

Merchants and crises: The Bristol sugar market during the French Revolutionary Wars

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The eighteenth century saw a range of crises, including conflicts, political upheaval, and natural disasters. Of these, however, warfare stands out to a significant number of historians as one of the worst crises that merchants could face. Gervais, for example, has called war ‘the ultimate crisis’ for an eighteenth-century merchant.¹ Morgan similarly argues that, with war, ‘trade was often interrupted; freight and insurance rates increased; and convoy protection was needed for commerce with the Caribbean’.² Yet other historians note how merchants could benefit from the wartime economy. Cutterham, for example, has shown how well-positioned merchants in the fledgling United States could take advantage of the state’s need for resources.³ Others, such as Haggerty, have gone further, arguing that ‘many merchants were used to, and comfortable with, coping in a war economy’.⁴ The impact that warfare had on trade, and the means by which merchants could cope and flourish in such an environment, therefore remain open questions. What can we learn from Bristol sugar merchants Tobin & Pinney, who were operating during the French Revolutionary Wars? For these merchants, was warfare really the ‘ultimate crisis’?

This paper examines the impact of the French Revolutionary Wars (1793-1802) on Bristol’s sugar market, and explores the means by which Tobin & Pinney, sugar importers of Bristol, coped with the effects of war. I argue that, thanks to established practices, warfare had a limited impact on their trade. They were able to secure their shipping with convoys and insurance; the gluts caused by convoys were overcome through strategies used in peacetime; and increased costs of war were offset by the fall in production and high prices that followed the Saint Domingue Revolution. Indeed, this Revolution, which began as an insurrection by the enslaved against their masters, evolved into a conflict in itself, and a significant component of the wars that followed.⁵ As a crisis of production, it was a significant source of opportunity for British merchants and sugar planters, leading to high sugar prices and increasing profits. The impact of warfare was mitigated in other ways: thanks to the disruption caused by the Saint Domingue Revolution and subsequent regulations, it was the high price of sugar which triggered export controls and prevented its export to the Continent, rather than French advancements. Threats to Britain’s West India possessions were mitigated by the concentration of military force in the Caribbean theatre. Finally, provisions scarcities caused by war in the islands were mitigated by the reopening of trade with the United States and the regulation of distilleries.

I

One of the most significant challenges facing merchants during wartime came from commerce raiding, with privateers threatening to disrupt shipping by capturing enemy ships. In response, merchants turned to the tried-and-tested convoy system, used throughout the eighteenth century to guard shipping. In 1793, rather than being imposed top-down by a state anxious to protect its revenue, the system was lobbied for by merchants: in Bristol, it was the West India Association who demanded convoys with strict departure dates from the Admiralty.⁶ Convoy protection proved effective. Retrospective estimates from Lloyds put merchant losses as a result of enemy action at

¹ Gervais, ‘Facing and Surviving War’, p. 79.

² Morgan, *Slavery*, pp. 16-17.

³ Cutterham, ‘Revolutionary Transformation’.

⁴ Haggerty, ‘*Merely for Money?*’, p. 198.

⁵ See: Duffy, *Soldiers*.

⁶ Bristol Archives (BA), MS SMV/8/3/2/1 West India Association Minute Book, 1782-1804.

around two-and-a-half to three per cent of the total fleet.⁷ Data on Bristol's shipping, extracted from the wharfage books kept by the Society of Merchant Venturers (SMV), shows that tonnage entering from the West Indies remained stable during wartime compared to its pre-war tonnage, especially compared to tonnage entering from Europe (see Table 1). Furthermore, travelling with convoy made insurance much cheaper, especially later on in the conflict, with merchants like Tobin & Pinney typically paying four or five guineas per £100 on ships and goods sailing with convoy, compared to 10 to 15 guineas for ships sailing without convoy.⁸ Historians often note the tendency for markets to glut with convoys, however. Indeed, as Hoppit summarizes, 'the convoy system, which offered reassurance and protection, led to highly distorted markets because of the way the system encouraged gluts'.⁹ Morgan similarly comments that 'one important snag of convoys' was the 'large numbers of ships arriving home at the same time and depressing the sugar market'.¹⁰ The potential for such distortions is evident in the shipping data. A closer examination of the SMV's wharfage books shows the seasonality of trade and the concentration during wartime around particular months (see Graph 1). The sample year for peace (1788/89) shows a small peak of entries around the summer months; the sample year for war (1797/98) shows these peaks exaggerated, with entrances concentrated predominantly in August.

Table 1						
Shipping Tonnage Entering Bristol from the West Indies, 1784-1801 (tons)						
1784/85	1785/86	1787/88	1788/89	1791/92	Mean	Range
12960	11231	17025	15677	17049	14788	5818
1792/93	1796/97	1797/98	1799/1800	1800/01	Mean	Range
12933	15070	11428	15184	16447	14212	5019
Shipping Tonnage Entering Bristol from Europe, 1784-1801 (tons)						
1784/85	1785/86	1787/88	1788/89	1791/92	Mean	Range
14533	17560	26935	23986	31541	22911	17008
1792/93	1796/97	1797/98	1799/1800	1800/01	Mean	Range
22531	14453	8372	20401	14674	16086	14159
Source: BA, MS SMV/7/1/1/72-81 Wharfage Books, 1784-1801						
Note: Each season runs from October to September						

Given the concentration of shipping into fewer months, one might expect this to have a distorting effect on the market, as Hoppit and Morgan imply. Yet in this instance this was not case. Sugar merchants in Bristol were used to a heavy influx of sugar over the summer months, and the price of sugar was influenced more by the amount of sugar that was produced. Though sugar was a perishable product, it could be stored long enough for merchants to be willing to wait out gluts. In peacetime, merchants held their sugar back from the market if they felt that it was overstocked and prices were too low; they entered when the market cleared, and prices began to rise again.¹¹ Prices

⁷ Rodger, *Command of the Ocean*, p. 559.

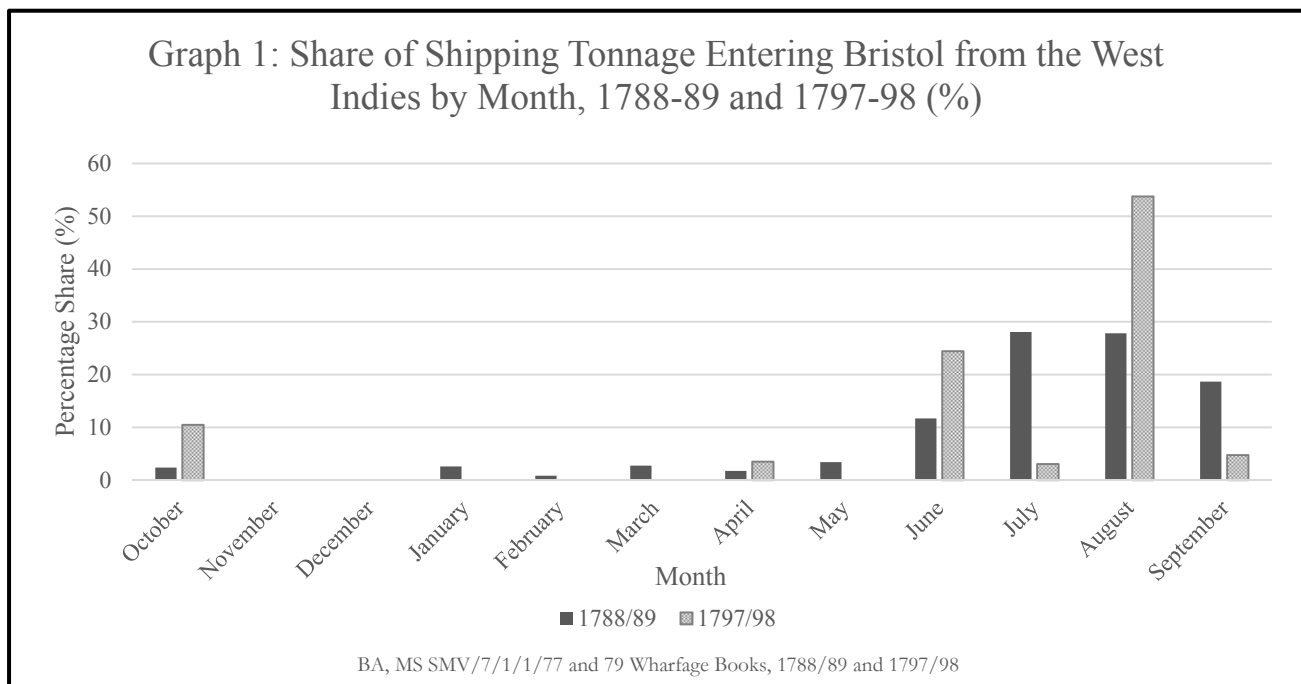
⁸ See rates paid by the firm in University of Bristol Special Collections (UoBSC), Pinney Papers, MS DM58/Account Books/32 and 40.

⁹ Hoppit, *Risk and Failure*, p. 128.

¹⁰ Morgan, *Bristol and the Atlantic Trade*, p. 203.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 215-16.

were influenced much more by the overall size of the crop rather than variations in supply of the season. The overall size was anticipated throughout the year, and finally determined when the last of the ships arrived by the autumn. In particular, it was Jamaica which influenced the market. Rumours of a bumper crop were enough to lower the price of sugar by five or six shillings per hundredweight; rumours of scarcity enough to raise prices.¹²



The mechanics of the price movements remained much the same during the French Revolutionary Wars. Surviving price data shows that only in the first two years of the wars were prices lowered over summer.¹³ Early on, merchants certainly feared gluts so great ‘that the prices must fall considerably’.¹⁴ The ability of merchants to withhold their sugar from the market was hampered by the pressures of the credit crisis that had forced many to sell ‘contrary to their inclination’.¹⁵ The impact of convoys waned thereafter, however, and from 1795 the impact was negligible. The revolution in Saint Domingue had led to a severe shortage of sugar in Europe, and production in the British West Indies was eagerly expanded to fill the gap.¹⁶ The price had risen considerably, and the shortage of sugar was so great that convoys even failed to produce any material short-term effect on prices.¹⁷ Moreover, the rising price of sugar offset the increased costs of war, and the profitability of sugar planting remained high.¹⁸

Convoys therefore protected trade, and though they may have glutted the market, merchants were able to overcome short-term gluts by withholding their sugar from sale. They did this in war, just as they did during peacetime, where the sugar arrived with the summer fleets, albeit more spread out over the summer months. The Saint Domingue Revolution had raised prices, offsetting the increased costs of freight and provisions. Yet issues with shipping were not the only way that warfare could impact the market.

II

¹² See, for example: Pinney & Tobin to Edward Brazier, 8 December 1787, UoBSC, Pinney Papers, MS DM58/Letter Book/37.

¹³ Morgan, *Bristol and the Atlantic Trade*, p. 210.

¹⁴ Tobin & Pinney to William Colhoun, 17 July 1793, UoBSC, Pinney Papers, MS DM58/Letter Book/39.

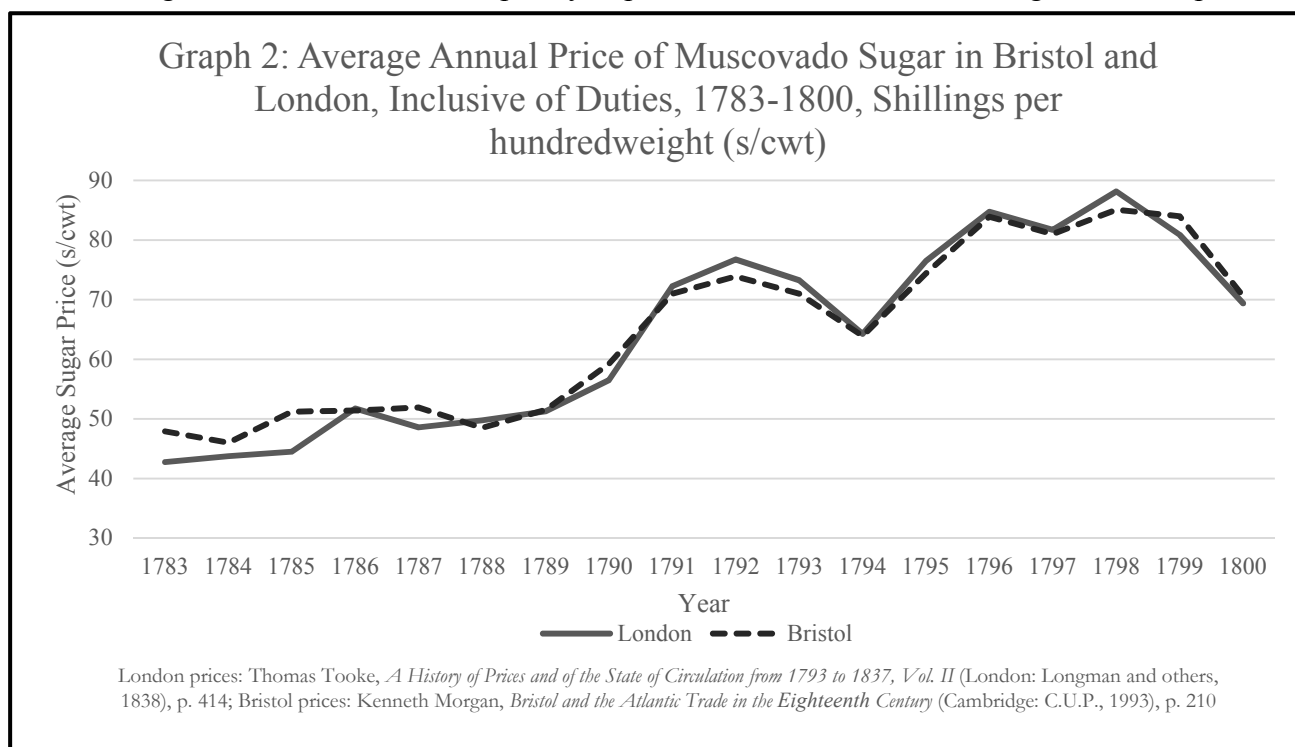
¹⁵ Tobin & Pinney to Walter Maynard, 11 September 1793, UoBSC, Pinney Papers, MS DM58/Letter Book/39.

¹⁶ See recently: Ryden, *West Indian Slavery*.

¹⁷ Morgan, *Bristol and the Atlantic Trade*, p. 210.

¹⁸ See recently: Rönnbäck, ‘Sweet Business’.

Britain's newfound dependence on the European market that followed the Saint Domingue Revolution was threatened by French advances on the Continent. Early on, absentee planters Barnard and William Dickinson feared that 'the unsettled state of Europe will prevent the Call abroad for Raw Sugars, and be a means of keeping down the Market'.¹⁹ Rumours certainly had a short-term impact on the price of sugar and pace of sales.²⁰ Yet in reality, especially as the war progressed, it was the high price that prevented exports to Europe, rather than French military successes. The British government had enacted export controls, triggered by a price threshold, to mollify the grocers and refiners of sugar, who were horrified by the sudden rise in prices.²¹ With prices reaching new heights from 1796 (see Graph 2), exports were prohibited. This failed to prevent scarcities or further price rises, and summer importations barely made a dent.²² Merchants Tobin & Pinney complained that 'the Sugar Market is under a temporary depression as the Ports are shut against the exportation



of that Article', with buyers waiting for the price to fall.²³ It was therefore the scarcity of sugar and subsequent high prices, rather than French advancements, which had a bigger effect on exports to Europe.

Further threats to production in the West Indies by French forces put pressures on the market in Bristol. Fears were realised in St Vincent and Grenada, which experienced uprisings by the enslaved. For merchants and planters connected to the islands, the 'unfortunate situation', as Tobin & Pinney referred to it, was devastating. A silver lining, however, (for those unconnected) was that it helped 'keep up the present high price of Sugars'.²⁴ There were similar scenes in Jamaica, with a maroon uprising at the same time.²⁵ It was government intervention that again alleviated much of the distress:

¹⁹ Barnard and William Dickinson to Thomas Salmon, 1 December 1792, Somerset Heritage Centre, Dickinson Papers, MS DD/DN/4/2/40(1).

²⁰ See, for example: Tobin & Pinney to John Taylor & Edward Brazier, 6 and 20 August 1794, UoBSC, Pinney Papers, MS DM58/Letter Book/39.

²¹ Ragatz, *Planter Class*, p. 206-7.

²² Tobin, Pinney & Tobin to John Taylor, 6 December 1797, and 2 May and 25 August 1798, UoBSC, Pinney Papers, MS DM58/Letter Book/40.

²³ Tobin, Pinney & Tobin to Edward Huggins, 13 November 1798, UoBSC, Pinney Papers, MS DM58/Letter Book/40.

²⁴ Tobin & Pinney to George Webbe, 15 October 1795, UoBSC, Pinney Papers, MS DM58/Letter Book/39.

²⁵ Petley, *White Fury*, pp. 179-80.

the British organised ‘the biggest expedition ever dispatched from British shores’ in response.²⁶ The uprisings were violently put down, and the rebels involved were hanged or deported, including many of the Caribs native to St Vincent. The presence of British forces mitigated the threat of French advancements in the West Indies, and indeed it was the British who were a greater threat to the French. Several French islands were captured early on, though not all were held onto.²⁷ Merchants contemplated the opportunities this offered; some were concerned that the inclusion of foreign islands in the British system would reduce the price of sugar. Given their newfound dependence on the European market, however, it mattered little where sugar was sent.²⁸ British reinforcement, though it came at a substantial loss of life, protected Britain’s West India possessions and kept sugar flowing back to Britain.

A final source of concern was the scarcity of provisions in the islands. The needs of the army and navy, coupled with failed harvests, had raised the price of grains. Flour rose from 44s a sack in 1794 to 83s in 1795.²⁹ Exports were regulated with quotas. These were rarely clear in advance, nor necessarily sufficient: Tobin & Pinney commented in January 1796 that ‘the quantity of Flour in [planter George Webbe’s] last order was engrossed in a day or two’.³⁰ By 1795, they had already noted the ‘great scarcity, and high price of everything in the West Indies’.³¹ The scarcity was alleviated by the reopening of trade with the United States, which had been heavily regulated from 1783. From 1793, ports in the West Indies were opened one-by-one to US ships under emergency exemptions.³² The regulation of distilleries in Britain further reduced scarcities of grain, and gave the price of rum and low-quality sugar a welcome boost.³³ Rum reached highs of 7s 6d per gallon, and was being sold ‘before the Mast’.³⁴ Shortages in the islands were alleviated, and the price of colonial produce had benefited at the same time.

III

Warfare thus failed to impact the market in the ways that may be feared. The sugar trade was sustained by the actions of the merchant community, who lobbied the government for convoys, and by access to cheap insurance. The gluts that convoys threatened to cause had little impact; the market was still dictated by the overall supply of sugar, rather than fluctuations in supply over the season. Merchants who were still able to withhold their sugar from the market until buyers were willing to accept the higher prices. They were aided in this by the crisis in Saint Domingue which massively disrupted Europe’s sugar supplies, causing a severe shortage and raising the price substantially. This more than offset the costs of war for merchants and planters. This newfound dependence on the European market meant that returns were threatened by French advances on the Continent. Yet it was the export controls, designed to prevent excessively high prices, which led to prohibition on exports. The West Indies were protected from further rebellion and invasion by the substantial presence of British forces. Scarcities in the islands were resolved through the reopening of trade with the USA. This demonstrates that, rather than being the ‘ultimate crisis’ for late-eighteenth-century sugar merchants, warfare was a period of manageable disruption that these merchants were able to successfully navigate.

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²⁶ Duffy, *Soldiers*, p. 370

²⁷ On these campaigns, see Duffy, *Soldiers*.

²⁸ This observation was made by contemporary Joseph Marryatt. See: Ryden, ‘Sugar’, pp. 53-54.

²⁹ Emsley, *British Society*, p. 7

³⁰ Tobin & Pinney to George Webbe Junior, 1 January 1796, UoBSC, Pinney Papers, MS DM58/Letter Book/39.

³¹ Tobin & Pinney to John Budgen, 3 October 1795, UoBSC, Pinney Papers, MS DM58/Letter Book/39.

³² See: Ryden, *West Indian Slavery*, pp. 110-12.

³³ Emsley, *British Society*, p. 43

³⁴ Tobin & Pinney to John Taylor & Edward Brazier, 15 December 1795, UoBSC, Pinney Papers, MS DM58/Letter Book/39

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