

SOME MERCHANTS AT PLYMOUTH

by Alan Taylor

Thomas Edgcombe who bought Edgcumbe from his nephew John in 1521 had several sons. The second, Peter, established himself as a merchant in Tavistock, in which activity he was followed by his grandson, also Peter. This Peter married a cousin, Agnes Edgcombe, and died in 1508 leaving several sons. Thomas, the eldest, remained in Tavistock for several years before moving to Plymouth where, no doubt, the profits of mercantile activity were greater. He was preceded, however, by his younger brother Peter who, with his son and grandson, is the subject of this article.

During the first half of the sixteenth century Plymouth was entering a new phase of its development. Its Elizabethan heyday was over. Drake had returned to Plymouth with the spoils of his great circumnavigation, and had sailed from the town to defeat the Armada, but he was dead. Dead too were the Hawkins brothers who had done so much to make the Elizabethan privateers the masters of the Atlantic. James I concluded peace with Spain, and put an end to this lucrative activity. London merchants founded the East India Company to develop the eastern trade routes, and although their ships called at Plymouth, they were not based there. There remained in Plymouth a spirit of enterprise, which needed to find new outlets. It found them in the exploitation of the north eastern seaboard of America.

Peter Edgecombe (c. 1588 - 1621)

Hither came Peter Edgcombe in the opening years of the 17th century. He was probably born c1588 and was still a minor when his father drew up his will in Tavistock on 20 June 1608. He left him £300 payable in equal instalments on his twenty first, twenty second and twenty third birthdays. He had probably recently received the final payment when, on 2 Sep 1611 he married Elizabeth Colwill at the parish church of St. Andrew, Plymouth.

The exact nature of Peter's mercantile activity is unknown. His son and grandson, both described as merchants, were primarily brewers of beer, and - though this interest may just as probably have been acquired later from the Dipford family - it may have been Peter's main interest as well. Of course, he may also have seized other profitable opportunities including perhaps those relating to the development of America. He was too young to be associated with the foundation of the Plymouth Company in 1606, and dead before serious attention was given to opening up the area that became the state of Maine, in which a number of his relatives were involved. But it may have been American affairs that were the subject of the agreement on an unknown subject

which he reached with Sir Richard and Dame Mary Edgcombe of Mount Edgcombe, before 1620¹.

Peter also retained interests in Tavistock, and used the Stannary Court of the town to pursue defaulting creditors. The court had a local jurisdiction extending beyond matters relating to tin mining and processing, so this cannot be taken as evidence that Peter had tin interests, although he may have had. On 11 Dec 1616 he paid two fines of 3d. to introduce separate actions for debt against John Woolcomb and Thomas Wyott in the court².

Peter died in his early thirties and was bur 2 Oct 1621 Plymouth St. Andrew. Elizabeth was not long a widow, and on 26 June 1622 obtained a licence at Exeter to marry Thomas Dipford of Totnes³. The marriage took place at St. Andrew's four days later on 30 June.

Peter and Elizabeth had six children:

1. Nicholas, chr 21 Jne 1612 Plymouth St. Andrew and described as son and heir in the 1620 Visitation. See below.
2. Ann, chr 25 Apr 1614 and bur 4 Oct 1615 Plymouth St. Andrew.
3. Peter, chr 14 Feb 1615/6 and bur 20 May 1617 Plymouth St. Andrew.
4. Francis, chr 8 Nov 1617 Plymouth St. Andrew, and described as second son in the 1620 Visitation. Bur 17 Nov 1634 Plymouth St. Andrew.
5. Elizabeth, chr 30 Nov 1619 Plymouth St. Andrew, and described as *only daughter* in the 1620 Visitation. No more known.
6. Peter, chr 24 Aug 1621 and bur 17 Feb 1649/50 Plymouth St. Andrew.

Elizabeth may have taken her four surviving children to Totnes, but if so they were all back in Plymouth by 1632 when Ann Dipford was buried. 1631-2 is also the earliest year for which the Plymouth borough rollage and package⁴ accounts survive. They show Thomas Dipford as a brewer in the town, and so he remained until he was buried, the same day as his wife Elizabeth, on 20 Feb 1642/3 at Plymouth St. Andrew. He was not brewing on a major scale, and indeed is recorded as paying nothing most years, but he paid 20s. in 1632-3 and 5s. in 1636-7.

Nicholas Edgecombe (1612 - 1649) His son was John Edgecombe of New London CT

Nicholas, the eldest of the Edgcombe brothers in the next generation, was probably taught brewing by his stepfather. On 26 Mch 1634 he bought from Thomas Dipford for £200 one messuage and tenement with curtilages and a garden lying on the north side of Cat Street in Plymouth; to its west lay lands of William Hawkins esquire, to its north and east lay lands lately occupied by John Ilcombe, merchant of Plymouth deceased, and to the east also lay lands of Martin Rider gentleman and the Plymouth Almshouses. His mother and stepfather agreed to make a fine within seven years, and appointed Thomas Andrew and another Thomas⁵, merchants of Plymouth, as attorneys to deliver seisin, which Thomas Andrew (by himself) duly did. The deed⁶ was witnessed by Thomas Andrew, Thomas Barker, Elizabeth Dipford and William John.

These lands were later described as the Malthouse. It therefore seems very likely that having recently come of age and completed his apprenticeship to his stepfather, Nicholas was setting up as a master brewer on his own account. Nicholas first paid rollage and package in 1634, and thereafter appears in the accounts each year until his death in 1649. In all years except 1639 and 1649 when no charge was levied, he paid twenty shillings, making him the largest brewer in the town.

On 20 Jul 1636 Thomas and Elizabeth Dipford sold Nicholas other properties for £125. These were adjoining messuages with gardens on the north side of Nut Street, Plymouth; one was occupied by John Jennings, the other which had joint access to a well by Christopher Beardon. To their west lay lands of John Davies chirurgeon, to their north lands of the Mayor and Commonalty of Plymouth and lands of Tobias Kemp, and to their east were lands which Tobias Kemp also now held but which had been William Cole's. Nicholas Hunt and Andrew Colwill were appointed attorneys to deliver the premises (which they duly did) and they and Thomas Diptord junior⁸ witnessed the deed⁹.

Although still in his early twenties, Nicholas felt sufficiently well established to marry. His wife's name was Joan, although I do not know her surname because I have not found the marriage,¹⁰ and have not yet identified the arms on the seal she used. This bore the heraldic device of a chevron between three stars, two and one. Over the next thirteen years Joan bore Nicholas nine children:

1. Joan, not baptised but bur 15 Sep 1637 Plymouth St. Andrew.
2. Susanna, chr 30 Sep 1638 Plymouth St. Andrew.
3. Nicholas, chr 18 Nov 1640 Plymouth St. Andrew. See below.
4. Jane, chr 2 Jan and bur 8 Mch 1641/2 Plymouth St. Andrew.

5. Ann, chr 4 Jne 1643 Plymouth St. Andrew. She married either John Young of Puslinch House on 2 Dec 1662 Plymouth Charles, or John Surraige, presumably the Plymouth merchant of that name, by a licence issued on 18 Jan 1667/8 at Exeter which described her as of Plymouth¹¹.

6. Joanna, chr 16 Feb 1644/5 Plymouth St. Andrew. She may have married Josiah Eendine on 9 sep 1673 Plymouth St. Andrew'¹².

7. Samuel, chr 4 Jne 1646 Plymouth St. Andrew. He was probably either the Samuel Edgcombe married to Mary whose daughter Elizabeth was bur 13 Aug 1675 Plymouth St. Andrew; or the Samuel who married Mary Tamking at Plymouth St. Andrew on 2 Dec 1683 with issue, Susanna, chr 7 Feb 1684/5 and bur 9 May 1686 Plymouth St. Andrew. He may have been both. There may also be a connection with several Samuel Edgcombes in Stoke, Damerel, and Plymouth in the next century, one of whom founded a line that can be traced for several generations.

8. John, chr 12 Mch 1647/8 Plymouth St. Andrew. He trained as a tanner but decided that his future lay not in Plymouth but in America. Around 1673 he settled at New London, Connecticut, where he married and raised a family. Numerous descendants including E.F.G.H. members Pauline Albers and Constance, wife of Ted Barraclough, are known. Lieutenant John Edgcombe of New Hartford, the ancestor of many more E.F.G.H. members -see E.F.G.H.16, pp. 402-412 - may have been his grandson.

9. Jane, chr 2 May 1649 Plymouth St. Andrew. She married there 5 Mch 1678/9 to John Payne.

As we see from the baptisms, Nicholas regularly used St. Andrew's church, then the only one in the town of Plymouth. We do not know what part if any he played in the disputes between the predominantly Puritan townsmen - to the extent that they paid theatre companies to stay away - and their high church priest, a dispute which lasted the 1630s and culminated in the division of the parish and the building of a new church, Charles Church, in 1641. This dispute reinforced the independent religious outlook and anti-royalist views of the population of Plymouth and helped to ensure that when the Civil War broke out in 1642 the town was firmly on the side of Parliament.

Nicholas was assessed for £3 subsidy on goods in Plymouth in 1640/1, and protested the Oath there in 1641/2. Around this time he was in need of capital. This was a very normal state of affairs as before and during the Civil War both sides resorted to ever more draconian levies and new or "voluntary" taxes and "loans" to finance their activities.

Whether for these reasons or others, Nicholas borrowed £208 from Jonathan Sparke of Plymouth esquire agreeing to repay it by 4 Jan 1641/2. Humphrey Gayer¹³ agreed to stand surety for the loan and on 3 Jul 1641 delivered a counterbond in the sum of £400. But he asked for security, and on the same day Nicholas made over to him the reversion of ownership of the Malthouse in Cat Street. The description of the premises is identical to that in 1634 except that Martin Rider had died in the interim and his lands passed to his heirs. The conveyance was to be voided if the debt was settled in due time. Walter Glubb and Edward Hooper witnessed the deed.¹⁴

Over the next couple of years Plymouth built up its reserves, no doubt at the expense of its leading citizens including Nicholas. At the start of the War the Royalists felt too weak to tackle the town head on, but in November 1642 cut off its water supply. A half hearted siege was mounted until August 1643, when it began in earnest. It lasted until the early days of 1646 when the Royalist forces were withdrawn from the south west to meet more urgent demands elsewhere. Plymouth's position was never dire, since it always retained access to seaborne provisions, but life in the town became extremely uncomfortable and unhealthy. Nicholas's brewing business would have encountered difficulty in obtaining supplies both of water and of other ingredients. But beer is a commodity always in demand, so Nicholas was probably kept busy. Unlike many families, too, his seems not to have lost members to illness during the siege.

In 1644 Nicholas was mentioned as a merchant of Plymouth in the will of John Legg. Also in 1644, in April, he lent £30 to the Committee for the Defence of Plymouth against the King,¹⁵ thereby demonstrating his Parliamentary principles - or unwillingness to attract the odium of the town's ruling clique, of which of course he formed a part. In 1645/6 he was fined 6s.8d. for not wearing his gown in the Sessions at Plymouth.¹⁵ He was Receiver of Plymouth from Michaelmas 1646 to Michaelmas 1647.¹⁵

Like his father Nicholas died in his thirties. He was bur 26 Sep 1649 Plymouth St. Andrew. He died intestate. He had never repaid Jonathan Sparke his £208 and ownership of the Malthouse in Cat Street had formally passed to Humphrey Gayer, who had predeceased Nicholas leaving Jonathan as his chief creditor and administrator. Nicholas had been allowed to continue occupying the premises but as soon as he died Jonathan took steps to recover them. On 15 Oct 1649 in the presence of William Jefferies and Henry Rexford Joan vacated them and allowed him to take them over.¹⁶ She was granted administration of Nicholas's remaining estate by the P.C.C. on 6 Nov 1649.

In due course the Malthouse in Cat Street passed to John Gayer, Humphrey's heir, who asked Joan formally to quitclaim any dower or other rights she might retain in the

premises. This she did on 19 Nov 1655 in the presence of Christopher Ceely, Thomas Rich and John Harris.¹⁷ In 1654 when Nicholas had come of age John Gayer asked him for similar confirmation. For the further consideration of five shillings, Nicholas made a quitclaim on his own behalf on 15 Aug 1664, sealing it with the traditional Edgcombe shield of three boars' heads on a bend.¹⁸

Meanwhile Joan took over the management of her husband's brewing business. Neither Nicholas nor she are named in the list of rollage and packase compounders in 1650, but she appears in 1651 and 1652 and again from 1654 to 1665, although she paid only twice: ten shillings in 1653 and again in 1664. Her eldest son Nicholas, bred to the trade, had taken over the business by 1666 and it is his name which appears in the compounders' list most years between then and 1701. In many years he made no payment and when he did it was normally only five shillings. Although he described himself as a "besrbrewer" whereas his father had been a "merchant", Nicholas the younger appears to have brewed on a smaller scale. It is likely that the family fortunes never recovered from the Civil War years and Nicholas senior's premature death.

Nicholas Edgcombe (1640 - 1702) Brother of John Edgcomb of New London CT

Nicholas nevertheless married into the Plymouth bourgeoisie to which his father had belonged. His bride was Elizabeth, the daughter of Christopher Tyacke, surgeon of Plymouth, and his wife Grace.¹⁹ They were married 8 Oct 1668 Plymouth St. Andrew, and had four children:

1. Elizabeth, chr 29 Oct and bur 15 Dec 1669 Plymouth St. Andrew. During her short life she was named as a legatee in the will of her maternal uncle, Thomas Durant.²⁰
2. Nicholas, chr 23 Feb 1670/1 Plymouth St. Andrew, and bur there 24 Jan 1674/5.
3. Joanna, chr 27 Dec 1672 Plymouth St. Andrew, and bur there 9 Feb 1672/3.
4. Grace chr 11 Sep 1674 Plymouth St. Andrew. She was named in her grandfather Tyacke's will in 1691. She married 15 Jne 1694 Plymouth St. Andrew John Pethen, with issue, Edgcumbe Pethen chr 11 Aug 1697 Plymouth St. Andrew, later involved as a witness to the deposition of evidence in Robert and Prothesia Edgcombe's case concerning the rents at Gawton.²¹ John Pethen died soon after since she was named as the wife of David Williams, clerk, in 1702 in her father's will.

Joan saw her son John set off to start his new life in America, but did not live to see the birth of little Grace. She was bur 26 Mch 1674 Plymouth St. Andrew as *Mrs. Joan Edgcombe*. Her daughter in law lived only another three years and was bur 3 Jul 1677

Plymouth St. Andrew. Nicholas allowed himself two years to mourn, and remarried on 8 Jul 1679 Plymouth St. Andrew to Mary Holditch. Nicholas took her home to live with him in Old Conduit Street²², but they had no children.

Mary was the heir, probably the daughter, of Stephen Holditch who had bought from Ambrose Fortescue a 26 acre tenement comprising a house, garden and orchard in Churchstow. It was held from the Lords Petre on a lease dated 1 Oct 1660 for the lives of Stephen himself, George Priestwood of Whetcombe and his sister Elizabeth (Priestwood) the wife of Bernard Drake, for an annual rent of £2 3s. 6d. and £2 13s. 4d. as heriott. There was also a charge of 2s. yearly for the right to draw water from a stream running across an adjacent tenement occupied by Roger Crispin.²³ By 22 May 1684 Stephen Holditch was dead and Nicholas, as occupier in the right of his wife, paid John, Lord Petre, £55 to add Mary's life to the lease.²⁴

Nicholas was churchwarden at St. Andrew's in 1685. When the Borough of Plymouth was reincorporated by a charter from King Charles II on 26 Jne 1684, he had been named as a free burgess and a common councillor for life. This suggests he was a Tory in politics. But even Tories grew disenchanted with James II, especially in so Puritan a town as Plymouth. Nicholas may have joined in enthusiastically when Plymouth became the first English town to proclaim William III and Mary II. Converse²⁵ says he was elected an alderman in 1694. However, when a new charter was granted by King William III on 8 Dec 1696 he was not appointed to the municipal government, nor named as a burgess.

At Michaelmas 1689 he became Receiver of Plymouth for a year. Within three weeks he suffered the personal tragedy of being widowed a second time when Mary was buried at Plymouth St. Andrew on 20 Oct 1689. Perhaps the job of Receiver helped to distract him. It was essentially the work of a Borough treasurer, and during his year in office he recorded the receipt of £859.4s.2d. and the expenditure of £742.3s.9d. The borough made a profit that year. Nicholas considered that the profit should have been higher, and recorded that he had not received the sum of £2.17s.5d. outstanding from the accounts of the previous Receiver, Walter Ingram, even though the auditors thought it should be paid to him.²⁵

On 12 May 1690 Nicholas paid the Mayor and Commonalty of Plymouth £10 for a lease for 63 years at an annual rent of four shillings of an enclosed piece of land called the Pound. This measured 71 feet east to west and 16 or 18 feet north to south. It lay near the Great Hoe Gate on the northeast corner of the junction of Great Hoe Lane and a small lane leading to Southside. To its north was the garden of Richard Read, and to its west was a widening of the street. By the terms of the lease Nicholas was obliged to expend at least £50 to erect a building on the site.²⁷

On 26 Oct 1690 Nicholas paid the Mayor and Commonalty £2 for a lease for 21 years from the Christmas Day following at an annual rent of four shillings of a choked and disused well on the east side of Broad Hoe Lane. If Broad Hoe Lane was the same as Great Hoe Lane, the well would have been near to the Pound. Nicholas was at liberty to clean and repair the well, and could enclose and cover it and install a pump. However, if he did so, he had to allow public access to the well between nine and ten every morning and between three and four each afternoon.²⁸

In 1691 his father in law, Christopher Tyacke fell ill. He drew up his will on 31 July, naming both Nicholas and Grace, and was bur 11 Aug 1691 Plymouth St. Andrew. The will was proved the next year at Exeter.

On 25 Jne 1692 Nicholas secured from Thomas, Lord Petre, licence to sell the Holditch lands at Churchstow to Nicholas Cole, clothier of South Pool.²⁹

On 15 Aug 1692 Nicholas paid the Mayor and Commonalty £90 for the reversion of houses with three curtilages and two gardens which had recently been built in a garden formerly occupied by John German deceased. They lay on the west side of Buckwell Street on the corner of Mudd Street which lay to the south; the Orphans Aid Hospital lay to the west and lands previously occupied by Christopher Wilkins and since by Martin to the north. The premises had been let to Leonard Randall, but in 1692 were occupied by Edmund Pollexfen on a lease for the life of Anne Barker, formerly Pollexfen, widow of Plymouth. After she died the lands were to be let to Nicholas for 21 years at an annual rent of ten shillings.³⁰

On 19 Jan 1699 Nicholas and Robert Symons, gentleman of Totnes, agreed to act as vouchers in a recovery action to let Lethbridge Trevill of Butshead, esquire, break an entail.³¹

Nicholas turned sixty with the century. He was aging and described himself as a beerbrewer in the will he drew up on 28 Mch 1702 and had witnessed by Elizabeth Oates, George Ridout, Amy Bone and John Foslett. He left his estate to three trustees and joint executors: his second cousin Thomas Edscombe, woollen draper of Plymouth³², his kinsman Jonathan Dipford, merchant of Plymouth, and Bartholomew Avent, also a merchant of Plymouth. They were to settle his debts, of which he mentioned specifically a debt owed to John Simkin of Plymouth for which Thomas Dipford senior stood surety, and convey the residue of his estate to his daughter Grace Williams.

He died at once and was bur 1 Apr 1702 Plymouth St. Andrew. Thomas Edgcombe and Jonathan Dipford proved his will in the P.C.C. on 9 May 1702.

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1. Before 1620 because that is when Dame Mary died. I have not seen the agreement which was among the Mount Edgcumba papers, but may have perished in the War.
2. P.R.O.: SC2/168/41.
3. They had issue (among others including probably the Dipfords associated with later Edgcombe generations - see infra) Ann, daughter of Mr. Thomas Dipford, bur 3 Nov 1632 St. Andrew.
4. An impost also known as portorage which was imposed on all brewers. The staff at the Record Office in Plymouth, are as uncertain as I of the purpose and rate of the levy.
5. There is a hole covering his surname - probably Barker.
6. W.D.R.O.: 372/13/1/6.
7. Perhaps a brother of Elizabeth's.
- 8, A son of Thomas and Elizabeth would have been too young to have witnessed a deed. Perhaps Thomas junior was the son of Thomas by an earlier marriage, or he may have been a nephew.
9. W.D.R.O.: 1221/12.
10. The Nicholas Edgcombe and Joan Beare who married at Ermington 25 Jan 1633/4 were a different couple. See E.F.G.H.14, p.342.
11. I do not know who the other Ann was.
12. Though it might have been her cousin Joan, daughter of Thomas Edgcombe, born in 1635.
13. The Gayers were one of Plymouth s leading merchant families. Humphrey had served as Receiver of Plymouth in 1632-33. Nicholas and his friends formed the close knit social and oligarchic elite of the borough.
14. W.D.R.O.: 1221/58.
15. W.D.R.O.: W359/79 (Worth's Calendar of Plymouth Records).

16. W.D.R.O.: 1221/58.

17. W.D.R.O.: 372/1/8/7. This is the document bearing her seal of a chevron between three stars.

18. W.D.R.O.: 372/2/2/15.

19.. Christopher died in 1691; Grace was already dead, bur 10 Dec 1660 Plymouth St. Andrew.

20. W. D.R.O.: 544 and 745/45-

21. See E.F.G.H.10, p.238. Pethen's involvement was as a man of respectability and not because of any ties of kinship.

22 Abraham Edgcombe's will dated 13 Sep 1679 refers to lands next to Nicholas Edgcombe's dwelling house in Old Conduit Street.

23. D.R.O.: 123M/L561, L566, L584.

24. D.R.O. 123M/L566.

25. In The Converse Family and Allied Families (1905), p.756.

26. W. D.R.O.: W133 (Plymouth Receivers' accounts).

27. W . D.R.O.: W267/116 and W720/136.

28. W.D.R.O.: W267/87.

29. D.R.O.: 123M/L584.

30. W.D.R.O.: W267/125.

31. W.D.R.O.: Z15/46/7 and /8.

32 Son of Abraham and grandson of Thomas Edgcombe, the elder brother of Peter who died in 1621.