

Graffin Prankard

An Eighteenth-century Bristol Merchant and the Baltic Trade

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The attention focused on Bristol's Atlantic trade during the eighteenth century, and the major part which the port played in the traffic in slaves, tend to obscure the importance of the commerce with European ports, particularly with the Baltic states. One Bristol merchant who had no dealings in slaves but was greatly involved in the Baltic trade over many years was Graffin Prankard. His career illustrates many aspects of Bristol's commercial activity during the first half of the eighteenth century, the variety of goods traded, the range of destinations, the methods of trade and the close connections between the merchant families especially within the Quaker community. Many of these features have been described elsewhere, and this paper will concentrate particularly on his trade in the Baltic.

Graffin Prankard's life can be briefly summarised. He came from a Quaker family living in Somerton where his father was a successful maltster who had invested in land around Somerton and at Lymsham on the Somerset coast. In 1708 Graffin Prankard married Sarah, the daughter of a successful Quaker merchant of Bridgwater, William Alloway. The newly-married couple moved to Bristol where they rapidly established close links with the Quaker merchant community. They lived in a house on St Augustines Back which was leased from the Dean and Chapter of Bristol cathedral and where Graffin Prankard began the multifarious trading activities which were to occupy the rest of his life. He also rented a cellar behind St Stephens church and a loft in Prince Street.

Many of his dealings were with other Quaker merchants, such as the Champions, Harfords, Tyndalls, Reeves and Goldneys, and he took as his apprentice Caleb Dickinson, a member of another wealthy Quaker family. Caleb Dickinson was later to marry Prankard's daughter and only child, Sarah, and to purchase the Kingweston estate in Somerset where the family remained as important landowners until the mid-twentieth century.

In 1710 Graffin Prankard entered into partnership with Abraham Darby, and the supply of cast-iron goods from Coalbrookdale was to provide an important element of Prankard's export trade. Much of this trade was with the West Indies and the American colonies. Ships returning across the

Atlantic brought sugar, molasses, rum, logwood and rice. Prankard also dealt in hides, tallow and linen from Ireland, fish from Newfoundland, Cornish tin, lead from the Mendips and various export cargoes including cider, cheese, clothing, tools, lead shot and even Hotwells water. He built up a large trade in salt which was brought down the Severn to Bristol and distributed widely throughout the west of England.

At first his cargoes were entrusted to the ships of various other Bristol merchants or to ships which he chartered, but in 1724 his own ship the *Parham Pink* (100 tons) was launched, and in 1732 a much larger ship the *Baltick Merchant* (226 tons) was built for him in Bristol by Sidenham Teast at a cost of £2,744. As was usual with Bristol merchants, however, his ships continued to carry the goods of several different owners, and Prankard combined with others for some trading ventures. From his surviving letter books and personal papers, Prankard emerges as a cautious, fussy, querulous man, closely attentive to his business affairs, fearful of being cheated, constantly complaining to suppliers about quality and condition of goods, and always concerned with maximum profits and the avoidance of expense. His letters to his agents and to the masters of his ships are full of grumbles about waste, inefficiency or expense, and his letters to Abraham Darby contain a catalogue of complaints about the quality of the articles supplied, tile costs and the lack of care by the trow owners responsible for transport down the Severn. For example, writing to the master of the *Parham Pink* in 1733 with orders to sail immediately for Stockholm to load with 25 tons of iron and 15 tons of deal boards, Graffin Prankard complained that the expenses incurred on the previous voyage had been very high, and ordered:

'Haul more close this voyage and avoid putting into harbours if possible by any means, except Stockholm. For when you come about in harbours there is generally a great expense attends ... there is a necessity for the utmost frugality in husbanding every penny of money to the best advantage.
..So wish thee a good voyage and a safe return ..'

A major part of his trade involved the import of timber, taliow, flax, hemp, pitch, tar and iron from the Baltic. As with the traffic in slaves, Bristol's trade with the Baltic involved a complex series of voyages. A typical pattern was for one of Prankard's ships to leave Bristol in December or January with a

mixed cargo of so-called 'European goods' bound for Charlestown, South Carolina. The goods were exchanged for a cargo of rice and logwood and the ship returned across the Atlantic by May or June. The logwood was unloaded at an English port, but the rice was then taken to Hamburg or Rotterdam for sale. From there the ship sailed under ballast to the Baltic, calling at Gothenburg, Copenhagen, Danzig, Stockholm, Riga or St Petersburg and collecting a cargo of iron, timber, pitch, tar, turpentine, flax, sail-cloth, hemp and cordage with which she returned to Bristol by September or October. The *Parham Pink* undertook several such voyages under her master Nathaniel Alloway, one of Prankard's Quaker relatives. Likewise, the *Baltick Merchant* on her maiden voyage in 1732 left Bristol for South Carolina in January, returning in May with a cargo of rice. She called at Cowes to obtain the documents necessary for the re-export of goods from the British colonies, and then sailed for Hamburg where the rice was sold. From Hamburg she sailed to St Petersburg and returned to Bristol in October 1732 with 360 tons of iron and timber. The profit on the voyage amounted to £575 12s 11d of which Graffin Prankard had £479 14s 1½d, and the ship's master, George Mackenzie, had £95 18s 9½. On a similar voyage in 1735 the *Baltick Merchant* took a mixed cargo of manufactured goods, furniture, clothing, tools, cider, cheese and Hotwells water to South Carolina. She left in January and returned to Cowes with a cargo of rice in June: the rice was then taken to Hamburg for sale, and in July she proceeded under ballast to Gothenburg, finally returning to Bristol in October with a cargo of iron and timber. The profit on the voyage was £535 8s 0½d. Not all voyages were so profitable. In 1731 the *Parham Pink* brought a cargo of rice and logwood from South Carolina. The rice was taken to Hamburg, and the ship then sailed to Stockholm where she loaded a cargo of iron and deal boards for Bristol. The costs of the voyage, including fitting out the ship, crew, agent's commission, harbour dues, pilotage and other necessary expenses amounted to £600 1s 7d, while the sale of the logwood, rice, iron and deal came to £664 10s 9d. bringing in profit for the whole enterprise of £64 9s 2d.

To manage this complex trade, Graffin Prankard employed agents in all the major ports at which his ships called. As well as numerous agents in the various American ports, his letter books contain lengthy correspondence with agents such as Francis Jennings, a major iron exporter in Stockholm, William Vigor in St Petersburg, Coysgame and Lloyd in Rotterdam, David Skinner in Hamburg and Muilman & Son in Amsterdam. A stream of precise instructions was sent to agents in the Baltic as to the

quantity, quality, weight and profile of the iron required, accompanied by complaints about prices and demands for reduction.

One of the most interesting features of Graffin Prankard's trade in iron from the Baltic is the evidence in his account books for the way in which the iron was distributed in small quantities from Bristol to blacksmiths and dealers throughout the west country and south Wales. This clearly illustrates Bristol's position as 'the metropolis of the west'. Iron was sent by carriers' carts throughout Gloucestershire, Wiltshire, Somerset and Dorset; iron was also sent by trow up the Severn to the Midlands, while other consignments were carried to many places in south Wales.

Until 1737 Graffin Prankard's affairs prospered. His various trading activities in iron, rice, logwood, timber pitch, tar, salt and many other minor commodities flourished and brought considerable wealth which was invested in land around Somerton, and he also inherited land at Lymsham from his father. In spite of his wealth, however, Prankard and his wife, Sarah, continued to live modestly in their rented house on St Augustine's Back. But while successful Bristol merchants could make large fortunes, there was inevitably a large element of risk and potential disasters lurked always in the background. This is clearly illustrated by the succession of calamities which struck Graffin Prankard. First, his agent in Charlestown, South Carolina, Paul Jennings, died leaving his affairs in total confusion and with large outstanding debts owing to Prankard. Next his great ship the *Baltick Merchant* ran aground in Charlestown, damaging the vessel and spoiling her cargo of rice. This was followed by the total loss of the sloop *Seaflower* which had been built in Bristol for Prankard in 1738. She was sunk in a storm whilst en route for St Petersburg under ballast. The most serious disaster occurred in June 1740 when the *Baltick Merchant* under the command of Nathaniel Alloway and with a crew of eighteen men was returning from South Carolina with rice, logwood and several passengers. Just off the Isles of Scilly she was attacked and eventually taken by a Spanish privateer, after a stout resistance in which two crewman were killed. Most of Prankard's dealings were carried out on credit, and when news of the this loss reached Bristol there was a rush of creditors to Prankard's house demanding immediate payment. Unable to meet the many claims being made upon him, Prankard was only saved from total ruin by the intervention and help of other Quaker merchants, and above all by the actions of his son-in-law, Caleb Dickinson, who

virtually took over the running of Prankard's business.

Thereafter, although Prankard did continue to trade on his own account, with the *Parham Pink* making several more voyages, and cargoes of salt continuing to arrive by Severn trows, he never resumed his large-scale activities. He devoted more and more of his time to his farming and land-holding interests. By the time of his death in 1756 he had ceased to trade altogether, and his will makes no mention of any ships or merchandise. His lands and property were left to his son-in-law, Caleb Dickinson, who had purchased the manor and large estate of Kingweston near Somerton in 1741.

Sources

The major source of information is contained in Prankard's accounts, letter books and personal papers which were preserved among the Dickinson papers and are now in the Somerset Record Office. (DD/DN 105-110. 122-7. 144)

Some extracts from Prankard's correspondence are included in Minchinton. W.E., ed., 'The Trade of Bristol in the Eighteenth Century'. *Bristol Record Society* XX (1957). 101-22

Accounts of Prankard's career are to be found in Bettey. J.H., 'Graffin Prankard: An Eighteenth-Century Bristol merchant', *Southern History* 12 (1990) 34-47

Bettey. J.H., 'From Quaker Traders to Anglican Gentry: The Rise of a Somerset Dynasty'. *Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society* 135 (1991) 1-10

For an account of the dramatic events surrounding the loss of the Baltick Merchant in 1740 see Bettey. J.H., 'The Capture of the Baltick Merchant'. *The Mariners 'Mirror* 76 (1990) 35-40