Robert Gyen of Bristol: A 14th-Century Merchant, Crown Official and Swindler Extraordinaire

By ROBIN McCALLUM and JAMES DAVIS

In the early 1350s, an anonymous petition was sent to Edward III's council claiming that a provincial merchant, Robert Gyen of Bristol, had stolen goods that once belonged to the late Master Robert Baldock worth 2,000 marks (£1,333 6s. 8d.).1 Baldock had emerged as one of the leading figures in the government during the final years of Edward II's reign and held the offices of Lord Chancellor, Lord Privy Seal, and Controller of the King's Wardrobe. His political ascendancy, however, was intrinsically linked to Edward II. When Queen Isabella and Roger Mortimer invaded the realm with an army of exiles and mercenaries in September 1326, Edward II, Baldock and Hugh Despenser the Younger fled to Wales as London descended into anarchy and its inhabitants pledged their support to the queen. Bereft of allies, the royal party roamed southern Wales, where they were captured on 16 November. Both the imprisoned king and his favourites ultimately encountered a similar fate at the hands of the regency government. In January 1327, Edward II was forced to abdicate in favour of his son, Edward, Prince of Wales, and was probably killed in Berkeley Castle later in the year; whilst Despenser was publicly executed at Hereford on 24 November 1326, and Baldock died in Newgate prison the following May.2 But 25 years after his death, Baldock’s legacy re-emerged onto the national political scene. Having learnt from the informant that Gyen was in possession of Baldock’s treasure ‘which ought to be in the King’s Wardrobe’, the council passed the petition to the treasurer, William Edington, to decide ‘what ought to be done for the profit of the king’.3 A royal commission led by John Mayn, the king's serjeant-at-arms, travelled to Bristol in March 1352 to locate Gyen.4 As Mayn and his companions set out for the West Country, they could have had no indication as to the true value of the merchant's hidden treasure.

Robert Gyen was a merchant who was active in Bristol between the 1310s and 1352. In many ways his career encapsulates much about the rising status and role of the mercantile class. As this article will explore, Gyen was a man who sought his fortune in commerce and demesne agriculture, and entered the civic élite of Bristol and undertook royal appointments. At the height of his career, he was advancing considerable sums of money to the Crown in the form of loans, which dwarfed the contributions of his fellow Bristolians. Gyen seemed to be the epitome of an enterprising and prosperous merchant at a time when the mercantile élite of England were beginning to assert their commercial and political weight. He provides an individual study of how merchants looked beyond their town and region in seeking advancement through royal patronage.

1. The National Archives [TNA], SC 8/153/7650.
3. TNA, SC 8/153/7650.
This Bristol merchant is no stranger to historians, having previously been the subject of a short article by Simon Penn. He provided a brief overview of Gyen's career in trade and local politics, but the main focus of Penn's research was to illustrate the symbiotic nature of interactions between urban and rural society. Gyen maintained connections with the hinterland of Bristol and purchased rural manors. For this Bristol merchant, 'there was no dichotomy between town and country'; they were 'an integral part of his life'. What Penn did not highlight is that Gyen was not all he appeared. There was a dark secret behind his rise to prominence that was revealed in 1352. Ultimately, for contemporaries, Gyen might have represented the perceived moral anxieties concerning commercial practice and wealth. Behind a façade of prosperity and royally-endorsed reputation, he was instead the embodiment of pulpit warnings about mercantile inclinations towards avarice and fraud.

Robert Gyen was not a native of Bristol, and his early life can be traced to rural Somerset in the late 13th or early 14th century. His parents, Robert and Maud Gyen, were minor landowners from the small market town of North Curry, situated east of Taunton. On their modest estate of moorland, pasture, messuages, a windmill and villeins, Robert and Maud had at least six sons: Robert Gyen, John Tracy, John Strete, William Vigerous, John Gyen and William Gyen. William Gyen settled near Taunton, where he married and had a son, also called Robert Gyen. Assisted by his wife, Alice, William managed the family estate in North Curry, which he expanded by acquiring land from the Dean and Chapter of Wells in 1321. His brother, Robert Gyen, did not settle in North Curry, but moved to Bristol in the late 1310s or early 1320s to pursue a career as a merchant. John Strete also migrated to Bristol, where he owned property in the Bedminster and Knowle districts of the town. John Tracy was indicted before the royal justices of Gloucestershire concerning a dispute with a prominent Bristolian, John le Spicer, in 1355, perhaps indicating that he too followed his brothers to the town. Their decision to migrate to Bristol was influenced by the town's prominence in national and international commerce. Bristol was the West Country's leading commercial hub with a large and protected harbour, which had developed extensive trading networks with France, Spain, Portugal and Ireland. Gascon wine and exotic foods and spices such as figs, raisins, almonds, rice, pepper and saffron were a common sight in Bristol's docks and commercial districts. For an aspiring merchant such as Gyen, the town provided extensive opportunities and overseas markets to pursue a career in international trade.

Gyen did not discard his rural interests when he moved to Bristol. Instead, he purchased large rural estates in Somerset, Dorset, Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire in order to convey an image of prosperity and royalty endorsement. His quest for land was not just a means to an end but an expression of his personal identity and social status. The purchase of these estates was a way for Gyen to bridge the gap between his urban and rural identities, and to reinforce his reputation as a respected member of the local community.


Ibid. 185.

Calendar of the Manuscripts of the Dean and Chapter of Wells [Dean and Chapter of Wells] (2 vols, London, 1907–14), I, 410; Cal. Pat. 1350–4, 179. This is the order in which the brothers were listed in the chantry licence of 8 Nov. 1351, but it is not clear if this was also the order of their birth. The retention of family surnames was still fluid during the early to mid 14th century.

Dean and Chapter of Wells, I, 209.


of prosperity and gentility. The reports of the commissions compiled after his death in 1353–4 illustrate that Gyen owned oxen, cows, a bull, a young heifer, iron chains, andirons (fire-dogs) and brass bowls on one of his Somerset manors. At Ilford, Somerset, he owned 12 oxen and a bull. He had also purchased rural property at Keynsham and Frome in Somerset, as well as at Thornbury in Gloucestershire. But, on 16 July 1338, Gyen granted much of his land in North Curry to his nephew, Robert, and Christina, his wife, to hold seemingly as feoffees in the first instance. Gyen had not abandoned demesne farming, but it is possible that he was attempting to persuade his nephew to refrain from criminal activity. The previous year his nephew had been excommunicated after being found guilty of cutting down and carrying away trees on the estates belonging to the Dean and Chapter of Wells, with the theft valued at £10. He then proceeded to ‘beat and wound to the shedding of blood Robert Coppe, their manciple, being on their soil engaged in their business’. For forgiveness, he paid a fine worth 48s. and purchased new trees for the church. He was then publicly ‘scourg’d… naked except his breeches’ around the churches of North Curry and Wells on three separate occasions.

By the time of his nephew’s acts of public penance, Robert Gyen was established as a member of Bristol’s ruling élite and an international merchant. Yet, despite his successes later in life, little can be said with certainty about Gyen’s early years in Bristol until 1326, when he was first elected to the office of bailiff. His absence from civic records raises questions about the success of his early commercial enterprises, implying that he may have been, at best, a standard and unremarkable merchant or, at worst, struggling to make a livelihood from overseas trade. Alternatively, Gyen’s desire to cultivate a reputation as a merchant may explain the dearth of documentation on his activities in these years. After all, an ambitious, but fledgling, merchant would have spent long periods at sea or on the Continent purchasing wine and merchandise to ship back to England, thus limiting their influence in town politics. Regardless, there is no indication that Gyen was anything other than an average merchant in a town crowded with others who also sought to make their livelihood from trade by the mid 1320s.

But, after a seemingly uneventful start to life in Bristol, Gyen’s fortunes transformed dramatically in 1326, when he secured election to the position of bailiff. The 1327 Lay Subsidy assessment also testifies to Gyen’s prosperity. The merchant resided in the St Ewen’s district of the town and was recorded as one of Bristol’s wealthiest residents, contributing the third largest sum (25s.) of any Bristolian in taxation. There is no indication that such wealth was the direct result of an inheritance, so the question arises as to how he built up such a fortune so quickly. To his fellow burgesses, the meteoric transformation in Gyen’s fortunes, and, in particular, his accumulation of a vast personal wealth, was undoubtedly the result of his astute business decisions and his ability to tap into Bristol’s commercial networks with the Continent. At this point there was no suspicion attached to Gyen’s dealings, and many would have viewed him as the archetypal self-made merchant, one who rose from humble rural beginnings to establish a personal fortune from overseas trade and cement himself within the ruling oligarchy of his adopted town. Certainly, the nature of his commercial ventures and the identities of his business partners would have reinforced such a belief. Gyen entered into contracts with local merchants, such as Roger Turtle,
with whom he co-owned vessels in order to import wine from the Continent. For instance, Gyen and Turtle acquired royal permission for their ship, *la Grace Dieu*, ‘to buy wines for them in the duchy of Aquitaine and to make their profit within the realm’ in March 1336.\(^\text{17}\) In the same year, they employed mariners and servants to sail to Gascony ‘and elsewhere within the king’s realm’ to import merchandise.\(^\text{18}\) When Edward III sent an army to Aquitaine in 1338, a vessel belonging to Gyen and Turtle, *la Bonan*, accompanied the fleet for protection and imported ‘wines and other merchandise’.\(^\text{19}\) Piracy, French raids and storms in the English Channel were a genuine threat to merchants trading with the Continent. Gyen imported goods on a ship, *la Mariote* of Hook in 1331, but it became stranded on its return voyage along the coastline at Goldcliff near Newport (Monmouths.). His merchandise was washed ashore and ‘carried away as wreck’ by the monks of Goldcliff priory.\(^\text{20}\) Whilst such setbacks were inevitable, Gyen had developed a career and reputation as a successful international merchant based in Bristol. Although not a native of the town, his wealth enabled him to expand his commercial ventures, purchase ships and property and rise to prominence within local politics.

The structure of Bristol’s government before 1373 was based around a mayor, two bailiffs and a common council of 48 burgesses, all of whom were elected annually to govern the town.\(^\text{21}\) This form of government was based on hierarchy with the leading residents dominating the main civic positions.\(^\text{22}\) These townsmen had previously entered into the freedom of the town and were known as freemen or burgesses. Members of this narrow and politically-franchised clique experienced greater privileges, such as permission to trade freely without paying toll, or the ability to hold property on burgage tenure.\(^\text{23}\) Whilst the civic documents from Bristol have not survived, an analysis of the number of admissions into the freedom of other provincial towns illustrates the exclusivity of this ruling group. Maryanne Kowaleski’s study of the entries into the freedom of Exeter reveal that a mere 4% (around 120 individuals) of the town’s population enjoyed such a status by 1377.\(^\text{24}\) Nicholas Amor has also estimated that the total number of Ipswich freemen at any one time was around 300 in the 14th century.\(^\text{25}\) However, Christian Liddy suggests that the number of burgesses in Bristol may have been more in line with York, where between 25% and 40% of adult males had entered into the freedom of the city by the late 14th century.\(^\text{26}\) Nevertheless, wealth remained the defining characteristic in securing further elevation to the ranks of office-holders, and merchants who traded in wool, wine, spices and cloth dominated the civic offices of most late medieval English towns.

18. Ibid. 279.
19. Ibid. 1338–40, 1.
20. Ibid. 1330–4, 139.
24. M. Kowaleski, *Local Markets and Regional Trade in Medieval Exeter* (Cambridge, 1995), 371–2. This calculation is based on Exeter’s total population being around 3,000 in 1377.
Once he moved to Bristol, Gyen would have soon entered into the freedom of the borough and was eligible to hold civic office. He was elected to the office of bailiff in 1326, 1331 and 1334; the mayoralty in 1345, 1347 and 1349; and sat on the common council between, at least, 1344 and 1349.27 In the position of bailiff, Gyen was responsible for presiding over the local court; serving summonses and writs; upholding law and order; and witnessing credit, property and business transactions between Bristol residents. Countless civic documents survive from the period of Gyen’s terms in office illustrating that he was required to oversee financial transactions.28 One such example dates from 1349, when he was included as a witness to confirm that Sarah, formerly the wife of Robert de Cameleigh of Bristol, had borrowed £20 from Stephen de Stowe, a local merchant.29 Appointment to the lesser civic positions equipped burgesses with experience of public office and the opportunity to develop contacts in order to secure election to the mayoralty.

The earliest reference to Bristol’s mayor can be traced to 1216, when King John issued a royal mandate to Roger le Cordwaner, the mayor, instructing him to supply wine to Walter de Lacy and Hereford castle.30 By the time of Gyen’s appointment, the mayor was responsible for arranging the collection of town revenues in order to pay the fee farm; presiding over the borough court; introducing and enforcing civic legislation; and representing the town in discussions with the Crown.31 Election to these civic positions also enabled individuals to establish a reputation beyond the walls of their town. In particular, the Crown had summoned urban representatives to Parliament since 1295, with their duties initially confined to the delivery of petitions and the granting of taxation. A study of the Bristol MPs reveals that they were chosen from a corpus of the elite who held the offices of mayor and bailiff. Roger Turtle was elected to Parliament in 1344, after serving as the town’s mayor on seven occasions between 1326 and 1341. Hugh Langebrigge of Bristol was returned to Parliament in 1328, 1332 and 1335, having held the positions of mayor and bailiff. Finally, after serving as bailiff but not yet mayor, Robert Gyen was elected as one of Bristol’s two MPs in 1327, 1336, 1337 and 1341.32 Whilst election to Parliament confirmed his status within the town, it also offered Gyen the opportunity to establish contacts at Westminster and lobby for royal favour or employment. Indeed, it can be no coincidence that he was employed as a Crown official soon after returning from the 1327 Parliament.

II

Due to his maritime expertise and role in local politics, Gyen, like many 14th-century provincial merchants, entered Crown service as a customs collector, commissioner and port official.33 Whilst these offices were unsalaried, royal appointments enabled burgesses to augment their social status and influence within their county, as well as establishing contacts with the nobility, gentry and senior civil servants. And given their distance from Westminster, office-bearers in the localities could exploit their positions for financial gain by accepting bribes, smuggling goods or

28. e.g. Bristol Archives, 5163/79, 81; ibid. P.St JB/D/2/40, 585–7, 662.
29. TNA, C 241/126/118.
32. TNA, C 219/5; C 219/6.
manipulating the customs accounts. Gyen first entered royal service in the summer of 1326, when Edward II was preparing to defend the realm against his wife’s invasion from the Continent. The king issued writs to ports and coastal towns on 15 August 1326, instructing them to send ships in excess of 50 tons to Portsmouth in order to patrol the English Channel. Gyen was appointed to oversee the requisitioning of all such vessels from Bristol, with the power to arrest either the owners or captains if they challenged the royal order. Gyen does not appear to have viewed royal service as a distraction from his trading activities or his civic responsibilities as he became one of the most prominent Crown officials in Bristol in the first half of the 14th century. For instance, he was appointed to the office of water bailiff for life in 1329 as a result of his ‘service to the late king’. Gyen, in his capacity as the town’s water bailiff, was responsible for recording the tolls due on all merchandise entering or leaving the port for the Crown (keelage); and the tolls paid by merchants for securing their vessels in port (anchorage); for docking their ship at a wharf (wharfage); and for unloading merchandise from their ship (cranage). In a large and crowded port such as Bristol, the water bailiff was a senior royal official with responsibility for maintaining accurate ledgers for the Crown.

Gyen may have appointed deputies to perform these duties as he was also employed to the office of deputy to the king’s butler in Gloucestershire and Worcestershire in the late 1320s and 30s. In this role, he was responsible for collecting the customs duties on wine imports and supplying the king’s armies with wine from Bristol. Gyen, however, abused this office to start a personal feud with Roger Tessler, another Bristol merchant. Edward III received a petition from Tessler in 1328 claiming that Gyen had seized 17 tuns of his wine and refused to provide payment ‘for hatred of him, until Michaelmas when the town was awash with wine… to his great harm’. The acrimonious relationship between the two men clearly continued, as Tessler submitted another petition to Edward III in 1331 recounting how Gyen and Richard de la Pole, the king’s butler in the West Country, had seized 11 tuns of his wine the previous December with promise of repayment. When no adequate form of reimbursement materialized, the aggrieved merchant pleaded with the Crown for remedy, claiming that the two corrupt royal officials had abused their positions by selling the wine for their own profit and had given him inferior wine as compensation.

The outcome of Tessler’s petition is not known, and it is possible that his claims were spurious. Alternatively, this case may be an indication that, from an early stage, Gyen was prepared to push the boundaries of acceptable practice and exploit his elevated position to pursue his own aims.

After serving Edward III as a port official, Gyen was selected as a royal commissioner in 1338, tasked ‘to array the men of the county of Gloucestershire for the defence of the realm against the French, to keep the peace there and to hear and determine trespasses’. Only four years later, he was appointed to a commission to ‘search in the port of Bristol… for the export and import of money’. The Crown established these commissions in port towns in response to financial and security concerns during the Hundred Years War. Edward III feared that alien merchants and alien priors residing in England exported money on board ships destined for France in order to

38. TNA, SC 8/144/7195.
39. Ibid. SC 8/75/3726.
finance the war against the English. Such fears bred a distrust of foreigners, resulting in the Crown seizing alien priories and introducing new statutes to regulate their activities. In 1343, only one year after Gyen was appointed to the commission, a new Statute of the Realm stated that: ‘money of good sterling in England... shall not be carried out of the realm of England in any masses, nor for any cause whatsoever.’ Royal officials were to ‘make search, that no silver be carried out of the realm in money or otherwise; except that the great men may, when they go out of the realm, have silver vessels to serve their houses’. Merchants may have lobbied senior civil servants or nobles to secure appointment to the office as it included financial incentives. Any commissioner who uncovered coin ‘shall have the third part of the good money which they shall find upon the sea passing out of the realm’.

Edward III also employed Gyen in a military capacity, entrusting him and Walter de Hanle, the king’s serjeant-at-arms, to provide sufficient ships of 80 tons from Bristol to transport Ralph Stafford, seneschal of Gascony, to France in March 1345. Gyen and Hanle submitted accounts to the Crown detailing their expenditure for the repair of the ships. In total, they spent £14 9s. 10d. on raw materials such as wooden boards, nails, stakes and nosebag feeders for horses.

Gyen secured his final appointment as a commissioner of the peace in Somerset in 1351, when he was instructed ‘to hear and determine trespasses against the Ordinance (of Labourers), and continue to process those indicted thereof until they be taken, surrendered or outlawed’. By the 1350s, merchants were no longer simply concerned with trade, commerce and local government. Instead, many had carved a career as Crown officials responsible for enforcing royal legislation, dispensing justice and collecting taxation.

During the 13th and early 14th centuries, the English Crown financed its wars with France, Scotland and Wales from the proceeds raised by lay and clerical subsidies, papal taxation, customs duties and loans from Continental banks. But the outbreak of the Hundred Years War in 1337, followed shortly by the bankruptcy of the Crown’s Italian creditors, placed unprecedented financial pressure upon the realm. These traditional sources of royal revenue were insufficient to meet the escalating costs of the conflict, ultimately forcing Edward III to negotiate loans with the nobility, towns, merchants and the Church to support the defence of the kingdom. During the years of Gyen’s residency in Bristol, Edward III approached the town for loans in 1346, 1347 and 1351, and borrowed a total of £1,015. Robert Gyen was the town’s foremost royal creditor and supplied three personal loans totalling £466 13s. 4d., or 43% of the overall value of Bristol’s loans between 1346 and 1351. Alongside his counterparts from Bristol and other towns, Gyen attended council meetings at Westminster in the late 1340s to negotiate loans with the Crown. In 1345, 42 merchants – including Robert Gyen, Roger Turtle, Eborard le French, John Wycombe and John Horncastle of Bristol – were present at an assembly to discuss loans for the Crecy

44. TNA, E 156/28/47.
45. Ibid. E 101/24/18.
50. TNA, E 401/383; E 401/388; E 401/407.
Five Bristolians advanced loans totalling £200 in March 1346, four of whom were present at the council meeting the previous year. This sum comprised loans from Robert Gyen (£66 13s. 4d.), Roger Turtle (£66 13s. 4d.), John Wycombe (£26 13s. 4d.), John Horncastle (£20) and Stephen le Spicer (£20).52

Edward III summoned 187 urban representatives to council meetings in the summer of 1347 to negotiate loans to finance the latter stages of the siege of Calais.53 Burgesses from London (£1,333 6s. 8d.), Norwich (£100) and York (£450) advanced substantial sums in credit to subsidize the campaign. Whilst 26 Bristolians lent £320, Gyen once again provided the largest individual sum (£66 13s. 4d.).54 In fact, his generosity is illustrated further when the value of his loan is compared with those from other Bristol creditors. Juliana Turtle, the wife of Gyen’s business associate Roger Turtle, provided the second largest loan (£26 13s. 4d.), Thomas Colstone (£6 13s. 4d.), John Neel (£10) and Edward le Hatter (£100s.) advanced minor loans in the same year.55 Gyen’s financial ascendancy is emphasized further by one last example from the summer of 1351, when the Crown borrowed around £6,500 from its subjects to subsidize campaigns in France.56 Overall, 17 Bristol merchants provided loans totalling £495, but this sum largely comprised Gyen’s contribution worth £333 6s. 8d.57 His loan was of comparable value to many of those advanced by the ecclesiastical nobility in the 1350s. For instance, John Thorseby, archbishop of York, and John Gynwell, bishop of Lincoln, both provided loans worth £333 6s. 8d. for the 1359 Rheims campaign.58 Gyen’s final loan was substantially greater than the corporate loans from Colchester (£100), Grimsby (£50) and Hereford (£50) in 1351. Unsurprisingly, other Bristolians were unable to match these loans, with John Cobyndon (£20), Thomas Babecary (£13 6s. 8d.), Robert Cheddre (£10) and Thomas Coventry (£6 13s. 4d.) providing lesser amounts.59

The extraordinary value of Gyen’s loans, particularly when compared to those from his fellow townsmen, raises questions about why he subsidized the war in France.60 Wealthy burgesses in port towns such as Bristol financed the Hundred Years War in order to protect their commercial links with the Continent. In the case of Bristol, the town’s prosperity was based upon its control of the wine trade with Gascony and Aquitaine. An indication of the importance of wine imports to Bristol’s economy can be gleaned from the customs accounts. In 1350–1, the same financial year in which Gyen lent £333 6s. 8d. to Edward III, a total of 535 tuns of wine were imported at Bristol, an amount only surpassed by London (2,010 tuns).61 Bristol was an expanding urban centre with an economy reliant on overseas trade. From the perspective of many local merchants, a short-term

---

51. Reports from the Lord’s committees… for all Matters touching the Dignity of a Peer (5 vols, 1820–9), IV, 555.
52. TNA, E 401/383.
54. TNA, E 401/388.
55. Ibid.
58. TNA, E 401/452.
risk in the form of loans significantly outweighed the potential long-term economic repercussions if the Crown lost Gascony.

Although commercial interests were important, Gyen also provided three loans in order to maintain his position as a royal official. We have already seen how Gyen, like many of his counterparts from Bristol and other provincial towns, rose in Crown favour and secured appointment to prestigious royal positions under Edward III. Bristolians including Thomas Albon, John Axebridge, Eborard Franceys, John Horncastle, John Neel, John le Spicer, Stephen le Spicer, Philip Thorpynton, Thomas Tropyn, Roger Turtle and John Wycombe followed the same career trajectory as Gyen by entering Crown service. For instance, Gyen’s business associate, Roger Turtle, was appointed to a commission in 1339, tasked to imprison any suspicious Frenchmen in Bristol who were ‘preparing to leave the realm with their horses, armour and other things’. The Crown clearly trusted Turtle with matters touching national security, as he was included in another commission in 1342 to uncover the identities of the individuals who were transporting armour and victuals from Bristol to the king’s enemies in Scotland. Whilst the prospect of financial gain from participating in royal commissions was limited, other Bristolians such as John Cobyndon, John Horncastle and John le Spicer had countless opportunities to abuse their appointment to the local customs administration for personal profit. Smuggling, accepting bribes or manipulating customs records presented port officials with opportunities to augment their income at the Crown’s expense. Regardless, all these Bristolians advanced either loans or ships to support Edward III’s campaigns in France, with some perhaps recognizing that such contributions were necessary in order to retain their status as royal officials. When negotiating loans with the king’s representatives at Westminster, many burgesses decided that it was in their best interests to support the French war, rather than losing their privileged status as a royal official. However, there is another remarkable dimension to the motivations behind Gyen’s substantial loans, as well as to the source of his prodigious wealth. This was only to be revealed by a royal investigation in 1352.

III

The Black Death reached England’s shores in 1348 and devastated the population of the kingdom, with as many as two million individuals (40–50% of the total population) dying from the plague. Unlike many of his associates, Robert Gyen was spared, but one could surmise that the extensive mortality alongside his own advanced years persuaded him to think urgently about his eternal soul. In November 1351, he received royal permission to establish a chantry within the premises of Bath Abbey. Three chaplains were appointed to celebrate mass for the souls of Gyen, his previous wives, Lucy and Margaret, his current wife, Egelina, and Reynold and Maud le Frenshe

63. Cal. Pat. 1338–40, 188.
64. Ibid. 1340–43, 546.
of Bristol. The chaplains were to ‘celebrate divine service daily in the priory church for the good estate of the king, queen and their children’.

Only three months later, Gyen’s status as a respectable civic and royal official collapsed in spectacular fashion, revealing an opportunistic charlatan whose public image was a façade designed to shield a career and reputation based on theft and deceit. During the course of his career, Gyen had made a number of enemies, one of whom – the anonymous informant – sent a petition to Edward III’s council claiming that the Bristolian had plundered the estate of the late Robert Baldock. A royal commission was sent to Bristol in the spring of 1352 to locate Gyen; and in the course of their investigation, they discovered that the Bristolian had committed an audacious theft. The report stated that Robert Gyen had stolen money, jewels and treasure that belonged to the late Hugh Despenser the Younger and Robert Baldock worth an estimated £20,000.

The Younger Despenser’s association with Edward II, and in particular his support for the king against Thomas of Lancaster, had resulted in a stream of royal grants of titles, land and castles. From royal patronage and gifts, he had constructed a virtual earldom in the Welsh Marches, where he challenged the authority of his rival, Roger Mortimer. Stretching from Pembroke on the western coast to Chepstow on the banks of the Bristol Channel, the Younger Despenser’s Welsh stronghold consisted of the lordship of Glamorgan, the Cantref Mawr, Gower, Usk and Is Cennen; and he had obtained custody of the county of Pembroke, the lordship of Brecon and a substantial portion of the honor of Gloucester. He thus controlled a number of strategically important Welsh towns and castles, including Cardiff, Swansea, Llantrisant, and Caerphilly. With the exception of the king, the Younger Despenser was perhaps the wealthiest individual in England in the 1320s. Overall, he received an estimated £5,000 per annum from his Welsh estates, and £2,100 per annum from his manors in England. Most of his prized jewels and large reserves of coin must have been transferred to his Welsh castles for safekeeping before the outbreak of civil war in September 1326. As Despenser was condemned as a traitor, all his possessions reverted to the Crown following his execution in 1326.

In the final chaotic months of 1326, Robert Gyen exploited the power vacuum and the collapse of law and order to travel to Despenser’s Welsh properties, which he systematically plundered. The merchant must have crossed the Bristol Channel into Wales and either travelled alone along roads by cart or, perhaps more likely, sailed along local rivers or the coastline on his ship, to each of Despenser’s strongholds. Gyen gained entry to Despenser’s unguarded castles and manor houses, fortunately before Isabella’s army or other looters arrived, and stole money, treasure, jewels and clothes. With his wagons or ship overspilling with treasure, Gyen made the perilous return journey to Bristol and kept the hoard secret for almost 30 years. The merchant used the treasure to finance his commercial endeavours, establish himself as a member of the Bristol ruling élite and enter Crown service. This explains how Gyen suddenly transformed his fortunes overnight from a standard merchant to become one of Bristol’s wealthiest residents. His was a career not founded on commercial expertise or knowledge, but instead on an extraordinary crime.

An inventory compiled by the royal commissioners in 1352 ‘to list the goods and jewels… of the said Robert (Gyen)’ reveals the contents of his stolen hoard, but also the extravagant wealth of the

68. This may have been an affinity formed via Gyen’s trade links with France and Gascony, though it is not clear from the source whether Egelina was the daughter of Reynold and Maud.
70. TNA, SC 8/153/7650.
72. Ibid. 522.
Younger Despenser and Baldock. When the officials searched Gyen’s urban and rural premises, they found jewellery including gold rings; rings encrusted with sapphires; gold brooches with emeralds; large brooches impressed with pearls; silver amulets impressed with Gyen’s personal seal; and countless other elaborate rings, necklaces and brooches decorated with sapphires, rubies, emeralds and pearls. Not content with expensive jewellery, Gyen had stolen ornaments including large silver boars and a lavish bowl in the shape of a Griffin’s egg bound with silver. Expensive cutlery featured heavily within the hoard, such as silver cups with personal crests; silver drinking vessels, jugs, cups and plates; large silver vessels with long decorated feet to hold wine; silver plates; silver salt cellars; and large mazers lined with silver. Gyen’s financial records were also seized by the commissioners and reveal the extent of his credit and trading activities. The merchant was in possession of 59 indentures and bonds worth £2,314 12s. 7d. and 45 Statute Merchants (a strong form of security for commercial creditors) worth £2,280 10s. 8d., as well as tallies for the repayment of loans totalling £1,187 19s. 7d. Three of these tallies may have recorded Gyen’s loans worth £466 13s. 4d. which he contributed towards Edward III’s French campaigns. The king’s wrath must have been considerable when he learnt that he had effectively borrowed his own money from the scheming merchant to finance the defence of the kingdom.

Gyen also purchased remote and scattered rural manors in Somerset, Dorset and Gloucestershire, where he concealed the hoard from the prying eyes of both royal agents and Bristol burgesses. In 1352–3, Edward III appointed royal commissioners to search Gyen’s rural holdings for the missing jewels. The reports of the commissioners in Somerset reveal that he concealed the treasure on his manors at Ilford, Keynsham and Frome. For instance, John de Ilford, prior of Bath abbey, found goods and silver worth £6,000. William Forde, another commissioner, searched Gyen’s manor at Ilford, where he retrieved goods to the value of £800. John Saunders travelled to Gyen’s manors in the hundred of Thornbury, Gloucestershire, where he located treasure worth £1,000, whilst Thomas de la Mare retrieved goods valued at £200. And finally, Reynold le Frenshe retrieved ‘700 marks of goods and chattels belonging to the said Robert Gyen, who stole £20,000 from the Lord King’. The appointment of Frenshe, however, created problems for the Crown, as he was a close associate and friend of Gyen. The chaplains in the latter’s chantry in Bath were to pray for Frenshe’s soul when he died. Motivated by either greed or loyalty to his friend, Frenshe seized a portion of Gyen’s treasure worth £1,000 and concealed it from the king. Royal justices convicted Frenshe of theft in 1353, and he only obtained a pardon four years later.

The royal investigation produced an extensive survey of the contents of Gyen’s rural holdings in Dorset, Gloucestershire, Oxfordshire and Somerset. These reports document the extent of Gyen’s landed wealth and agricultural interests, illustrating how he cultivated an image as a prosperous member of the rural gentry. In Somerset and Dorset, the Bristolian owned manors at ‘Abbelake, Chelworth, Clotton, Gorewell, Kingsdon, Knowle, Norton Hautville, Shorecombe, Tykenham and Wyke’. On his ‘Clotton’ manor, the commissioners found that Gyen owned 215 acres of arable land sown with grain, oats and beans; 47 acres for pasture; barrels (presumably for the transport of wine); and livestock including oxen, bulls, foals, hogs and a swan. Gyen’s ‘Norton Hautville’ manor consisted of 140 acres of arable land sown with grain, oats and beans; 12 acres for pasture; farming equipment such as ploughs, carts and wagons; and oxen, bulls and 156 sheep. Furthermore, his ‘Gorewell’ manor included 400 sheep, 14 oxen and 62 acres sown with grain.
and oats. And finally, the royal commissioners recorded that his ‘Wyke’ manor consisted of 101 acres of arable land sown with grain and beans, silver ornaments and cutlery and oxen and hens. The extraordinary size of the Bristolian's manors, in particular when compared to the modest North Curry estate where he spent his childhood, illustrates that he craved social aggrandizement and used his new-found wealth to enter the ranks of the rural gentry. Rents from tenants and the sale of surplus grain or livestock would have generated substantial additional revenue for the merchant. The large numbers of sheep on his rural manors, as well as oxen, ploughs and land sown with grain, illustrate that a significant portion of Gyen's wealth was not actually derived from the import of wine, but instead from his active participation in the lucrative wool trade and demesne agriculture.

Once discovered, the treasure was transported to London, but remained in neither the Treasury nor the Crown's possession. Instead, Edward III assigned the entire sum to Ralph, earl of Stafford, as repayment for his expenses incurred whilst on campaign in France. Unlike Reynold le Frenshe, no royal pardon was issued to Robert Gyen, who was found guilty of countless ‘felonies, trespasses, conspiracies, confederacies, extortions, usuries… forestallings, grievances and excesses’. The Bristolian was imprisoned in the summer of 1353, until he had repaid his debts and fines in full. But with his reputation damaged beyond repair and facing financial ruin, Gyen – the international merchant, civic and Crown official, and royal creditor – languished in prison, where he died in late 1353 or early 1354.

IV

From a contemporary perspective, Robert Gyen's rise and fall would have been a remarkable tale in itself, perhaps evoking notions of the Wheel of Fortune that was regularly applied to the fate of nobles. However, Gyen’s trajectory was not rooted in misfortune, but rather in his own malfeasance. Bristolians would have drawn clear parallels from sermons, pastoral literature and moral exempla that highlighted the potential turpitude encouraged by profit-making and commerce. Merchants were continually exemplified as the personification of the deadly sin of avarice, which would lead to covetousness – an inordinate love of material goods. Medieval congregations regularly heard how those who succumbed to avarice would eventually endanger their soul by following the path to such sins as deceit, theft and false claims.

Fasciculus Morum, a 14th-century preacher's handbook, declared that avarice would ‘cause wretched man to err from the way of truth and justice and lead him on the way of iniquity and misery’. It highlighted particularly those:

80. TNA, E 142/47; E 199/39/31.
83. J.S. Bothwell, Falling from Grace: reversal of fortune and the English nobility 1075–1455 (Manchester, 2010).
merchants who grow in wool and other riches, whose iniquity and tricks against the simple in buying and selling will yet be revealed before God in the end. For although here in their trickery they spend their days in wealth, according to Job [21.13], yet in the end they will, because of their treachery and tricks, at a point go down to hell.”

Warnings that traders neglected their spiritual salvation was an incentive for many to be generous in their wills in endowing prayers, masses and other forms of spiritual restitution. It is likely that Gyen’s attempt to establish a chantry in 1351 was driven by such concerns, despite the insistence of many moralists that giving away stolen gains would not necessarily save your soul. Without true redemption, you would still go ‘to the deuyl, body and bone’.

The most notable literary depiction of a medieval English merchant can be found in the prologue to Geoffrey Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales. Although this portrayal of the ‘Marchant’ was written some 40 years after Gyen’s notoriety, Chaucer drew upon long-lived stereotypes about mercantile morality. The ‘Marchant’ is described as active in the international trade in wool and cloth. His outward façade is prosperous, respectable and well-dressed (‘for sothe he was a worthy man with alle’), wearing a Flemish beaver hat and sitting ‘hye on horse’. However, Chaucer’s sense of irony also hints at suggestions of ambition, self-importance and vanity. The prologue provides further subtle allusions to a man in debt and perhaps engaged in deceitful, usurious dealings. Ultimately, Chaucer asserts ‘I noot how men hym calle’, further undermining the Marchant’s cultivated image as not necessarily compatible with how all talked about him. Such imagery would have been readily understood by those who were inundated with moral warnings about mercantile abuses. It is unlikely that Chaucer’s merchant was based on any one individual, even though his own employment as a civil servant and customs official would have led to encounters with successful, avaricious and struggling merchants on a daily basis. Instead, the portrayal was undoubtedly ‘formed from a conglomeration of fiction, experience, estates ideology and literary convention’. Although we do not know how long Robert Gyen remained part of Bristol memory, he was relatively unusual in the extent of his crimes. It is thus possible that a merchant like Gyen was one of those examples that reinforced Chaucer’s literary depiction or, at least, the preconceptions of those that read and heard it. Equally, his career perhaps illustrates that the plethora of medieval moral and pulpit anxieties about mercantile sins were not always heeded.

Robert Gyen’s fortunes rose precipitously, placing him firmly within Bristol’s civic élite and in strong favour with the Crown. His fall from grace was as sharp as his rise, and the conditions surrounding his extensive wealth highly unusual. Nevertheless, his astute use of positions such as MP, commissioner and water bailiff, alongside the forwarding of substantial loans in response

87. Ibid. 344–7.
93. Davis, Medieval Market Morality, 88 n. 255.
to royal demands, are a demonstration of how mercantile-government links were intensifying at this time. For much of his life, Gyen had carefully cultivated his reputation as a prosperous and respectable merchant and, in return, both the town and Crown had entrusted him with positions of civic and royal responsibility. However, like Chaucer’s merchant, it was a façade that was too good to be true.