

CABOT AND BRISTOL'S AGE OF DISCOVERY

The Bristol Discovery Voyages 1480 -1508

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INTRODUCTION

EUROPE'S DISCOVERY OF THE AMERICAS in the 1490s was one of the most important events in the history of the world. New crops, animals and foodstuffs transferred across continents. Horses, pigs and wheat transformed the economies and societies of the Americas, while potatoes, maize, and cassava did the same for Europe, Asia and Africa. Meanwhile, the Old World diseases inadvertently introduced to America decimated the indigenous population, allowing the rapid conquest and colonisation of Central and South America by the Spanish and Portuguese. Once there, they founded plantations and silver mines that made them rich, establishing forms of commercial exploitation that others, such as the English, would copy in North America during the seventeenth century.

Ask people today about the voyages of the late-fifteenth century and many will recall that 'In fourteen hundred and ninety two, Columbus sailed the ocean blue.'¹ Yet Christopher Columbus never ventured beyond the Caribbean. His early expeditions explored the Bahamas, Hispaniola and Cuba, and when he reached the mainland in 1498, his landing place was the coast of modern-day Venezuela, in South America. Neither he, nor any of the other explorers from Spain, visited North America before 1513.²

Although the Spanish did not explore to the north in the decades after 1492, they knew North America existed and even marked it on their maps. In 1500, a Spanish cartographer and explorer, Juan de la Cosa, created a world map that included the northern continent and the identity of those who had been there. The map marks a long section of coast with five English flags and the note that this was 'the sea discovered by the English'. Those explorers were the men who sailed from Bristol under the flag of Henry VII, King of England. The most famous of them was the navigator John Cabot, known in his native Venice as Zuan Chabotto. His 1497 voyage in the *Matthew* of Bristol resulted in Europe's discovery, or rediscovery, of North America. Yet his expedition was not the first exploration

voyage launched from Bristol and it was not the last. Between 1480 and 1508 Bristol sent a series of expeditions into the Atlantic to search for new lands and trade routes. This book is the story of those endeavours: a tale that has Cabot at its heart, but which began decades earlier. That is why we need to start, not with Cabot, but with Bristol and the world from which the voyages sprang.

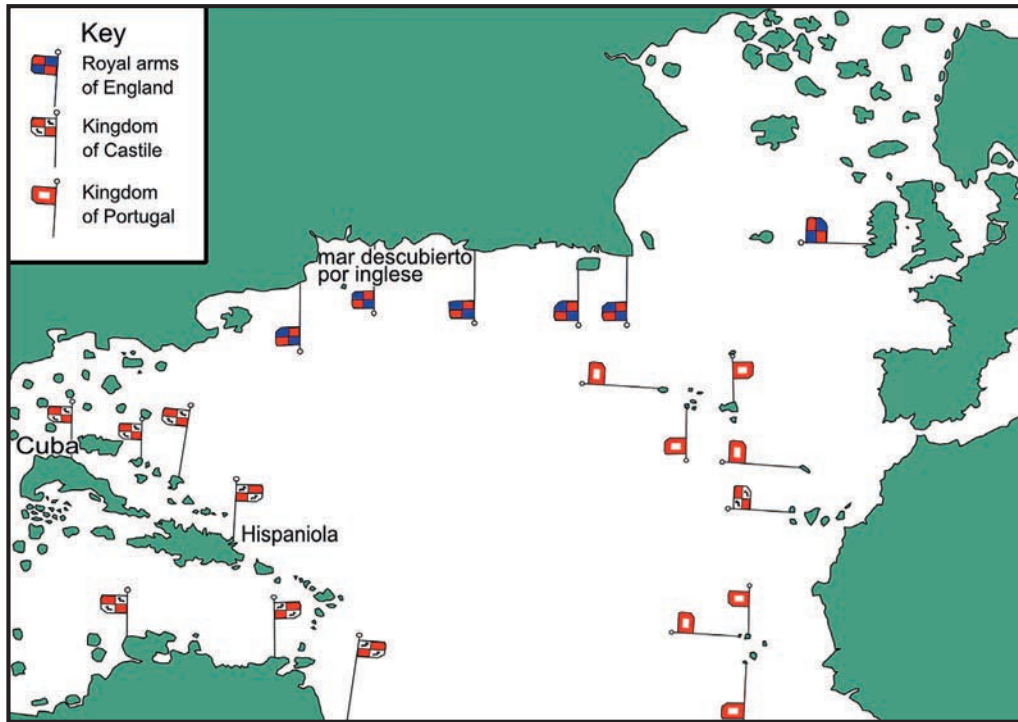


Fig 1 | 1500 AD: The North Atlantic in Juan de la Cosa's Map with English flags marking the coast 'discovered by the English' in North America. The Castilian flags record the Caribbean islands and the north coast of South America explored by the Spanish. Portuguese and Spanish flags on the Atlantic islands off Africa mark the recently-established colonies in the Azores, the Canaries and the Cape Verde Islands

1 BRISTOL IN THE AGE OF DISCOVERY

Fifteenth-century Bristol was England's leading provincial centre and the second port of the realm. By modern standards it was small, with a population of just eight thousand. Yet in a pre-industrial country of two million people, this was enough to make Bristol the regional hub for Somerset, Gloucestershire, South Wales and much of the West Midlands. The town itself was just a mile across: a visitor entering from the east on the London road could walk to the western shipyards in half-an-hour. In the process they would pass the Norman castle, the High Cross, the town's fine churches and the tall timber-framed houses of the port's great merchants. But what often impressed visitors most were the ships, glimpsed first down side alleys leading off the



Plate 2 | Bristol's High Cross and city gates as depicted in its late-fifteenth century town chronicle (Bristol Record Office, MS 04720)

4 CABOT'S PLAN: LONDON AND BRISTOL

On 5 March 1496, Henry VII granted 'John Cabot, citizen of Venice' the right, by 'letters patent':

*to sail to all parts, regions and coasts of the eastern, western and northern sea, under our banners, flags and ensigns...to find, discover and investigate whatsoever islands, countries, regions or provinces of heathens and infidels, in whatsoever part of the world placed, which before this time were unknown to all Christians.*¹

If Cabot succeeded, he and his heirs would enjoy the profit from any lands occupied or trade established. For his part the King would receive one fifth of all profits made from the enterprise. As with a modern patent, the grant gave the holder the sole right to exploit his 'product'. That meant the King's subjects could only sail to any lands discovered with Cabot's permission. But the grant did more than this: since Cabot's ships would be sailing under the King's colours, any attack on the explorers would be treated as an attack on the King. Foreign powers would know that, if they interfered with the expedition, England would retaliate. So while Henry VII did not pay for the venture, the legal and political guarantees were significant.

Obtaining the patent was crucial to Cabot: without it, his voyages might not have taken place. The grant, however, represented the end of a process, not the beginning of one. A poor Italian merchant could not have obtained a royal privilege like this on his own; just to get an audience with the King required influential backers. But who were these people and why did they help this bankrupt Venetian?

It used to be assumed that Cabot's supporters all came from Bristol. After all, it was on a Bristol ship, with Bristol men, that Cabot sailed. Moreover, contemporary commentators made clear that the port's merchants played a key part in the enterprise. This is apparent from a letter sent on 18 December 1497 by Raimondo



Plate 20 | The 'office copy' of the grant to John Cabot and his sons
(TNA: C76/178 m.8)

de Raimondi de Soncino, the Milanese ambassador to England. Soncino's letter to his master, the Duke of Milan, discusses both the voyage undertaken by Cabot the previous summer and the one planned for 1498.² The ambassador, who had no reason for exaggerating Bristol's importance, noted that when Cabot returned four months earlier, he would not, as a 'foreigner and a poor man' have been believed at Court 'had it not been that his companions, who are practically all English and from Bristol, testified that he spoke the truth'. Soncino then went on to say of the plans for the 1498 voyage that 'the leading men in this enterprise are from Bristol, and great seamen.'



Plate 22 | Ludovico Maria Sforza, Duke of Milan. His ambassador's letters home are an important source of information concerning John Cabot.
(Victoria and Albert Museum)³



Plate 21 | Henry VII's great seal, which would have been attached to the actual letters patent given to John Cabot

Clues as to why Bristol supported Cabot can be found in the letters patent. While this was issued to the explorer, such grants could be assigned to others, in whole or part. In the same way that modern venture capitalists will buy shares in an enterprise from an entrepreneur who has a patent, Cabot could give away part of his rights to others in return for the money needed to fund his expeditions. In theory such investors could have come from anywhere. In practice, a clause in Cabot's grant made it particularly likely that Bristol's merchants and, indeed, the port's broader community, would support him. This clause was the stipulation that all ships operating under the patent should use the port of Bristol 'at which they are bound and holden only to arrive'. All future trade was to be conducted through Bristol. This made investment in the enterprise particularly attractive to the port's merchants. It would



also benefit the town more generally, since more trade would flow through it if Cabot's plans succeeded.

During the sixteenth century, Lisbon and Seville became two of the richest cities in Christendom precisely because the Portuguese and Spanish monarchs decreed that all extra-European trade should pass through these ports. The result was that the fortunes made from colonial commerce were not limited to those who were directly involved in it; many people in Seville and Lisbon became rich by providing ships, provisions and services to the trade. With Bristol being granted very similar monopoly rights in 1496, the potential rewards for the port and its inhabitants were as great as they were for Cabot.⁴

Plate 23 | The town quays of the port of Bristol in 1673: detail from Millerd Map (Bristol Record Office: Photo Roger Leech)

While Bristol's role in Cabot's voyages has always been clear, the significance of the Italian community in London has only recently become apparent. During the 1960s Dr Alwyn Ruddock, an historian and lecturer at the University of London, found documents that cast new light on how and why the voyages came about. Ruddock's discoveries showed that part of Cabot's funding came from Italian banks based in London. She also suggested that his chief supporter in England was Brother Giovanni Antonio de Carbonariis, an Augustinian friar from Milan. He was no ordinary friar: Carbonariis was an important ecclesiastical administrator, with responsibility for collecting the Pope's taxes in England. He was also a diplomat who served as Soncino's guide and advisor when he arrived in England as ambassador for the Duke of Milan. If Cabot had the support of such a man, it would go a long way to explaining how the would-be explorer got access to the King. That Carbonariis was involved in the later voyages is certainly known, in that he sailed on Cabot's 1498 expedition. Ruddock, however, appears to have found evidence that the friar was the explorer's chief supporter from the very start, suggesting that Carbonariis arranged Cabot's audiences with the King and, later on, secured the explorer's rewards.⁵



Plate 24 | Austin Friars, London. The friars ministered to London's Italian community, and Cabot may have lodged there.⁶

The great tragedy here is that, while Alwyn Ruddock's research was ground-breaking, she never published her findings and on her death in December 2005 she ordered the destruction of her draft book, her notes, and the photographs she had taken of her sources. Since that time the authors of this book, along with our collaborators, have sought to relocate the twenty-three new documents Ruddock said she had found during the four decades she spent investigating the Cabot voyages.⁷ Our research is discussed in a number of academic articles and document transcriptions that can be accessed online. To date, not all of the documents Ruddock found have been re-discovered, which makes it impossible to verify all her claims. On the other hand, we have re-located many of her sources. These include the accounts of the Bardi, a famous Florentine banking house that had a branch in London. One of the Bardi's commercial ledgers includes a record of two payments, totalling 50 nobles (almost £17) to John Cabot in April and May 1496 to help fund his expedition to search for 'the new land'. Although their contribution would only have covered a part of Cabot's expedition costs, it confirms that he received money from the Italian merchant community in London.⁸



Plate 25 | Late fifteenth-century decoration of a beam and ceiling in the Bardi's house in Florence. It includes a frieze of nautical imagery
(Photo: Francesco Guidi Bruscoli)

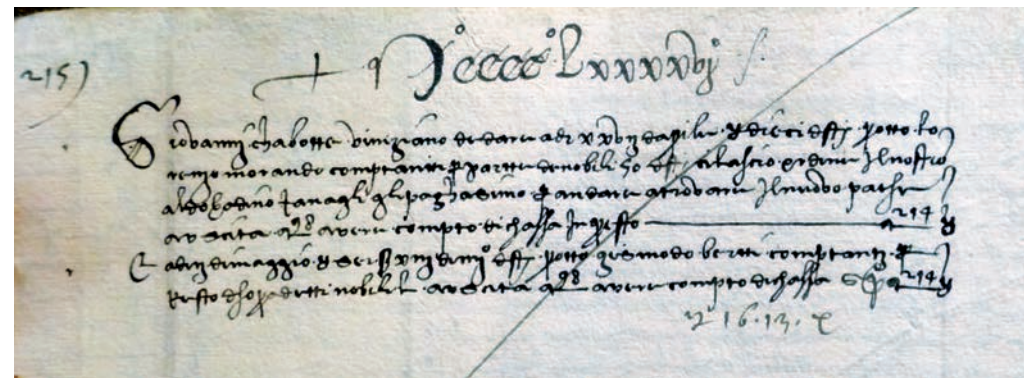


Plate 26 | The Bardi transfer 50 nobles, valued at £16 13s 4d in 'old' money, to John Cabot 'venetian' (Giovanni Chabotte viniziano) 'so that he can go and find the new land'
(Archivio Guiccardini, Florence, Carte Bardi 12, fo. 215)

At the very least this demonstrates that the Bristol voyages were not purely a local venture. Indeed, from the perspective of his Italian backers, they might be regarded as part of their broader drive to search for new markets beyond Europe. To the Italians, Bristol's merchants and Henry VII were simply another set of partners in their search for new commercial opportunities.

Cabot's chief aim, as he described it following his 1497 voyage, was to reach China and Japan by sailing west across the Atlantic. Like Columbus, the Venetian knew that the Orient produced many luxury goods that Europeans wanted, such as silk and spices. The problem was that these goods were very expensive because of the vast distances they had to travel. Some goods spent 'a year on the road' before reaching Europe, passing through the hands of many merchants. Each of these merchants needed to pay the cost of transporting the goods, as well as any customs duties levied on the lands they passed through. And, of course, each merchant also needed to make a profit. The result was that oriental goods could cost ten times more in Europe than in their countries of origin. So, if a European merchant could sail to those countries directly, buy at the local rate and ship the goods home at low cost, he would become rich. This is precisely what Columbus hoped to do. His expeditions were based on the assumption that the world was much smaller than it actually is, and that India and China lay just a few thousand miles west of Europe. Indeed, according to his initial projections, made before he set sail, the coast of China was at least a thousand miles east of where we now know the coast of North America to be. This is why Columbus declared that the Caribbean islands he discovered in 1492 were part of the 'Indies' and that China must be nearby. Cabot clearly believed something very similar. Indeed,

on his return in 1497 he suggested the lands he had discovered in North America were those of the 'Grand Khan', by which he meant the Emperor of China.⁹

While Cabot's plan was similar to that of Columbus, what distinguished it was the route he meant to follow. Columbus had sailed south to the Canaries, before heading west to the Caribbean. By contrast, having left Bristol and passed Ireland, Cabot headed north before going west. His voyage thus ran on a line that was roughly parallel to the route taken by Columbus, but more than 1,500 miles to the north. If the world had actually been much smaller, this would indeed have made a lot of sense, in that he would be arcing over the top of the world and might have reached Asia much faster. It was also a route that took advantage of the prevailing winds and ocean currents.

If Cabot's aims are clear, those of his backers are less obvious. First, it seems that his Bristol supporters hoped that his voyage would locate the Island of Brasil. They must also have bought into Cabot's hope of finding a new trade route to the Orient. Beyond this, it has sometimes been argued that Bristol was interested in sailing west because the port's merchants wanted to find new fishing grounds. This is because, when the 1497 expedition returned, Cabot's Bristol companions reported that 'the sea there is swarming with fish' and that 'they could bring so many fish that this kingdom would have no further need of Iceland, from which place there comes a very great quantity of the fish called stockfish.'¹⁰ This fishery, which lies along the coast of Newfoundland, later became one of the world's most important cod fisheries. This does not mean, however, that the explorers had set out to find such a fishery. Indeed, the actions of Bristol men both before and after Cabot's expeditions demonstrates that they were not particularly interested in developing such a fishery themselves.

As noted earlier, when in the early fifteenth century Bristol merchants started trading to Iceland, their main purchase was stockfish – a form of freeze-dried cod that keeps for many months. Yet even at the trade's height, only a few Bristol ships sailed to Iceland each year, with the Iceland venture never accounting for more than about five percent of Bristol's overseas commerce.¹¹ Moreover, having reached a peak during the middle decades of the century, Bristol's trade to Iceland went into decline. Bristol's surviving customs accounts

show that only one ship entered from Iceland in the accounting year 1485/6; none is reported in the customs records for 1486/7; and only one in 1492/3, which was the last known voyage from Bristol to the island.¹² By the 1480s, Bristol's 'Iceland venture' was a dying concern undertaken by only one or two ship-owning merchants.

The decline of the Iceland trade has led some historians to suggest that the English were 'forced' out of Iceland by the Hanseatic League and that this prompted Bristol to go searching for a new source of fish to the west.¹³ There are a number of problems with this theory. First, it ignores the fact that, throughout the fifteenth century, most of Bristol's fish came from southern Ireland. If Bristol needed more fish, the Irish trade could have been expanded. The second problem is that the English were not 'forced out' of Iceland during this period; Hull merchants, for example, continued to trade to Iceland until the end of the century.¹⁴ Indeed, the English fishery off Iceland actually grew in the late-fifteenth century and on into the sixteenth century. By the 1530s it was one of England's most important fisheries, with up to 130 ships sailing there annually.¹⁵ It is just that nearly all of



Fig 7 | Bristol's trade as recorded in the 1492/3 customs accounts¹⁷

these vessels came from East Anglia. Bristol's merchants did not participate in the Iceland fishery because Bristol had never been much of a fishing port – the interests of its merchants were in trade, not fishing. So, it would have made no sense for them to search for a new fishery across the Atlantic that they did not need, and showed, in the event, little interest in exploiting.

That Bristol merchants stopped going to Iceland in the later fifteenth century is best explained by rising trading opportunities in Spain after 1453, as relations between England and Castile improved following the end of the Hundred Years War. This led to a dramatic increase in Bristol's commerce with Spain, which soon became much larger than its trade with Iceland had ever been. Bristol's merchants were not 'pushed' out of Iceland, they simply abandoned it in favour of more profitable opportunities in Iberia.¹⁶ In particular, the summer trade to Iceland for fish was replaced by a higher value trade to the Basque ports of northern Spain for iron and woad.

5 1496 AND 1497 EXPEDITIONS

Once Cabot received his patent in March 1496 he was keen to sail. The only record of his voyage that summer is a letter to Christopher Columbus, written in early 1498 by the Bristol merchant, John Day:

Concerning the first voyage which your lordship wants to know about, what happened was that they took one ship, and he [Cabot] was unhappy with the crew and he was badly provisioned and he found the weather to be unfavourable, so he made the choice to come back.¹

This unsuccessful expedition seems to have been a rushed affair, undertaken too late in the year. Until Cabot secured his patent on 5 March it would have been difficult to secure funding; and even after that it took some time to get the money to pay for the voyage. The Bardi, for example, did not make their initial payment until 27 April, followed by a second instalment on 2 May. Ideally Cabot should have been at sea by then – as he was in both 1497 and 1498. Yet, since he was still collecting money in London in May 1496, it is unlikely that he could have scratched together a ship, crew and provisions before late June or July.

After his return to Bristol, Cabot had at least eight months to prepare his next venture. The interval allowed him to charter the ship of his choice and to make sure it was well provisioned. Above all, it gave him time to gather a crew who were willing to undertake a voyage of unknown length in uncharted waters.

The ship chosen for the 1497 expedition was the fifty-ton *Matthew* of Bristol. She was provisioned for an eight-month voyage. Contrary to popular belief, there is no particular reason to think the *Matthew* was specially built for Cabot; and her subsequent employment was in Bristol's ordinary trade to Ireland and France. The bare details of the ship's most famous voyage are recorded in an Elizabethan chronicle: