

THE PORT OF SOUTHAMPTON IN THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY: SHIPPING AND SHIPS MASTERS

By SUSAN ROSE

ABSTRACT

This article mainly uses an analysis of the Local Port Books of Southampton, for sample years in the fifteenth century, to gain an understanding of the amount and nature of the commercial shipping using Southampton at this time. Although details of ship type are only rarely included, there is enough evidence in these books to estimate the timing and frequency of voyages and whether the vessels recorded were engaged in coastwise or overseas trade. The operations of those ship masters who appear most frequently in the sources are also considered and analysed. These analyses contribute to a deeper understanding of the trade of Southampton and the extent of its hinterland.

INTRODUCTION

The commerce of Southampton in the late medieval period has been much studied. Dr Alwyn Ruddock's *Italian merchants and shipping in Southampton 1270–1600* was published as long ago as 1951, while the printed editions of the port books (local customs records) and brokerage books, (which record inland trade passing through the Bargate, the main landward exit from the town) and their introductions, have added much easily accessible detail relating to both native and alien traders. (P.Studer, 1913, B.Foster, 1963, H.S.Cobb, 1961, E.S.Lewis, 1993, D.B. Quinn and A.A. Ruddock, 1937) This is hardly surprising, of course, since the town is so well endowed with the records of local customs and other dues covering both seaborne and inland trade and has moreover a somewhat intriguing and romantic connection with the merchants of Venice, Florence

and Genoa. Reading the lists of the cargoes brought in in their carracks and galleys is to get a glimpse of the luxury trade of fifteenth century England; everything from feather beds, and leopard skins to gold dust and popinjays or parrots. Equally the use of the port by the royal ships between the early years of Henry V's reign and round about 1440 has been described, and some of the most important documents transcribed and printed. (S. Rose, 1977, 1982, 1998). Less studied has been what might be called the bread and butter, everyday shipping of what was, even in the heyday of Soper's naval administration, principally a commercial port. This paper goes some way to filling this gap and presents some tentative answers to questions like how busy was the port? Was there a noticeable seasonal pattern to voyages and which were the most travelled routes? How many ships may have been in Southampton ownership during this period? Can we make any statements about the type of shipping most commonly used? Can we see the fortunes of the port changing over the course of the century?

THE SOURCES

Any conclusions, of course, will depend on the nature and amount of the surviving evidence. Here there are problems. The best source for the kind of information that we need is undoubtedly the surviving Port or Local Custom books. The earliest is that for 1426–7 printed as long ago as 1913 by the Southampton Record Society. There is then a surviving group of books from the 1430s; another group covering with a few gaps the years 1448–1460, a further

group from the late 1470s and 80s, one from 1494–5 and finally one from 1499–1500. The MSS of all these books are in the Southampton Civic Record Office and a full set of microfilms is held by the British Library of Political and Economic Science at the London School of Economics. This looks like a series quite good enough to enable one to answer the questions above; however, there was no uniform format for keeping these books, the main purpose of which was, of course, to account for the various payments owed by those using the port to the town corporation, not to preserve details of the vessels they used. What information went in and what information was left out seems to have been down to the whim of each water bailiff. (This was the title of the official responsible to the corporation for this task). Thus some books do not even include dates beyond the year in question. Others make no mention of vessels except for the exceptional Italian carracks and galleys already mentioned. Others do not give any details of ships, not their names, nor their ports of origin: nothing except the somewhat uninformative use of the terms 'boat' or 'ship', ('*batella*' or '*navis*' in the original).

In most of the surviving port books the so-called *Liber Communis* is kept separately from the *Liber Alienigenus*; the first was mainly concerned with goods taken through the port by denizens while the other dealt almost entirely with shipments by aliens. However, the principal function of most of these Alien Books is to record the details of the dues owed by the patrons of Italian carracks and galleys; payments due from other foreign ships, from the Netherlands or France most commonly, will frequently be found in the *Liber Communis*. As well as these particular difficulties there are the general ones of the variability in the record-keeping prowess of the various water bailiffs and the fact that voyages or ship movements which generated no payment to the water bailiff may have often been unrecorded. There were many users of the port who were exempt from the local dues but fortunately they often had to pay for the use of the town crane or the wharf (dues known as craneage and wharfage) and thus these payments are included and

the voyage recorded even if no customs were payable. Comparisons from one year to another can be difficult. Any figures produced must always be regarded as being more approximations than accurate totals or proportions. Generally it is safe to regard the total number of ship movements recorded in a Port Book as the minimum likely for any particular period.

Other sources which can be helpful include the particulars of the royal customs, the King's Remembrancer's Customs accounts in the National Archives which do include some shipping details. The problem here is that coastwise local trade is not included for the good reason that it generated no payment to the Crown. Thus only the foreign-going voyages of Southampton ships are likely to find a place in these records. It is also the case that the series of particulars of the Exchequer Customs accounts for the fifteenth century for Southampton has many gaps.

The various commissions for the arrest of shipping in Southampton for defence purposes, whether to take part in sea-keeping expeditions or to transport troops overseas, usually of course to France, very seldom give any details of the number of ships it was hoped to find in any particular port. Rather more useful for our purpose are the particulars of account in the National Archives class Exchequer Accounts Various (E101) which record payments to the individual ship masters involved in these expeditions. These will be referred to below. There are also some scraps of useful material in other classes of Southampton records. In the main, however, this paper draws on material from a database of ship movements compiled from the printed port books for 1426–7 (edited by Studer as 1427–8); 1439–40 (edited by Henry Cobb) and 1469–70 (edited by D.B. Quinn); and the manuscript books for 1457–8 and 1494–5. All the books run from the 1 October to the 30 September, following the pattern of the term of office of the water bailiff, the responsible official for the corporation of Southampton. These years were chosen not only because they provided a reasonable chronological spread but also because the original manuscripts include at least some of the details of shipping needed.

It is also fortunately the case that none are years of notable military activity overseas which could have added a particular slant to the figures.

THE PORT OF SOUTHAMPTON

We should, perhaps, at the outset, define more closely the 'port' of Southampton. For customs purposes it included havens as far to the west as Keyhaven and as far to the east as Portsmouth. One notable exclusion was Fareham which does not seem to have been treated as a member of this port. Also, in the view of Cobb (1961), the dues from the member ports with the exception of Lymington were not collected after the middle of the fifteenth century because the amounts were so small that it was not worth the trouble. Here we will include consideration of shipping from the same general area as, broadly speaking, 'Southampton ships'.

SHIP MOVEMENTS

If we look first at the total number of ship movements recorded in each of our 'target years' it appears that in 1426-7 a total of 177 voyages which began or ended in Southampton are recorded in the Common Book and 69 in the Aliens Book. In 1439-40 the figures are 217 in the Common Book and 29 in the Aliens Book; in 1457-8 the Common Book records 189 ship movements in total, 172 in the Common Book and 17 in the Aliens Book. In 1469-70 the high total of 467 is recorded in the Common Book and only 9 in the Aliens' Book. By 1494-5 the number of Italian ships visiting was minimal but 270 vessel movements are entered in the Common Book. Is this picture of a dramatic decline in the visits of Italian vessels to Southampton justified? Confirmation is to be found in Alwyn Ruddock's book *Italian merchants and shipping in Southampton, 1270-1600* where the reasons for the decline, including the ending of the visits of the Florentine State galley fleet and the fall-off in the participation of Genoese merchants using Genoese shipping in trade to England, made clear. One further reason was

the vulnerability of Venetian galleys to attacks by raiders. In October 1495 the galleys were attacked by French pirates while at anchor off Southampton and two of the leading Venetians on board were kidnapped and held to ransom. No galleys visited the town for the next two years. (Ruddock, 1961, p.225) Less understood is the pattern affecting local shipping, the vessels whose movements can be found in the Common Books

The first question to be considered is the pattern of voyages throughout the year. The table of *Total Ship Movements* (Fig. 1) records both entries to and exits from the port of Southampton month by month for 1438-9, 1457-8, 1469-70 and 1494-5; we cannot also include 1426-7 since this is one of the books in which most voyages are undated. However from comparing the data in these four years the variations in the number of voyages are plain and it is equally clear that there was no tendency to avoid going to sea in the winter months. In fact the greatest number of entries in 1438-9 was recorded in December despite the fact that it was probably the Christmas holidays which ensured that there was only one ship movement between 24 December and 4 January. In 1469-70 there is very little difference between the totals for November and January with again a Christmas holiday apparent lasting from 23 December to 2 January. The reason for this year apparently also showing a boom in shipping in Southampton is not easy to discern. Politically the country was in turmoil by the end of 1469, when the entries in this Port Book begin, with the disaffection of the Earl of Warwick undermining support for Edward IV but this does not seem to have had economic effects in this South Coast town. In 1494-5 the visible decline in ship movements might plausibly be linked with the dispute with Maximilian over trade with the Netherlands but as will be discussed below the great majority of voyages did not involve cross Channel trade. As well as possible Christmas holidays other periods of very little traffic in the port can be linked with the celebration of Easter. Easter day fell on the 27 March in 1440, April 2 in 1458, April 22 in 1470 and April 19 in 1495. (C.R.Cheney, 1945, p.159) The total

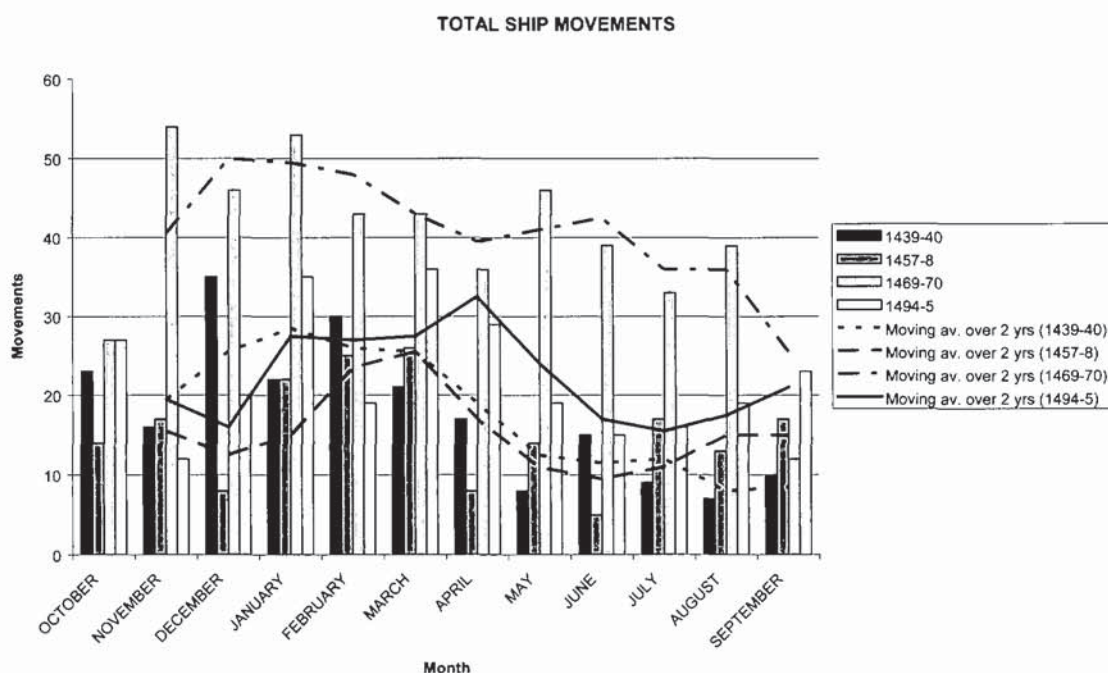


Fig. 1 Total ship movements

number of shipping movements during April differs widely in these years, varying from 3 in 1458 to 36 in 1470; however it is noticeable that in all four cases the Easter period is avoided. In 1470, for example no vessel is recorded as entering or leaving Southampton between the 19 and 27 April while in 1495 no voyages are recorded in this month after 17 April. The other and longer period when shipping did decline markedly is the summer months especially July and August; a trend line has been added to the graph based on a two month rolling average to make this clearer. This is an unexpected finding since it has always been assumed that medieval mariners were reluctant to put to sea in the winter months. There is no evidence in this source to support this view.

How can this be explained? The root cause most probably lies in the nature of Southampton shipping and the tasks it normally performed. To some extent the glamour of the Italian traders' visits with their exotic cargoes has distorted our view of the port. The average shipowner in

Hampshire and Sussex in the fifteenth century was not a merchant trading overseas but someone in a small way of business principally engaged in coastwise traffic along the south coast with a small (by contemporary standards that is, probably between 20 and 30 tuns capacity; the size of a vessel at this date was measured by the number of wine tuns with which it could notionally be loaded; that is, it was a measure of capacity not displacement) but seaworthy vessel. Most of those who visited the town who were based in other ports, and those who were Southampton men, had businesses like this. It also seems to be the case, from the evidence from the 1469-70 and 1494-5 Port Books, that during the latter half of the fifteenth century the trend to local voyages in small craft became more pronounced. The masters of such local craft had an intimate knowledge of local conditions at sea and probable weather patterns and were, therefore not averse to winter voyages on principle. It is tempting to link periods with no recorded arrivals in the port, in otherwise busy periods, with possible stormy weather. This may,

however, be only the result of the record entering practice of the water bailiff. An example of such a gap is 9–13 March 1439–40 or 10–23 October 1469.

It is clearly necessary to examine the English ports with which Southampton had trading connections. (In all cases this discussion ignores the carracks and galleys from Italy which fall into a different class). Studer (1913, pp.xix–xxii) conveniently lists these in the Introduction to his edition. In the late 1420s, ships entered the port of Southampton from no fewer than 38 English ports. Only 3, Carmarthen, Hull and Newcastle were not on the south or south-east coast. By far the biggest number came from the West principally Devon and Cornwall; virtually all the havens from Poole westward are represented, including Yealm, Chudleigh, Looe and Gorran Haven. Because of the way the information is organised, the Port Book for 1439–40 includes fewer details of home ports but even so the majority of those mentioned are still in the West Country. In 1469–70 a noticeable change seems to have taken place. The only ports to the West mentioned are Lyme, Dartmouth, Bournemouth and Swanage and only Boston on the east coast; all the other voyages where it is possible to ascertain the port of origin of a vessel or its destination are made either by ships of members of the port of Southampton, Langstone, Hythe, Bosham, Portsmouth or Hook or by ships based nearby on the Sussex or Kent coasts. These ports include Itchenor, Fishbourne, Shoreham, Pagham, Brighton, Hastings, Romney and Sandwich. In 1494–5 a very similar pattern emerges. An origin can be deduced for approximately 68 vessels, the majority of which come from very local ports. Of those from further afield, a small group come from Dartmouth loaded with slates or tin, another group come from East Anglian ports usually trading in fish of various kinds, and others from Sandwich and Winchelsea with mixed cargoes. The only vessel clearly noted as coming from some distance is a Hanse owned ship which entered Southampton in early September 1495 with a cargo of manufactured goods and shipbuilding stores including wheelbarrows, needles, masts, pitch and wainscot boards.

There are unfortunately no details regarding the size of vessels in the Port Books. Some vessels are called boats and others ships, with ships clearly being more imposing vessels but that is more or less the limit of the information in the Common Books. Occasionally the term for fishing boat is also used and, uniquely, the Port Book for 1457–8 has entries for 1 balinger, 1 cogship, 2 skiffs, and 12 'spinasse'. For size, however, since this was normally measured by a vessel's carrying capacity as already mentioned, the only way we can estimate this is by deduction from the amount of cargo a vessel is recorded as carrying. This is, of course, pretty rough and ready; who can say if a ship is fully loaded or not? But it is better than nothing. Using this criterion it is clear that these coastwise voyages are divided into two groups; some are made by boats bringing fish whether fresh or salted into Southampton. Not surprisingly their visits are clustered in the Lenten months of February and March. The only exception to this seems to be conger eels which were clearly regarded as a delicacy and usually came in, in the summer in mixed cargoes, in ships, most probably from Brittany given the nature of the rest of the goods carried, including linen, canvas and salt.

The second much larger group consists of small vessels owned by local men who were running something very like a carrier's trade up and down the Solent and Southampton Water and along the Sussex coast. The minimum (since some voyages may well be unrecorded) number of voyages made by all those whose name, as a shipowner or master, appears six or more times in the Port Books have been extracted from the data. This only produces a total of fifteen individuals from all five books analysed. Several appear in more than one book, being clearly in business for some years, while the most successful, or at least the one who was most often on the water, was a certain John Shepard who made well over seventy recorded voyages in and out of Southampton in 1457–8 and 1469–70. His nearest rivals were Richard Spryng (21) Henry Hamlyn (21), William Short of Langstone (19), all in 1469–70 and John Knight who made fifteen voyages in 1494–5.

John Shepard with a total of 83 recorded journeys clearly merits some closer attention. Looking more closely at the voyages he undertook in his boat in 1469–70, his most successful year, it is clear from the dates of entry and exit to the port that he is sailing within a restricted area, most probably from Southampton to the Isle of Wight on a regular basis. Very nearly all his inward trips are with cargoes of kerseys; the manufacture of this type of cloth was something of an Island speciality in the fifteenth century. Thus, for example he brought cargoes of kerseys into Southampton on the 20, 24 and 26 of May 1470. There are no outward voyages mentioned between these dates; thus he cannot have had far to go and also probably enjoyed favourable winds. There is plenty of evidence in the Port book that these kerseys came from the Isle of Wight (those paying the customs are often described as being from Wight or from Godshill for example) and this traffic was the bedrock of Shepard's business. His return cargoes to the Island were miscellaneous selections of goods for which there was evidently some demand; wine (but in small quantities, usually one or two tuns at most), feather beds, tallow, oil, salt, or herrings and hake in the winter. The same pattern is clear in 1457–8 when he may have been just building up his business since only 9 trips in all are recorded.

Henry Hamlyn, Richard Spryng and William Short, who all made a minimum of around 20 voyages distributed very similar goods from Southampton but both Hamlyn and Short seem to have specialised in bringing cargoes of wheat and malt into the port very often from Sussex. Altogether a total of around 800 ship masters traded into or out of Southampton in our sample years.

Although voyages like these in small vessels usually owned by their master undoubtedly made up the bulk of the traffic in Southampton Water there is some evidence for larger ships trading in more distant waters, (again not including the Italian galleys and carracks) using the port, some owned by Southampton men and some coming from Iberia, Aquitaine and the Netherlands. The difference can be

illustrated by looking at the vessels engaged in the wine trade. In our five target Port Books wine was included in cargoes on 240 occasions. Of these a large proportion are evidently small vessels transporting 1 or 2 tuns or pipes of wine sometimes with other goods like fruit or oil. Sometimes a local destination is indicated or a named individual like the Prior of Christchurch. It seems clear that these boats are delivering wine orders to customers who have bought the goods from some of the more important merchants in Southampton. These merchants received their supplies once or twice a year in much larger vessels coming either from Iberia or Aquitaine. In 1439–40 the *Marie of Southampton* brought in 190 tuns and the *Trinity of Bursledon* and a Portuguese ship comparable cargoes. This trade was clearly affected in 1457–8 by the recent loss of Guyenne by the English and the largest inward wine cargoes were carried in galleys and carracks. In 1469–70 the trade had recovered to some extent and 9 large vessels brought in wine with amounts varying from 28 to 75 tuns; 3 arrived almost together in early November probably having travelled in company.

THE SHIPS OF SOUTHAMPTON

The earliest Port Book that for 1426–7 gives the clearest picture of substantial vessels owned by Southampton merchants. All told some 30 ships in our three sources are described as being of Southampton. The most commonly undertaken long distance voyages were undoubtedly those to Bordeaux for wine before 1453 and the English loss of the Duchy and to the north of Spain, usually Bilboa, for iron. This was the route taken by the *Julian of Hampton* in 1426 with George Mixto, previously one of Henry V's shipmasters, in charge. John Bidbroke was the master of the *Marie of Hampton* probably of more than 200 tuns capacity (she brought in a cargo of 190 tuns of wine on one occasion, as already mentioned) in 1439–40 and may be identical with the John Bygbroke who was also in charge of a ship with the same name on the Bordeaux run in the earlier period. These ships usually took out cargoes of cloth and occasion-

ally wheat, slates and hides. In 1494–5 a ship called the *Rosmarine* evidently impressed the water bailiff considerably since she is the only vessel given a name in this particular Port Book. She sailed regularly from Southampton with cargoes of cloth, kerseys and tin probably to Iberia since she returned with cork, oil (olive) and woad.

This picture of Southampton being the homeport of relatively few large ships is confirmed by looking at the surviving accounts of payments to masters of ships arrested for royal service usually the transport of troops to France. Only relatively few of these particulars of account survive, all from the reigns of Henry V and Henry VI. In 1416 35 ships were arrested and ordered to assemble at Southampton for the expedition going to the relief of Harfleur. The commissioners visited ports along both the east and south coasts to make up the numbers and included vessels from 20 to 300 tons capacity in the fleet. None, however, were 'of Southampton' though several were from Danzig, (mostly arrested in King's Lynn) and others from Bristol, Grimsby and London. (TNA PRO E101/48/10). Were the Southampton men well informed enough to keep their ships away from the commissioners? If so they 'pulled the same trick', as it were in 1438 when a fleet was to be assembled at Plymouth for a voyage to Aquitaine. On this occasion thirty ships were arrested in Exeter or Dartmouth, thirty in Plymouth and Fowey, 1 in Bridgewater, 6 in Bristol and 1 in Lyme. In all these ports there was only one Southampton ship present, the *Anthony* of 155 tons. The remainder of the fleet included ships from London, Danzig, Bayonne, Lubeck, and all the west country ports. (TNA PRO E101/53/23). The fleet ordered to assemble at Poole in the same year similarly contained only one Southampton vessel, the craier *George of Southampton* of 40 tons, despite the fact that the commissioners had been specifically ordered to arrest shipping in Southampton. (TNA PRO E101/53/24)

In 1450, when the situation in Aquitaine was very bad as far as the English were concerned, a fleet was hurriedly put together in a last

desperate attempt to stave off the loss of the Duchy to the French. No fewer than 83 ships and their masters are listed and it is noticeable that many more large vessels were requisitioned for royal service than on other occasions. No fewer than 24 were of 200 tons or more with the largest being the *Trinity of Dartmouth* a 400 ton ship. Southampton was represented by the *Margaret of Hampton* (100 tons), the *Marie of Hampton* (270 tons), the *Christopher of Hook* (120 tons), the *Mary of Hook* (55 tons), the *Nicholas of Hampton* (110 tons), the *Margaret of Hook* (80 tons), another *Mary of Hampton* (200 tons) and finally the *Edward of Hampton* (300 tons). It is noteworthy that the 270 ton *Mary* and the *Nicholas* were owned by Robert Aylward a prominent Southampton burgess and the *Edward* by John William who had had a distinguished career as one of Henry V's ship masters. This total of 8 including 3 large ships seems more what we might expect but it is lower than that for Dartmouth (12) and Fowey (10) and very much lower of course if we include all the west country ships in one group. (there were also vessels in the fleet from Plymouth, Looe, Penzance, and Landulph). (TNA PRO E101/54/14).

The evidence from these and similar accounts of payments to the masters of arrested shipping seems to point to this part of the country and more particularly the ports on the south coast of Devon and Cornwall as being the centre of English shipping at this date.

PATTERNS OF TRADE

Thus, if we leave out of consideration the royal ships, most of which had been sold by 1427 as required by Henry V's will, (S. Rose, 1982 pp.50–55), and the visiting carracks and galleys from the Mediterranean what picture can we create of shipping in Southampton in the fifteenth century? It seems that the most striking feature was the quite large numbers of small craft, usually owned and sailed by the same individual, which made coastwise voyages within a relatively confined area. By 1469–70 some of these men sailed on regular routes

almost like carriers on inland roads. Much of their work was to distribute to smaller places both the exotic and the more everyday goods which came into Southampton from more distant places. On inward voyages they carried the staples of Southampton trade, cloth or foodstuffs, principally wheat, barley or malt. The larger vessels were never very many and tended to be owned by merchants, or at least not by their sailing masters. The most frequent long distance voyage was probably that to Northern Spain, especially after the loss of Guyenne by the English. We can speculate that these larger ships

by the end of the century probably resembled those shown in the drawings in the Beauchamp pageant (A.Sinclair, 2003) but beyond that there is no evidence. To date the quite extraordinary *Gracedieu*, the pride of Henry V's fleet, is the only fifteenth century wreck which has been found in the area. (R.Clarke and others, 1993) Perhaps nowadays, when Southampton Water is crowded with yachts and other small craft, it is most like its medieval self when John Shepard and his rivals plied endlessly up and down the coast and across to the Island with small parcels of everyday goods.

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A 'Time Team' programme for Channel 4 transmitted in February 2005 examined the wreck of the *Gracedieu* in some detail.

Author: Susan Rose, Heath Winds, Merton Lane, Highgate, N6

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