

Mr. Mayor, the Admiral of the Port

Since the inception of the Sea Pie Supper the Mayor of Southampton has been our guest at the Top Table and, invariably, his badge of maritime jurisdiction, in the shape of a silver oar, has been laid out in front of him - or nearby.

WHY, I wondered does OUR Mayor have such a Badge of Office and why does he carry the additional title Admiral of the Port ?

Few, if any, of us will remember a "picturesque and interesting" ceremony enacted in the port on September 12th 1951 when the Mayor and Corporation sailed around the port, visiting the ancient boundaries - with the silver Oar of Admiralty occupying pride of place in the wheelhouse of the Southampton Harbour Board patrol launch. This unique occasion was to mark the 500th anniversary of the title Admiral of the Port being bestowed on the Mayor by the King, Henry the Sixth, and the presentation of that Badge of Office.

These honours were bestowed to acknowledge the tremendous contribution the port had made to the country by "the eminence it had attained in overseas trade" and his "Admiralty Jurisdiction" extended from Hurst Castle in the West to Langstone on the East - and included Portsmouth. The inclusion of Portsmouth will surprise many but, in those days, it was small and made little contribution to trade or defence. In fact, the tiny fishing village of Hamble made a greater contribution to the king's service, in terms of ships and mariners than did Portsmouth !

At the ceremony in 1951, as in 1451, Hamble presented the Mayor with a crab whilst Redbridge, at the mouth of the Test, offered him a salmon - a fish that once abounded in its waters. These gifts were a recognition of the Mayor's powers as Admiral of the Port; he controlled all fishing rights and issued licences to those desirous of fishing in his waters. He also maintained a Court of Admiralty supported by a prison to accommodate those who broke his laws.

It is unsurprising that not everyone locally recognised the Mayor's powers and when, in 1684, a Dutchman - laden with wine - foundered on Calshot Spit - and the Mayor, his burgesses and customs officers hastened to the scene, there was a clash with some men sent by the Governor of the Isle of Wight who claimed to be Admiral of that part of the Solent. The Mayor of Southampton was summoned to appear before the King and Council in January 1685 which resulted in the curtailment of some of his powers, but it was not until 1835 that all of his admiralty powers were removed

The trade at the port (which gave rise to the honours being bestowed) is attributed to the prosperity of that with The Levant ports which once used Calais but who now found Southampton to be closer and more efficient. The port soon became the centre of all the Levant trade - in and out.

Wool was the principal export but, in later years, when Henry the Eighth prohibited its export that trade fell away to such an extent that, in 1598, Southampton was classed a "decayed town" - similar to Newcastle and Hull - and only its trade with the Channel Islands prevented its total eclipse - but this at the expense of Poole.

Happily, for the area, the New Forest provided an abundant supply of quality timber for shipbuilding. The town had already built the "Grace Dieu" and "Holy Ghost" for Henry the Fifth and, by the end of the 18th. Century, frigates and merchant vessels had been built at Northam and Buckler's Hard on the Beaulieu River turned out no fewer than 21 "ships of the line".

The Port of Southampton has many natural advantages in addition to its proximity to the trade routes of the Globe. Besides its "Double Tide" with the second High Water occurring about two hours after the first, the "Young Flood" a tidal stand of between five and six feet meant that it could accommodate the largest vessels afloat. Unhappily, it did not have any docks - merely wooden wharves - but, in 1803 a celebrated engineer embarked on a project to construct docks, thus enabling the "decayed" port to re-enter the world of ocean trade once again. BUT ...that is another story.

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(With acknowledgements to "The Nautical Magazine" 1952.)

The Silver Oar of Admiralty can be seen in the picture, right, taken at the Shipping Festival Service.

It is being carried by the Town Sergeant, preceding the Mayor.

The role of the Town Sergeant outdates even that of the Admiral of the Port, being first recorded in 1447.

The oar was displayed at our Trafalgar Dinner at St. Mary's stadium in 2017 where we described it thus:

The Silver Oar is the cherished badge of maritime jurisdiction of the mayor and is symbolic of rule over the seas.

It is hallmarked, "London 1707-08", and inscribed with the Town Arms and the Town Rebus (symbol).

Sir Henry Englefield, in his 'A Walk through Southampton' (1801) described it as "modern and not handsome".



So, not the original perhaps, or maybe the original oar assayed in 1708.