1488 and was proved 16 June 1488. The will of his widow, Joan Roger, of 1495, proved 1496, is given in full in *The Church Records of St Andrew Hubbard East Cheap, c1450-*

moment), there were licences granted to Thomas to trade to Iceland in 1482 and to carry pilgrims to Compostella in 1484.¹⁸ Others may have found evidence of his involvement in the wine trade. 'His progress', I wrote in 1964, 'from mariner in the 1460s to fishmonger in the 1470s, to vintner in the 1480s demonstrates his prosperity'. That his maritime career included serving Richard, Earl of Warwick, a man who had first-hand experience of war at sea, and service to three very different monarchs, eventually in the key position of clerk of the king's ships, demonstrates also that he was, to say the least, a man good at the job. And so to the will.

Thomas was principally concerned to have prayers said for his soul, the souls of his parents, and the soul of Edward IV in the church of the Dominicans, the Blackfriars, in London, on the north side of the nave of which church he was to be buried 'ayenst the buryelle of Maistresse Lytton there'. His parish church was St Andrew Hubbard in East Cheap, where he had a house; he also had property in the parish of All Hallows the Less in Thames Street. Further off he owned land in East Greenwich and Charlton in Kent. He left five marks to the Blackfriars and pardoned them a debt of £10 they owed him. Otherwise, apart from a bequest of £10 to Joan Goyse, his goddaughter, 'being with me servaunt', to be given to her when she came of age or was married by Thomas's widow, Joan, all his goods and chattels were to be equally divided between the widowed Joan and her son, John Mone. His landed estate was to go in the first instance to Joan for life, thereafter to John Mone and his heirs, and if there were no heirs it (and the property in Thames Street) was to be sold: £100 to be spent on vestments for the service of prayer to be offered in the Dominican church, the remainder on good works including the repair of highways around London. The only property not to be sold at that juncture was the house in East Cheap which was to be administered by the Vintners Company, who were to continue to maintain the service at the Blackfriars. The priest celebrating there was to have five marks yearly from Joan in her lifetime, and she was to continue paying that sum even if she remarried; if John Mone came into the property he was to pay £5 annually for the prayers. Whatever the eventuality, those prayers were to be kept up, and at each mention of them in the will the soul of Edward IV was invoked: what does that say about Thomas's relation with that king? Remembrance says something surely.

His executors were to be Joan, John Mone, and Ralph 'Estry', alderman and fishmonger of London (Astry, mayor 1493-94 and knighted); the supervisor was to be William Mariner, salter of London: he and Ralph were to be appropriately rewarded for their trouble, Ralph with £5 and Thomas's 'best ryng of gold' and William with forty shillings and 'my hope [hoop] of gold'. Joan's first husband, Mr Mone, and Ralph Astry and William Mariner are

c1570, ed C. Burgess, London Record Society, vol. 34 (1999), item 235, pp. 215-17. William Mariner salter of London acted as her supervisor and her son John Mone was the only executor.

¹⁸ Richmond, Thesis, p. 532.

traceable by historians of late medieval London, but I doubt that what may be known about them will greatly illumine the life of Thomas Roger. It is a pity, for one would dearly care to know a good deal more of such a man. As it is, what we are able to tell allows us to conclude that Thomas Roger was a man of merit as well as substance. It also brings me to restate what was said fifty years since: late medieval naval history deserves more than the peripheral place in a national narrative that it has hitherto had. There was life aboard ship before the *Mary Rose* turned turtle and Thomas Roger was the man who in his day mainly saw to it that there was.