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Mastering the worst of trades : England's early Africa companies and their traders, 1618-1672

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CHAPTER 1

ENGLAND AND THE TRADE TO AFRICA, LAUNCHING THE GUINEA COMPANY, 1618- 1630

1. Introduction

The Governor and Company of Adventurers of London trading into the Parts of Africa received their letter patent from James I & IV on November 11, 1618.⁶⁰ The Guinea Company(GC) became the first English Africa company operating on a joint-stock with complete and exclusive access to the West Africa coast on behalf of England. Its membership was well connected to both court and Parliament, but as this chapter will show they became easy prey to experienced merchants who considered the company a favorable cover from where they could better challenge their merchant competitors. It will be shown here that connections and financial strength, true for at least for some of the members, mattered little if experience and a network within the trade was lacking. The company came to suffer financially at the hands of established Africa traders turned company members, but it would also be them that recognized the potential the company offered and thus saw to its survival.

The company's new patent declared that the company was granted the right to "*have use and enjoy the whole entire and only trade (...) with and from the parts of Africa (...) into and from all and singular regions, countries, dominions, territories, continents, coasts and places (...) called or known by the name of Gynney and Bynney.*"⁶¹ Further, it established the company as one body, corporate and politic, holding perpetual succession and thus the ability to include new members as the company "*shall think convenient*".⁶² At the date of ratification the patent lists thirty-six names. An eclectic group of men, some of them well-known and others anonymous, counting sixteen knights – included company governor Sir William St. John, fifteen esquires, and five merchants.⁶³ Several of the members had notable

⁶⁰TNA: Patent Rolls, 16 Jac I. pt. vi, printed in Carr, *Select Charters of Trading Companies*, XXVIII:99–106.

⁶¹Carr, XXVIII:103.

⁶²Carr, XXVIII:100.

⁶³See Appendix 1 for a full list of the patentees.

careers in the Navy, such as vice-admirals Robert Mansell, Richard Hawkins, and Thomas Button, as well as Sir Allen Apesley who held one half of the patent for naval victualling. Others were closely connected with the court, such as the Earl of Warwick and Sir Giles Mompesson, of which the latter was infamous for his nepotistic and corrupt practices. Of the five merchants: John Davies, John Watkins, Michall[sic.] Best, Richard Salford and William Awdely not much is known; though it is John Davies that stand out most clearly from the sources. He was the merchant behind the request for the company patent and appears to have been the most established and experienced in the Africa trade among the original group, having especially focused on the trade in redwood.

The GC differed from earlier partnerships and companies, such as the Senegal Adventurers, in its approach to sharing liability and risk and in the monopoly, they were awarded. The Senegal Adventurers only held a monopoly of trade on a specific part of the coast, and other groups continued to venture to other regions as trade remained free and unregulated. Only with the GC patent from 1618 was access to the West African coast, the area referred to as *Gynny and Bynney* - understood as Upper and Lower Guinea and Benin, granted to a single incorporated group based on perpetual succession. Thus, although John Davies and his fellow company members may not have been the first discoverers of the trade as they claimed, they did represent the first corporate body in England to be granted a patent for sole access to the West African coast at the cost of all other traders.

The patent presented the GC as an incorporated joint-stock company with the right to own land; to present itself a separate legal entity in court both as plaintiff and defendant; and holding a common seal.⁶⁴ As seen, it granted the company “*the whole, entire and only trade*” and exclusive access to the region in question, and the ability to send there as many ships as they deemed necessary. The privileged access that the company was granted did, of course, in real terms, grant the GC a monopoly on the Anglo-Africa trade even if not stated in such terms, and a trade monopoly in one form or another was to remain in effect, at least nominally, until deregulation put an end to the RAC’s privileges in 1696. The company held the ability to assemble courts; make, and execute law, and issue fines. This they could use in order to control access to the coast and punish any unwanted activity that took place in breach of their patent. The only limitation being that their proposed laws were not at odds with the laws of the English realm.

The GC was to be managed by a governor, a deputy governor, and a committee of twelve assistants. Considering the number of patentees, such a management structure would suggest nearly half the names of appearing on the patent were active

⁶⁴I rely on the transcriptions of the 1618 charter as presented in C.T Carr, *Select Charters of Trading Companies*, XXVIII:99–106. The patent original can be found in TNA: Patent Rolls, 16 Jac I. pt. vi

in the decision-making at any given time. This management group was responsible for the practical arrangements of trade, from the preparation and fitting out of ships to the acquisition of tradable goods; as well as the management of the sale of the African commodities that were imported. The company was rarely governed in such a way, however, as several of the members were active in early Jacobean politics at the time, some held high-ranking offices, and some had interests in other ventures. This was most notable in the Spanish trade and to some degree in the ventures of the developing Atlantic. Instead, certain members, such as John Davies, took care of much of the practical planning. The GC that emerged in the early 1620s, despite being governed by the somewhat anonymous William St. John, was strongly influenced by Davies – as one of the five merchants appearing on the patent, and Davies were soon joined by fellow overseas merchant Humphrey Slaney. In the mounting criticism directed at the company from excluded traders, much aggression was directed towards Davies and his personal control over the trade, and this matter will be given more attention below. The patent text was clear, the company was meant to base its trade on a joint-stock, not a regulatory system of individually organized trade among the members. The members themselves clearly stated in the patent that they had ‘*joined together and resolved to run one uniform course in setting up and prosecuting a trade of merchandise into those parts*’. But the ‘*uniform course*’ proved challenging for to maintain. The members did indeed share a joint stock, but mechanisms such as limited liability and capital lock-in was not fully established or utilized, and even when it was, it was rarely applied as intended. This contributed to a general sense of insecurity and lack of commitment among several of the members and did not help in the company’s attempts to manage its financial obligations.

The patent did not only offer privileges, it also gave the company obligations to the Crown as the King claimed to be “*credibly informed that the setting on foot and prosecuting of voyages thereof and the due establishing of an orderly traffic and trade of merchandise (...) will not only be beneficial to our said Realms and Dominions but also profitable to Us in advancement of our customs.*”⁶⁵ The hopes were high for the income of gold, and remained high throughout the first decade of the company’s existence. It is challenging to assess gold returns from the existing sources, but the income from the trade in gold cannot have been entirely unsatisfactory in the first decade or so, as the renegotiated charter of 1631, which will be returned to in the following chapter, maintained the hope of substantial yearly customs income from imports of gold. The motivation of customs income was combined with an expressed hope of more English explorations as result of the grant, “*whereby they (the GC members) may be encouraged not only to proceed in a present trade, but to adventure*

⁶⁵Carr, XXVIII:99, 104.

their money and labour for a further discovery (...) which they presume by God's assistance will turn to the great benefit of Us and our Realms".⁶⁶ By "discoveries" was mainly meant the locating of the source of the gold trade, but despite several different schemes and attempts throughout the century and the next not much headway was made. The failure to discover the source of the gold trade, in addition to the false claims of first discovery, was indeed actively used against the company by disgruntled outsiders that no longer enjoyed legal access to the trade.

The patent leaves no doubt of this exclusive access, as it was clearly stated that the region in question "*shall not be visited frequented or traded unto by any other of our subjects or the subjects of Us (...). And therefore we do hereby (...) command prohibit and forbid all subjects (...) of what degree or quality soever they be, that none of them presume to visit frequent trade or adventure to traffic into or from the said (...) lands*".⁶⁷ Only if the company consented to the issuing of a license could the coast be accessed. This license had to be acquired in writing and ratified with the company seal. Any independent English trader stopped on the coast without such a license risked the "*pain of our indignation imprisonment of their bodies (...) and the forfeiture and loss both of their ships and goods (...)*".⁶⁸ In addition to this stern warning, the company - that is its member and employed factors on the coast - attained the authority to arrest, take, or seize all ships or goods that were brought either to or from the coast in contrition to the patent. In such cases the value of any prize-ship was to be split equally between company and king.⁶⁹

2. The establishment of a company profile - members of the early Guinea Company

The patent that was ratified on the November 16, 1618, includes thirty-six names, and together they contributed to a company with a diverse social composition. Some of the members were, and have remained, well-known while others are more anonymous. This is not an in-depth presentation of each of the thirty-six members as several of them never appears to have engaged themselves in the business of the company or have proved impossible to trace, instead what follows is a presentation of the persons that appear most prominently in the early development. Among the most well-known characters we find men with commercial experience and a past in overseas trade. Some of the funders and investors of expansion projects and companies, such as Sir Ferdinando Gorges and Sir Robert Rich, later Earl of Warwick,

⁶⁶Carr, XXVIII:p.100.

⁶⁷Carr, XXVIII:104.

⁶⁸Ibid.

⁶⁹Carr, *Select Charters of Trading Companies*, XXVIII:104.

wanted a part in the launching of an Africa company. Several representatives of the Royal Navy were also present, such as Sir Robert Mansell, who after a long, though controversial career in the Navy saw potential in trade to Africa. How many of them had been to the coast of Africa is difficult to know with any surety, though beyond the traders the number is unlikely to have been high. Still, it is certain that despite the eclectic background of its membership, there was a strong presence of persons with personal experience of life at sea. Furthermore, when investigating the background of some of the more prominent names of the patent, in some cases it is enough to simply scratch the surface, a reputation for questionable financial dealings appear. There is a clear tendency of stacking up much debt, of accusations of corruption, and of taking advantage of various offices for personal benefit or for the benefit of extended networks. These were the prominent members and must have contributed much to the company's image and presence. In addition to Warwick, Gorges, and Mansell, we find governor William St. John, along with former discoverers-turned-naval commanders Sir Richard Hawkins and Sir Thomas Button, and corrupt courtier-administrators such as Sir Giles Mompesson and Sir Allen Apsley.

2.2 Discoverers and naval men

The wealthy and influential Sir Robert Rich, soon to be second earl of Warwick, named first among the patentees, was involved in an array of overseas projects, especially aimed at exploration and colonization in the Americas.⁷⁰ Among his activities was the financing of settlement developments on the North American mainland, and he played an active part in the Massachusetts Bay- and Virginia Companies, as well as the Somers Islands- and the Providence Island Companies. Warwick's involvement with the Africa trade formed a part of his interest for overseas exploration, trade, and settlement.⁷¹ This was true also of Sir Ferdinando Gorges, who appears frequently in all matter relating to the English expansion projects on the American continent. Gorges started out with a military career, a background he shared with several of his fellow GC members, but went on to become heavily involved with the founding of the province of Maine in the first decade of the seventeenth century.⁷² They are worth mentioning here as they likely contributed to the presentation of the

⁷⁰Warwick appears frequently in Brenner, *Merchants and Revolution*.

⁷¹Sean Kelsey, "Rich, Robert, 2nd Earl of Warwick," Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Jan 2008, n.d., accessed May 6, 2017. Accessed: 04.11.2015

⁷²Charles E. Clark, "Gorges, Sir Ferdinando (1568–1647)," Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Jan 2008, n.d., accessed May 6, 2017; "Gorges, Sir Ferdinando (c.1568-1647), of Plymouth, Devon; Later of Ashton Phillips, Som. | History of Parliament Online," n.d., accessed April 11, 2015.

GC as a viable investment option in a similar way as their other Atlantic projects, but beyond appearing first in the patent text they engaged themselves little in the running of the company.

Sir Richard Hawkins (1562-1622) had, by the time the GC was launched, already behind him a long career at sea, both in the company of his uncle William and later on his own, sailing to the West Indies, South America, and the Pacific.⁷³ Thus, the Hawkins name was already strongly linked to exploration with a long line of infamous maritime discoverers.⁷⁴ Hawkins' father Sir John, was, as seen in the introduction, among the early traders on the coast of Africa in the reign of queen Elizabeth. There he caused much chaos for English traders, ruining their reputation with his practice of seizing Africans along the coast and selling them as slaves on Spanish Hispaniola.⁷⁵ Richard Hawkins followed in the family tradition, sailing to South America, where raiding Spanish settlements resulted in his capture and eight years of imprisonment. An autobiographical account of his experiences was posthumously published in 1622.⁷⁶ He was elected mayor of his hometown of Plymouth in 1603 and served as a member of Parliament for Devon. Hawkins also had familial links to fellow explorer-turned-politician Sir Francis Drake. In addition to his mayoral career he served as both a captain and a vice-admiral for the Navy, a position in which he was heavily criticized for corruptive practices. He was closely connected with another GC company member, Sir Robert Mansell, who despite past troubles trusted his abilities, referring to him as "*a very grave, religious and experienced gentleman*".⁷⁷ During the years as a member of the Guinea Company he was again appointed a vice-admiral under Mansell, a position he held until his death in 1622. Hawkins' time in the GC was therefore brief, although also he undoubtedly helped profile the company among contemporaries.

Considering not only the mercantile sphere but also that of the Navy, the questionable dealings of some of the GC's members have, in certain historians' eyes, made them the perfect examples of early Stuart decadence, characteristic for its poor management, corruption, greed, and decay. And none more so than Sir Robert Mansell. In his important contribution to our understanding of the history of the early modern English navy Michael Oppenheim was ruthless in his comparisons

⁷³David Loades, "Hawkins, Sir Richard (c. 1560–1622)," Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Jan 2008, n.d., accessed June 5, 2017.

⁷⁴Other influential explorers of the late Elizabethan era were Sir Walter Raleigh, Sir Francis Drake, Sir Humphrey Gilbert, and Sir Martin Frobisher to mention some.

⁷⁵Basil Morgan, "Hawkins, Sir John (1532-1595)," Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Jan 2008, n.d., accessed June 5, 2017.

⁷⁶Richard Hawkins, *The Observations of Sir Richard Hawkins, Knt in His Voyage into the South Sea in the Year 1593*, ed. Charles Ramsey Drinkwater Bethune (London : Printed for the Hakluyt Society, 1847).

⁷⁷John H. Ferris and Paul Hunnyball, "Hawkins, Sir Richard (c.1560-1622), of Plymouth, Devon; Later of Slapton, Devon | History of Parliament Online," n.d., accessed May 6, 2017.

between the Tudor and Stuarts monarchs and of the men they surrounded themselves with. Oppenheim proclaims, “*On March 1603 the weapon forged by Henry VIII, and wielded by Elizabeth, fell into the feeble hands of James Stewart*”.⁷⁸ According to Oppenheim, the king chose “*the most unfit men to manage it [the Royal Navy] at home and command it abroad (...). The naval records of his reign are but a sorry collection of relations of frauds, embezzlements, commissions of inquiry, and feeble palliatives.*”⁷⁹ It is worth noting therefore, when assessing the foundation of the first official English Africa company, that some James I’s most prominent, and “*unfit*”, naval men formed a substantial group of founding members of the company.

Robert Mansell (1570-1652) (at times referred to as Mansfield or Mansfelt), in addition to a long career in the Navy resulting in posts as both Treasurer and Vice-Admiral, can be found as investor both in the initiatives in Virginia and New England, as well as in the Guinea Company. His career at sea started at the end of the sixteenth century, when he took the post of captain on a privateering vessel sent to the West Indies by Lord Thomas Howard. In addition to his career in the Navy, he also held the exclusive patent for glassmaking and the malcontent this caused among other manufacturers led to petitions and meetings in Parliament. Thus, Mansell had some experience in holding patents that caused frustration.⁸⁰

From the published diary of shipwright for the Navy, Phineas Pett, which he kept in the years before the GC received its patent, we get an idea of Mansell as the two worked closely together. Throughout his career Mansell was repeatedly embroiled in controversies and corruption allegations, which in 1608 resulted in the launch of a “*Commission for Inquiring into the Abuses of the Navy*”. To both the commission, and to Oppenheim, the root of the problem was clear: “*... the appointment in 1604 of Sir Robert Mansell was most unfortunate. Mansell, who was an indifferent seaman and an incapable and dishonest administrator and who’s only claim to the place was his relationship to, and favour with, the Earl of Nottingham*⁸¹, *remained in office until 1618, and the greater portion of this section is practically a record of his unfitness for his important charge*”.⁸²

The accusations against Mansell were diverse and included lavish travel expenses, handing out of positions to friends and members of his network, as well as

⁷⁸M. Oppenheim, *A History of the Administration of the Royal Navy and of Merchant Shipping in Relation to the Navy from 1509 to 1660, with an Introduction by K.R. Andrews Treating of the Preceding Period* (Temple Smith, 1988), 184.

⁷⁹Oppenheim, 184–85.

⁸⁰Ibid. Andrew Thrush, “Mansell, Sir Robert (1570/71–1652),” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Jan 2008, n.d., accessed May 23, 2017. SP, State Papers, Domestic, James I, vol. 124, p.227r-229r (no.110-112) regarding his patent on glassmaking.

⁸¹Charles Howard, 1st Earl of Nottingham, 2nd Baron Howard of Effingham (1536 – 14 December 1624) was Lord High Admiral from 1585 to 1619.

⁸²Oppenheim, *A History of the Administration of the Royal Navy*, 184–85.

fraud. In a year where only seven naval ships were in operation, as many as six positions of admiral, divided up in sections of north, south, east, west, the Narrow Sea and Ireland, were all receiving liberal pay. Dilapidated ships that had been taken out of circulation were re-commissioned to provide appointments for the group around Mansell.⁸³ This group included future GC members Richard Hawkins and Thomas Button, and possibly also future company governor William St. John, who appears to have been operating as captain for the Navy in the early decades of the century. Furthermore, Mansell had provided the Navy with wood for shipbuilding on which payment had been made several times over. Along with the Surveyor of the Navy, Sir John Trevor, Mansell secured for himself the provision of all requisite stores and made – in direct opposition to the rules, substantial gains selling provisions to the king. Again, timber was ordered and paid for several times over though used for the same purpose. From the diary of Pett we know that in 1617 fellow GC member-to-be and notorious fraudster, Sir Giles Mompesson, also involved himself in naval timber supply, much to Pett's frustration, and though it is not possible to verify with certainty, it is possible Mansell and Mompesson made contact with each other through the trade in timber for the Navy.⁸⁴ According to Oppenheim, Mansell was accused of making £5000 over the course of four years by fraudulent timber trade. A further £7000 was gained together with Trevor, through the selling of pitch, tar, masts, and other ship-building necessities to the crown at elevated prices, with the two pocketing the difference. The accusations of illegal activity went as far as to include the building of a private vessel all from Naval supplies, meant for use in personal merchant shipping, though hired out to the king for the passage of the Earl of Nottingham to Spain as ambassador in 1605. Despite being caught red-handed, Mansell was furious over the investigations into his corruption, so much so that it landed him in Marshalsea Prison in 1613 after being accused of behaving in a contemptuous and disloyal manner.⁸⁵ This was not the first time Mansell was in trouble, known for being a notorious hot-head, he had gotten into trouble already in 1600 when a quarrel between Mansell and a neighbor resulted in a duel where the neighbor lost his hand.⁸⁶ Despite the embarrassment, all the accusations against him, a stint in prison, and dismissal from office in 1618, Mansell did not lose favour at court. Perhaps he had, as suggested by Oppenheim, secured himself an illegal fortune of such a size that he could buy himself out of the worst of it.⁸⁷ The decay of the Navy was, however, noticed by the king's favorite, George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham, who took a new and firmer grip on the operations as Lord High Admiral in 1619. Despite being

⁸³Oppenheim, 191.

⁸⁴Phineas Pett, *The Autobiography of Phineas Pett*, ed. William Gordon Perrin (London : Printed for the Navy records society, 1918), 88, 118.

⁸⁵Pett, 111.

⁸⁶The mummified hand of Sir Christopher Haydon, Mansell's neighbor, can still be seen in Norwich Castle Museum today.

⁸⁷Oppenheim, *A History of the Administration of the Royal Navy*, 191–92.

dismissed from office at the time, the increased control by Buckingham never sat well with Mansell, and in the mid-1620 he again made angry outbursts. This time his criticism was directed against the Buckingham's naval decision-making. Accusations against the king's known favorite did not go un-noticed, bringing him in front of the king's privy council as a result. Luckily for Mansell several of the council's members shared a hostile view of Buckingham and he was treated with leniency.⁸⁸ In Mansell's defense, the problem of dishonesty in the Navy was not invented with his appointment in 1604. Already the year before a contemporary commentator exclaimed "*To say the truth the whole body is so corrupted as there is no sound part almost from the head to the foot; the great ones feed on the less and enforce them to steal both for themselves and their commanders*".⁸⁹

Mansell was indeed dismissed in 1618, when he instead took part in the launch of the GC. Yet, only two years previous, well after the investigation into naval corruption had pointed to him as a main culprit, he had received a monetary gift of £16,000 from the king on the occasion of his wedding. Just two years later he received a new appointment as commander of an expedition to Algiers in which he also secured a place for fellow GC-members Richard Hawkins and Thomas Button/Dutton. Mansell therefore represented a key connection between the company and the crown, between the company and the Navy and also contributed to its public appearance. Mansell was popular despite his corruption and outburst and commanded much respect. This was further confirmed when Mansell, despite bad words about the king's favorite, imprisonment, and commotion, managed to keep his post. Though he was popular his practices did not go unnoticed forever, and when in 1618 he was appointed vice-admiral, leaving the position of Treasurer behind, it was believed not to have been a promotion but instead a way of getting his hands off the Navy Treasury.⁹⁰

In conclusion to his chapter on the Navy in the reign of James I, Oppenheim points out how fortunate it was that the services of the Royal Navy were not needed in earnest during the reign of king James. That is, of course, only true if we ignore the rampant piracy on merchant shipping both in the Channel and from the North African states in the Mediterranean, and the loss of valuable market shares to the Dutch as they expanded their reach. Oppenheim goes on to point out the mismanagement under GC company member Mansell, evident in the gradual decrease of seaworthy ships during his time as Treasurer which was, inexplicably, paired with ever increasing costs. The long-term effects of Mansell's rule were devastating: "*Ships might be replaced and open speculation checked, but the deeper wounds on spirit and discipline caused by fourteen years of license among the higher officials, and fourteen years of heartless chicanery*

⁸⁸See footnote 71

⁸⁹Thomas Norreys to Sir John Coke quoted in Oppenheim, *A History of the Administration of the Royal Navy*, 192–93.

⁹⁰Thrush, "Mansell, Sir Robert (1570/71–1652)."

suffered by those more lowly placed were not so readily healed, and bore their fruits for long afterwards in the habitual dishonesty of officials and workmen, in the disloyalty and half-heartedness of the seamen, and later, in the shameless knaveries that disgraced the Navy office at the close of the century, many of which had their origins under Mansell's rule."⁹¹ Oppenheim did not only place blame on Mansell, however, as his assessment of the king himself was no more lenient: "Had not Lord Buckingham desired to be Lord Admiral, we have no reason to suppose that James I would have seen any cause for interference merely on behalf of seamen who were starved or robbed, or of the English people whose chief defense was being destroyed, and whose money went to enrich a gang of thieves."⁹²

As mentioned, Mansell was just one among several significant company members embroiled in corruption scandals. In fact, for many contemporaries he was not the worst one. Richard Hawkins had siphoned away money from seized shipping in the West Country, while Mansell managed the Treasury and was accused of taking his share of the Navy's funds. The accusations, against Mansell in 1608, also included fellow GC-member-to-be, Sir Thomas Button (?-1634) who operated as a naval captain at the time.⁹³ Button, who has often been wrongfully identified as Dutton, had a long career at sea as a discoverer and explorer. His marriage to Elizabeth Mansell in 1595 made him Sir Robert Mansell's nephew-in-law. As a result, Button was given the command of one of Mansell's privateering vessels and returned from the West Indies with a substantial profit.

Illustration 2:

Sir Richard Hawkins, Sir Robert Mansell and Sir Thomas Button



Late 16th century Artist unknown,
Source: National Maritime
Museum Greenwich, UK.



Date and Artist unknown,
Source: National Museums and
Galleries of Wales via Oxford
Dictionary of National Biography,
Wales, UK.



Date and Artist unknown,
Source: After an original in
possession of G. M. Traheren,
Glamorganshire, Wales, UK.

⁹¹Oppenheim, *A History of the Administration of the Royal Navy*, 215.

⁹²Oppenheim, 215.

⁹³Pett, *The Autobiography of Phineas Pett*, 33–34.

Later, in 1612, he embarked upon a lengthy voyage of discovery of the North-West Passage which nearly cost him his life, but also resulted in the naming of an island after his patron and uncle-in-law, Mansel Island in the Canadian Arctic. He, like Hawkins, relied on Mansell's influence and patronage in the Navy and both men were appointed to accompany Mansell in an expedition to Algiers shortly after the GC received its patent. After recovering from the voyage to Canada, and – like Mansell – having avoided punishment in the corruption inquiries of 1608, Button too built a reputation for being greedy, siphoning away funds that were meant for wages and victuals for his crews. However, as the 1620s progressed, evidence suggests a moderation of the harsh judgement against him as it became clear that Button only received a fraction of the money he was entitled to for his services to the crown and had paid out of his own pocket for victuals and provisions for his crews when the necessary funds had not been received. His personal finances likely suffered as a result.⁹⁴

2.3 Court connections and financial trouble

In addition to – and in connection with – accusations of corruption, another shared feat between the high-ranking GC members is worthy of attention as it undoubtedly had an impact on the company's early development: the experience of financial trouble while being a company investor. Button, Hawkins, governor St. John, and Sir Allen Apesley all struggled personally with their financial situation during their time in the company. However, it is unlikely any one of them struggled more than Sir Giles Mompesson, (1584-c.1651). Mompesson was so infamous for his corruptive tendencies that he was made immortal in play-form by Phillip Massinger, who in the 1625 play “*A New Way to Pay Old Debts*” based the villainous and corrupt anti-hero *Sir Giles Overreach* on Mompesson. Mompesson was influential at court in the late 1610s, relying on a familial link to the Duke of Buckingham, a distant relation through Mompesson's wife. Mompesson married Katherine St. John, a marriage that made him brother-in-law to Buckingham's half-brother Edward Villiers. Edward had married Katherine's sister, Barbara. The influence granted Sir Robert Mansell's through his work for the Navy – which saw to the advancement of company naval officers such as Button, Hawkins, and possibly St. John – was thus paralleled by the influence of the Duke of Buckingham which catered to a different faction of the company members. And, as the harsh feeling of Mansell against Buckingham has already been

⁹⁴Andrew Thrush, “Button, Sir Thomas (c. 1575–1634),” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Jan 2008, n.d., accessed May 23, 2017. TNA: SP 15/36, p. 23r (25 March 1604). See also *Cal. S.P. Dom. Jam. I, Vol. 36, p.441. Cal. S.P. Dom, Char I, Vol. 1, p.3*

pointed out, tensions between these structures of influence and patronage may have contributed to the company's problematic decision-making processes in its first years.

The link between Mompesson and Buckingham may appear untenable, but with Buckingham's power nearly unchecked in the late 1610s and early 1620s it was enough to secure Mompesson, and other distant in-laws with him, considerable influence. The St. John sisters was a point of connection also for Sir Allen Apesley (1582-1630, written both Appesley, Apsley) who married a third St. John sister, Lucy. Apsley, like the others, held posts in the Navy, and from 1612 to 1630 he was Survey of Marine Victuals. There he, like the others, encountered Pett and likely also Mansell through various naval business.⁹⁵ In addition, he had interests in overseas expansion, and two years after the launch of the GC he joined the New England Company. He, like Mompesson, was making good use of his connection to the Villiers family, and his appointment by the king in 1617 to the post of Lieutenant for the Tower of London was seemingly gotten through the influence of Buckingham. His connection with the Villiers, increasingly known for their nepotistic practices, meant that he spent parts of the 1620s defending himself from the contestations of Parliament over the many patents and monopolies he enjoyed. Despite this he held on to the post as Navy Victualler also after the eventual assassination of Buckingham in 1628, maintaining his position until his death in 1630.⁹⁶ Despite sporadic criticism, Apesley did not get into as much trouble as Mompesson, who in 1621 was forced to flee the country over corruption accusations. Buckingham and his brother Edward had secured Mompesson the post for monitoring inns and taverns, and his behavior in this regard made him widely unpopular. Especially one incident linked to this post came to represent the beginning of the end of his privileged status and is worth retelling here for the outrage it sparked. Shortly after receiving his position as monitor of inns and alehouses in 1617, Mompesson sent one of his trusted men, a Mr. Ferret, to an alehouse incognito, where posing as a traveler he spent the evening in drink and general merriment. As the tavern was closing Ferret begged the owner of the alehouse to let him stay the night, as he had nowhere to go. The alehouse-keeper took pity on the man and allowed him to stay. The next morning Mr. Ferret informed him that he was being prosecuted for operating as an *inn* when he was only licensed for running an *alehouse*. Unsurprisingly such tactics did not generate popularity. During his time in office Mompesson practices led to the prosecution of as many as 3329 innkeepers, and few missed him when he fled the country in 1621, leaving his wife and her family to sort out the financial chaos he left behind.

⁹⁵J.C. Sainty, "Surveyor of Marine Victuals 1550-c. 1679 | Institute of Historical Research," accessed May 23, 2017, <http://www.history.ac.uk/publications/office/navymarine>.

⁹⁶J.H. Round, "Apsley, Sir Allen (1566/7–1630)," Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Jan 2008, n.d., accessed May 23, 2017.

Illustration 3:

“*The Description of Giles Mompesson late Knight censured by Parliament, 17th of March 1620*”



Engraving, artist unknown. London, 1621.

As may have been noticed, two of the company members mentioned, Mompesson and Apesley married women named St. John. Yet, the question of whether the family they married into was familiarly linked to their namesakes in the company, William the governor and the more anonymous Oliver St. John, has proven surprisingly difficult to answer. Though seemingly originating as one family, the St. John's were split into two main branches as far back as the year 1400. The family divided into the St. Johns of Bletsoe and the St. Johns of Lydiard Tregoze. Among them company governor William has proven especially difficult to place. The name St. John itself is challenging to research as several prominent St. Johns appear in the early seventeenth century, and of them at least four were named Oliver, none of them William. Out of the four prominent Oliver St. Johns we find one viscount and lord deputy of Ireland, one baron, one earl and baron, and one prominent lawyer.⁹⁷

⁹⁷Oliver St. John of Lydiard Tregoze, Viscount Grandison of Limerick, Lord Deputy of Ireland (1562-1630); Sir Oliver St. John 1st Earl of Bolingbroke and 4th Baron Bletsoe (1583-1646); Sir Oliver St. John 5th Baron Bletsoe (1603-1642); and Oliver St. John, descendant of the 1st Baron Bletsoe, influential politician

Neither are likely to be the Oliver St. John who appears in the patent, either because the timelines of their lives are not combinable with the launch of the company, or because unlike the Oliver St. John in the patent, they would likely have appeared with their titles. None of them reveal particularly strong links to overseas trade, though some of them were involved in the colonizing projects in Ireland and the Atlantic.⁹⁸ Few William St. John's appear in the family history and taking the 1618 date of the patent into consideration, along with the fact that he was offered the governor post, leaves only one probable option. If there was a familial link between governor William and his namesake in the company Oliver, they likely both belonged to the St. John's of Lydiard Tregoze. The sisters St. John, who married Mompesson, Apesley and Edward Villiers, had a brother named Oliver (born ca. 1584), and there is a high probability that this Oliver, who was 34 years old in 1618 and apparently untitled, is the man behind the name on the company's patent. Assuming he is the same man, there is a familial link between him and the man that could have been the company governor. Oliver's grandfather, Sir Nicholas St. John had a half-brother named William St. John (1538-1576), and this half-brother had a son that was also named William.⁹⁹ William St. John the younger (1574-?), we know little about, but will have been the cousin of Oliver's father, and 44 years old in 1618. It is difficult to establish without doubt the link between the two, and between the governor and Mompesson and Apesley for that matter, but if there was indeed a familial link within the St. John family it was here, making the St. John family the glue of the GC – at least for members from outside the mercantile sphere. It is worth noting that Oliver's uncle, and William's cousin, was Sir Oliver St. John, Viscount Grandison of Limerick, Lord Deputy of Ireland. His first action, upon being appointed to the office in 1616, was to knight Captain of the Navy, Thomas Button.¹⁰⁰

2.4 John Davies

Lastly, John Davies (? -1626) seems to have been prime mover behind the choice to ask for the patent and was one of only five merchants appearing on the patent. The other four were John Watkins, Michall [sic] Best, Richard Salford and William Awdely and none of them emerge clearly from company sources. The work of Robert Brenner has revealed one John Watkins appearing as member and trader

and lawmaker (1562/3-1626).

⁹⁸Ute Lotz-Heuman, "St John, Oliver," Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Jan 2008, n.d., accessed February 6, 2017.

⁹⁹Harding Alan, "St. John, William (1538-1609), of Farley Chamberlayne, Hants. | History of Parliament Online," History of Parliament Online, n.d., accessed June 2, 2017.

¹⁰⁰Calendar of State Papers relating to Ireland, James I, Vol. 5 (1615-1625), p.134, no.286

in the Levant Company in the late 1630s and early 1640s, but there is no way to be sure whether the two were one and the same.¹⁰¹ As for John Davies, J.W. Blake described him in his young years as a ‘*typical Elizabethan, fitting out privateers and preying upon the Spaniards and dabbling in the slave trade*’, but it is not clear from where this information is drawn.¹⁰² Inquiries are complicated by his relatively generic name, and a number of famous contemporaries by the name of John Davis or Davies. Two of which were involved in early voyages either for the EIC or for the purpose of discovery. However, the dates of their escapades suggest that neither of them were the merchant John Davies of the GC.¹⁰³ If Blake’s assessment of him as a pirate was correct, Davies later abandoned the pirate approach, quieting down in his later years, and instead focused on establishing the redwood trade on a firm footing. Early sources show how he first attempted to request a patent on his own, in the autumn of 1614, with exclusive rights to the trade in redwood.¹⁰⁴ In a letter from the privy council to the Warden of the Dyers, the livery company representing the dyers of London, the council relate Davies’ claims and request. Davies claimed to have involved himself in the redwood trade for over seven years, meaning, if true, that his background in the Africa trade stretched back to 1607 at least. Davies explained in his petition that he had experimented with different types of wood from the African coast with the hopes of finding one suitable for dyeing and had now landed on redwood for its “*perfectnes of coulor as for lasting and continuance of the same*”. To attest to its qualities as a dye Davies had requested testimony and certification from numerous clothiers and dyers. The Privy Council still required an independent opinion on the matter and asked for the Company of Dyers to give their expert opinion as to the usage and quality of the dye. In compensation for the cost of establishing the trade Davies requested the exclusive right of import for the coming twenty-one years. Davies’ request was unsuccessful and the 1618 patent was likely, as was suggested by Blake, a new attempt for Davies to gain control over the redwood by launching a company

¹⁰¹Brenner, *Merchants and Revolution*, 374-375n.

¹⁰²Blake, p.87

¹⁰³John Davis of Sandridge, arctic explorer died in 1605 according to his biography: John Davis, *The Voyages and Works of John Davis, The Navigator*, ed. Albert Hastings Markham (London : Printed for the Hakluyt Society, 1880). In the introduction A.H. Markham goes some way in trying to clear up the confusion caused by the different Davies, though he does not mention the Africa trade, the GC patent, nor the merchant who’s name appears in it. Michael Hicks, “Davis, John (1550-1605),” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Jan 2008, n.d., accessed May 24, 2017. John Davies, EIC sailor, was on a voyage to the East Indies from 1616 to 1619 and was away from England again from 1620-1621 when he died. This would mean that he could not have been present during the patent negotiations, nor the first years of trade, which contradicts other sources. The year of death (1621) differs from 1627 as given in the work of Blake. Anita McConnell, “Davis, John (d.1621),” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004; online edn, Jan 2008, n.d., accessed May 24, 2017.

¹⁰⁴State Papers, Acts of the Privy Council, Vol. 33 (1613-1614), p.633, no. 899. Listen in Blake, “The Farm of the Guinea Trade in 1631,” 93n.

that requested exclusive geographical access to the coast. This would help to explain Davies' actions as a company member through the first half of the 1620s, which, as it became evident that Davies was not the only merchant interested in the redwood trade, quickly became a cause of conflict and competition.

After this look at some of the more influential members of the company, certain features stand out. Though from what we know of their political leanings they move across the scale, there is a tangible link to the Duke of Buckingham. Several of the courtiers nursed tight links to the king's favorite through their marriages to his half-brother's sisters-in-law. However, Sir Robert Mansell, appearing as an outspoken critic of the Duke, carried much weight in the Navy despite his numerous accusations of corruption and scandal. Scandal and financial trouble connects them all, regardless of affiliation, and limbo have extended to members we know less about. As will be discussed below, attention directed at company scandals came to hurt its reputation in the 1620s as a viable investment option, but it is equally likely that all the scandals that haunted the pasts of members also damaged the company profile, attracting a certain type of investors more likely to play fast and loose with their word and reputation. Furthermore, the company's membership does not squarely fit into traditional historical categories, such as 'mere merchants' or 'new merchant establishment', as pioneered by Robert Brenner.¹⁰⁵ Several of them had background and interest from exploration and colonization endeavors in the Americas, while others focused on court and domestic politics. Davies, the main instigator, seems for instance not to have involved himself in any of the Atlantic projects. Neither is their social status easy to discern, as some of them were from, or connected to, high status families, while others, such as the remaining four merchants, have proven difficult to find. It should also be remembered that despite financial troubles, and no evidence of particular experience in trade with the African continent beyond John Davies, several of them still had behind them extensive careers at sea. Either way, neither naval men nor politicians or courtiers contributed nearly as much in the way of building a profitable venture on the African coast, as did John Davies and later members with mercantile backgrounds. The merchants were a small group by comparison to the naval men and courtiers, counting only five in 1618, but it was the merchants who quickly secured control of the company's trade and, despite some internal conflict through the 1620's, settled the trade on a stable footing allowing it to expand throughout the following decades.

¹⁰⁵Brenner, *Merchants and Revolution*.

3. The two merchants of the Guinea Company and its first expeditions

Despite several influential company members within both court and navy, the surviving sources leave little doubt about who were running the Guinea company in the 1620s, and who made a profit. Two merchants, John Davies and Humphrey Slaney, ruthlessly ran and split the trade between them, to the exclusion of other members. The two merchants, sometimes working in unison – at other times engaging in bitter rivalry, used the company as little more than a tool to exclude competition. At times they manipulated company affairs to their mutual benefit, at other times they were playing their fellow members against one another. Davies was, as seen above, a founding member with long experience in the trade from the coast, especially in redwood. Slaney, who joined the company shortly after it received its charter, had been a competitor of Davies for several years. Now that the trade in Africa was meant to be managed and conducted by the GC only, he chose to take an active part. Together the remaining members, with courtly connections and influential positions, but very little - if any - experience from the coast of Africa, had little choice but to rely on their expertise. Upon receiving his membership Slaney swore, like Davies had, to leave his private trade behind, operating instead only in unison with the others, and he was active in organizing several company voyages, helped to secure capital, fitted out and victualled ships, and organized the goods to be brought to Africa for sale. Like Davies he had the connections and experience necessary, and undoubtedly benefitted the company greatly. However, he, like Davies, did not leave his private operation behind him, instead he looked for ways in which his newly gained membership could serve him also there.

Already from the very start it proved troublesome for the company to generate a profit, though this did not stem from lack of trying. In 1621, they presented the king with an overview of the accounts from the first voyages, and it quickly becomes clear that trade had proved challenging financially. When we pair this source with published accounts from Richard Jobson, it is clear there were extraordinary challenges that went merely simple bad investments. Jobson was sent out by the company, under the directorship of governor St. John; sub-governor Apesley and deputy governor Button, at the end of October 1621. After his return in 1623, his travels up the Gambia River were published in book-form under the title *The Golden Trade or a Discovery of the River Gambia (Gambia) and the Golden Trade of the Aethiopians*, and it has become an important source for early seventeenth century trade on the west African coast.¹⁰⁶ According to these documents, the accounts and Jobson's book, the company initially had three ships in circulation between England and the African

¹⁰⁶Richard Jobson, *The Golden Trade or a Discovery of the River Gambia and the Golden Trade of the Aethiopians*, 1623. (Reprinted by Dawson of Pall Mall, London, 1968)

coast – the *Katherine*, the *St. John* and the *Syon*. Whether these ships were owned by the company or freighted either externally or by and from company members, as the name *St. John* may suggest, is not known. A total of four voyages had been conducted between 1618 and 1621 and signals high activity, with the mixed motive of establishing relations and trade with the markets in the Gambia River estuary, as well as conducting further explorations upriver with the aim of connecting to the trading circuits in the continent’s interior. The trade from Gambia was the company’s focus throughout the 1620s, largely spurred on by the established trading links in the region, possibly stemming from Davies’ earlier activities there, and the trade in redwood based in the region. There is evidence that Davies traded privately from the area around the Sierra Leone River, while Slaney focused on the river Sherboro. According to Blake, though it has not been possible to confirm from the sources, he there employed his two apprentices and soon-to-be company directors, William Cloberry and John Wood.¹⁰⁷ This meant other parts of the coast were not visited with any high degree of frequency by the company, and must largely have remained open for private, now de facto illegal, initiatives.

In addition to trade in African commodities, the hope for the expedition was to better understand the gold trade, and if possible to locate its source. We do not know in what way the company organized its starting capital, nor if the practice from the Senegal Adventurers of clustering investors behind representatives, was continued. In the decade following the launch of the company, another thirty or so members and their capital entered the company and left without leaving much trace.¹⁰⁸ Wherever the capital was sourced from it was clearly unfortunate that the investment for fitting out the 120-ton vessel named *Katherine*, just after receiving the patent in 1618, was immediately lost when the *Katherine* did not return. Her master, George Thompson, had been instructed to sail the ship up the Gambia river, as far he could safely get her, and then continue exploring up river by use of pinnaces. According to the writings of Jobson, Thompson did as he was instructed but once the majority of the crew had commenced their journey upriver, leaving the *Katherine* behind, the ship was attacked by a group of “*Portingals and Mulatos*”.¹⁰⁹ Those who had remained aboard the *Katherine* were all killed. News of the attack eventually traveled up river to Thompson, who decided to send some of his men down to the coast in the hopes of gaining passage back to England to relay the bad news and ask for assistance, and in this they succeeded. In the company accounts the *Katherine* is simply listed as “*taken, and most of the men slayne*”, and subsequently no return on

¹⁰⁷TNA: C 2/ChasI/S94/34, Blake, “The Farm of the Guinea Trade in 1631,” 95.

¹⁰⁸Blake, 95–98.

¹⁰⁹Richard Jobson, *The Golden Trade, or, A Discovery of the River Gambia, and the Golden Trade of the Ethiopians* (London: Nicholas Okes, 1623), 6–11.

investment was recorded. This was a devastating start for the company, and things were not getting better. In response to the plea for help from Thomson, the company prepared to send out another vessel. The following year, in 1620, a 50-ton pinnace named *St. John* was fitted out to the total sum of £1989. The total profit recorded from that voyage, in hides and gold, was only £80, which can hardly have appeared as a successful return on investment. The only uplifting news brought by the *St. John* was that Thompson, believing himself now well established up the Gambia river, had declined the offer to return with the ship - asking instead for the company to send more goods for trade. Thompson, along with eight of his men, remained in the Gambia to continue the explorations and reported enthusiastically to the company directors that “*they should in no wayes doubt of a hopeful discovery, where the Moores of Barbary traded, and a valewable returne for their losses sustained...*”¹¹⁰

Therefore, in late October 1621 the *St. John* was again fitted and sent out for another attempt, sailing this time together with the substantially larger vessel *Syon* of 200 tons. Humphrey Slaney was charged with the organization of the voyage.¹¹¹ Richard Jobson partook in the expedition, witnessing and documenting all events and publishing his accounts upon his return to England. The two ships were, according to the company accounts, fitted out to the total cost of £1921 – a smaller sum than the voyage before when considering the tonnage for the two vessels combined was substantially larger, a sign that the initial high hopes may have cooled down somewhat. The accounts do not tell us what the ships were stocked with, though the list of returns were slightly more promising. The ships brought back hides, wax, and ivory to the total value of £1387. The voyage still ended in loss though, and worse still - the two ships returned with unfortunate news regarding the project of establishing trade in the interior. While the ships had been away, Thompson – along with two of his fellow explorers – had left the larger party and headed further inland. There they had been in search of a trader named Buckor Sano based at the town of Tinda.¹¹² Sano was thought to be an important link to the interior trade, but unfortunately, they learned upon their arrival that Sano was away on one of his business travels. According to Jobson’s accounts, while waiting for Sano’s return and carefully studying the trading that was taking place, a fight over Thompson leadership had broken out among the Englishmen. The outcome proved deadly for Thompson, as “*one of his Company slew him, to the utter losse of what he [Thompson] had attained*”. To make matters worse, Jobson explained, Thompson had “*committed nothing to paper, so as all his endeavors and labors were lost with him*”.¹¹³ Of the knowledge gathered from over

¹¹⁰Jobson, 7.

¹¹¹Blake, “The Farm of the Guinea Trade in 1631,” 95.

¹¹²Also written *Tenda*. Jobson, *The Golden Trade*, xiii.

¹¹³Jobson, 8.

three years of exploration of the Gambia inlands, none of it made it back to the company in London. Furthermore, despite the positive developments in returns with the voyage of *St. John* and the *Syon*, when the time came to close the accounts a further £1301 of the company's funds went towards the cost of freight and crew. Thus, by 1621 the company had spent £5766 on fitting out vessels - and another £1301 in freight charges and wages for those that had returned - bringing the total expenditure to £7067. Despite the return of £1466 from the two last voyages, the company was out of pocket £5600, and firmly in the red. On top of this came the tragedy of losing one of the company ships with crew, the loss of Thompson, and with him all his gathered knowledge.¹¹⁴

3.2. Conflict arises

The first years thus did not live up to the expectations, and measures had to be taken for trade to continue. The company had lost money and there was need for more funds, and the tough first years must have left their mark, for capital had to be sourced from outside company ranks. In November 1621, after the return of the *Syon* and the *St. John*, the company borrowed £1000 from Lady Elizabeth Craven, the widow of former Mayor of London, Sir William Craven.¹¹⁵ The loan may have helped short term, but its aftermath would cause far more trouble than had been foreseen. The decision to request the loan, as well as the organization of all things practical, was done by Humphrey Slaney, Sir Giles Mompesson, Sir Allen Apesley, as well as fellow company members Sir Francis Blundell, George Dunscombe and Phillip Jones. The money supposedly went towards fitting out another company voyage to the river Gambia, but in the court cases that followed when the debt remained unpaid, doubts were cast on whether the funds had gone to that end, or even to the company at all. Accusations were later made in court by Apesley that Slaney had not only been conducting copious private trade to the damage of the company, but also simply pretended that the funds would go towards fitting out a new voyage to the Gambia, instead pocketing the money for himself. John Davies had also benefitted privately from the loan, and according to Apesley the two merchants were equally responsible for repayment, unlike himself.

If Slaney and Davies both benefitted from the loan and applied it to their

¹¹⁴SP Dom., James I, Vol. 124, no. 115.

Blake, J.W., 'The English Guinea Company, 1618-1660: An early example of the chartered company in colonial development', proceedings and report of the Belfast Natural History and Philosophical Society. Talk given on the 7th of March 1946., p.19 Transcript from: https://archive.org/stream/proceedingsrepor23194546b/proceedingsrepor23194546b_djvu.txt Accessed 11.09.15.

¹¹⁵TNA: C 2/ChasI/S85/4.

own personal operations, it does not appear it was the result of active cooperation between them. On the contrary, shortly after the loan had been received, Davies played to the company's concern for its own financial difficulties and offered to personally take on parts of the repayment responsibility. He requested, however, certain benefits in return. Davies had at this point, perhaps disheartened by the lacking success from the voyages, decided to return to his former wish for control of the redwood trade. The events of 1620-1 had left nothing in terms of furthering the company's ability to pay the loan to Lady Craven, and now Davies offered to take on the repayment of the loan in exchange for sole access to the redwood trade. The company, tempted by the offer, accepted and thus eight years later Davies held control of England's legal trade in redwood.¹¹⁶ Davies' grip on the redwood trade was not good for company business. Redwood, or *taccola*, was a reasonably priced dye wood and enjoyed growing popularity in Europe at the beginning of the seventeenth century. From Pieter van den Broecke's journal we know that he too was bringing redwood into Amsterdam for his employers around the same period.¹¹⁷ Indeed, in England Davies had himself been active in trying it out, requesting the London Company of Dyers to experiment with its quality.¹¹⁸ In addition to its qualities as a dye, redwood was used by several of the African states along the West African coast, and thus held value as an article of re-export. The Portuguese had long since acknowledge redwoods potential as a re-export article, used by nobles along the coast as a dye to be painted on the skin. Broecke wrote, "[The Portuguese] buy *taccola* in abundance and transport it along the entire coast, where it brings great profits."¹¹⁹ It was a commodity that brought in steady profits, and once it was directed into Davies' hands, it hastened the company's downward spiral. Slaney, who was also operating privately on the coast and too held a stake in the redwood trade, watched the process with much frustration and contention. From his actions following the deal between Davies and the company, it is evident that it had either taken place behind his back, or against his will. Ignoring the agreement, Slaney continued his trade until he and Davies came to blows.¹²⁰ From then on, the two men engaged in a personal conflict, where the company, and several individual members became collateral damage. Blatantly ignoring the deal between Davies and the company, Slaney sent his ships to the coast and continued trading in redwood. Not long after, Davies' factors on the coast seized a ship belonging

¹¹⁶TNA: C 2/ChasI/S94/34, HCA 13/106, p.25v-27r, Blake, "The Farm of the Guinea Trade in 1631," 94n.

¹¹⁷Broecke writes of bringing 1,800 pieces of redwood to Amsterdam in late July 1611, "*which we had brought to do a test to see if it could be used by the dyers.*" Another 800 pieces was brought in a similar voyage in the fall of 1612. Broecke and La Fleur, *Pieter van Den Broecke's Journal of Voyages*, 70-80, 92.

¹¹⁸TNA: PC 2/31, f.681-682, State Papers James I. Acts of the Privy Council of England: A.D. 1542-[June 1631]. Vol. 38: 1621-1623.

¹¹⁹Broecke and La Fleur, *Pieter van Den Broecke's Journal of Voyages*, 73, 79-80, 87-88, 97, 102.

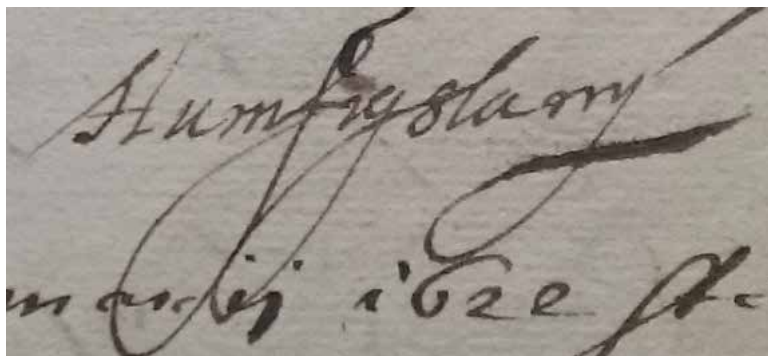
¹²⁰TNA: HCA 13/106, 25v-27r

to Slaney. Davies got the company to serve Slaney a fine £500 for trading against company regulation. In response to this, Slaney took the conflict public, delivering a damning complaint to the king's privy council in April, 1623.

In early historiographical work on the company, such as that of W.R. Scott, C.T. Carr, and E. Donnan, Humphrey Slaney has been presented as a company challenger who had a past as a trader on the African coast and who felt the squeeze of the patent, before eventually taking over the trade with the new Guinea patent granted by Charles in 1631.¹²¹ Blake challenged this view, showing that Slaney had been a company member for more than a decade by 1631, only gradually introducing the group of supporters that came to run the Anglo-Africa trade in the 1630s and 1640s. I argue here that not only does the records of his complaint to the Privy Council show that Slaney was indeed a member of the company, and was therefore not challenging the company as a private trader, but he was in fact not challenging the company at all. From the state papers it is evident that Slaney challenged John Davies personally. This he did from inside the company as a fellow member who hung the company's dirty laundry out to dry. Slaney was willing to risk the future of the company as a viable investment option, in order to maintain his private trade.

Illustration 4

Signature of Humphrey Slaney



Source: Detail from HCA 13/106, 27r, The National Archive, Kew, UK.

Before presenting Slaney's complaints it must be acknowledged that there was frustration with the company coming from the outside as well. The criticisms had started as soon as the patent was granted, and in 1622 members of the Eastland Company took the opportunity to point to the GC as an example of a company that

¹²¹Scott, *The Constitution and Finance of English, Scottish and Irish Joint-Stock Companies to 1720*, 2:13; Carr, *Select Charters of Trading Companies*, XXVIII:99-106; Donnan, *Documents Illustrative of the History of the Slave Trade to America*, Vol. I, 1441-1700:79.

was not making use of the extensive patent it was holding, nor allowing anyone else access to the trade in its absence.¹²² The same was claimed by a Nicholas Ferrar in a petition to the House of Commons from 1622, who argued that the claim of “first discovery” was a falsehood, and the low level of activity in combination with the seizing of interlopers, was bringing the prices on African commodities to unacceptable levels.¹²³ We know now that the reason for this was Davies monopolizing of the trade at the expense of all other activity. The combination of lacking activity and denied access also formed the core of Slaney’s frustrations, and the source of the problem was the grip that Davies held over the company through taking over the debt to Lady Craven. The company had become indebted to Davies, in addition to losing its redwood trade. On top of claiming his agreement was legal and entered into freely by the company, Davies still insisted that the clause in the patent in which the company agreed to trade on a “*unison course*” was still strictly upheld, which denied all other members from conducting private trade. According to the patent of the company, members who wanted to trade had to do it through the company, and this did not change just because Davies took on some of the company’s financial burden. But this was no easy thing to do when the company was close to bankruptcy. New capital was hard to come by for a company which was indebted, embroiled in conflict, and had lost some of its most secure trade to private hands. These restrictions had their desired effect, and by closing off all access to the trade John Davies had, by 1622/3, “*the sole trading to the saide places of Guinea and Binney, excluding all those of the same company from trading to those partes*”.¹²⁴

This was the backdrop in April 1623, when Slaney stepped in front of the Privy Council with a forceful complaint about the practice of his company, and of one of his fellow company members. In his appeal to the council, Slaney freely admitted that he had not accepted the demands of Davies, and that he had conducted private trade as the company engaged in none, which as a result meant he had been operating in breach of the patent.¹²⁵ Slaney had sent three of his own ships to the African coast aiming to trade, but – according to his statement - also to explore regions where the English had not yet settled, ‘*for the enlargement of trade, employment of many maryners and encrease of his Majestie’s Customes*’. His justification, an expressed wish to discover the African coast for England, gained him support with the council. In fact, he went as far as to claim that the three ships he had sent had traded for

¹²²SP. Dom., James I, Vol. 130, p. 387, May 5, 1622. (Entry made on May 8th, written in a document dated May 5th, 1622)

¹²³Scott, *The Constitution and Finance of English, Scottish and Irish Joint-Stock Companies to 1720*, 2:13.

¹²⁴TNA: PC 2/31, f.681-682, State Papers James I. Acts of the Privy Council of England: A.D. 1542-[June 1631], Vol. 38: 1621-1623.

¹²⁵*Ibid.*

more than company itself. It is impossible to establish the actual size of either Davies or Slaney's private activities in the redwood trade, but it is clear that the trade was profitable enough for neither of them to willingly lose it to the other. Davies appeared uninterested in sharing the coast with anyone, and upon being informed of Slaney's activities, had made efficient use of the patent and presented Slaney with the abovementioned fine of £500 for trading privately on the coast. Slaney claimed he was more than willing to contribute to the company clearing its debt with Davies and Craven, but the transferal of the redwood trade was going too far, resulting in the '*transaction of privilege to one sole hande, though it be with the consent of the company*'.¹²⁶

The privy council was furious upon hearing Slaney's case, and sided with him on the matter. In very clear terms it was decided that Davies behavior was "*unfit to be suffered and his Majestie being informed hereof doth utterly dislyke that his gracious favour intended for a generall good shoulde be charged into the nature of a monopoli for the private turne of one man, both to the prejudice of the saide Humphrey Slaney and the discouragement of others from undertaking lyke adventures; it is therefore thought fit and ordered according to his Majestie's pleasure signified in that behalfe, that the arrests and sutes of molestacion against the saide Humphrey Slaney be stayed and that hereafter the saide Slaney be not molested or troubled or his goods arrested upon any such pretence by the saide Davis.*"¹²⁷ Slaney had won the right to trade on the coast, and Davies was strongly reprimanded. The decision did not, however, address the core of the issue – Davies seemingly maintained his prominent position in redwood trade until his death in 1626/7, and the company's financial issues continued.

4. The Company in court

During the on-going court conflict between Slaney and Davies, trouble was arising elsewhere in the company as well. In 1624 it was decided that the company would attempt to organize yet another voyage in the Gambia with Richard Jobson in charge. The company governor, William St. John, took it upon himself to organize the purchase of a vessel for the purpose, and eventually found a Spanish ship that he thought suitable. However, the cost of the ship, £1250, was higher than the company's current joint-stock – proving that even though private merchants like Davies and Slaney might be profiting, this did not spill over into company coffers. An agreement was reached when St. John along with a group of members offered to buy the ship privately, relying again on private credit, and then rent it out to the company for £60

¹²⁶*Ibid.*

¹²⁷*Ibid.*

per month.¹²⁸ This the company agreed to, and the ship was purchased and fitted out for its voyage. It left the Thames only to immediately seek harbor at Dover as it “*proved rotten and so ominous to their proceeding, hazarding the lives of us all that were ingaged in her*”.¹²⁹ Because of leaks and need for repair it was evident that the ship could not embark on a voyage to Africa, as “*many of us resolve the stoppe of this last voyage was God’s blessed hinderance*”.¹³⁰ The whole project had to be cancelled. The rest of the company members were furious, demanding a return of the money they had already put in for hiring the ship and acquiring its cargo. We do not know much of how the group that had purchased the ship reacted to these requests in detail, but a case between governor St. John and the executors of the will of Sir George Digby who was one of the members who offered to take part in the purchase, shows that Digby had put complete trust in St. John when it came to the choice of ship.¹³¹ St. John was in no position to offer any refunds, and as the expected rent from ship was not coming in he quickly began to struggle with the debt he still owed the ship’s original owners. When no solution presented itself, the governor took a page out of fellow-company member Giles Mompesson’s book and ran away.

The company’s financial issues were not helped when it appeared, after Davies’ death in 1626, that after all the problems his deal with the company had generated, he had not in fact paid down the loan to Elizabeth Craven. The loan would in the end, perhaps paradoxically and justifiably, become Slaney’s problem. From the records of a judicial complaint filed by Slaney in 1627 the case of the debt unravels. Due to Davies lacking payments, the creditors were now turning on Slaney, as the only viable option for restitution among the members who requested the loan in 1621. They were, in addition to Slaney, Sir Giles Mompesson, Sir Allen Apesley, Sir Francis Blundell, George Dunscombe and Phillip Jones. By 1627, Craven was deceased, and the recovery of the debt had passed to her brothers George and William Whytmore, the executors to her will. Slaney, refusing to take responsibility for the entire sum in arrears, complained of slander and plotting against his reputation. This was fervently denied and dismissed by the Whytmores. The executors did acknowledge that they were indeed coming after the arrears left from the debt owed to Craven by the company, £400 in total, and though they acknowledge that the debt had been taken up by a group within the company, and then had been handed over to Davies for repayment, those payments had never been received. The loan had, as

¹²⁸Blake, “The Farm of the Guinea Trade in 1631,” 95; J. M. Gray, *A History of the Gambia* (Cambridge University Press, 1940), 27.

¹²⁹Richard Jobson, “The Discovery of the Cuntry of Kinge Solomon His Rich Trade and Trafique within Twenty Daies Sail of England” (1625), Royal MS. 18A, LVIII, British Library.

¹³⁰Jobson.

¹³¹TNA: C 2/ChasI/S44/26, 2/ChasI/S87/25

far as the executors understood, gone towards the company's intended voyage to the Gambia. However, at the time the loan had been granted Lady Craven did not know, nor ask, what the money was intended for, "*But that the said one thousand pounds was borrowed or employed for the said companie the said Lady Craven to the knowledge of these defendants knowe not, nor doe these defendants at all know any thinge for whome or what use it was borrowed, neither doe these defendants know what was the complainants employment or adventure for the said companie, nor what (...) returns they made (..) neither what care the said company tooke to satisfie the said Lady Craven.*"¹³²

Illustration 5:

George Whytmore (d.1654) brother of
Lady Elizabeth Craven and executor to her will.



British (English) School, ca. 1650, artist unknown.

Source: Dudmaston, Shropshire, Midlands, National Trust, UK.

¹³²TNA: C 2/ChasI/S85/4

Thus, the executors claimed, to Craven it appeared to be a loan granted to the men who had requested it, and it was these men she viewed as her debtors. Furthermore, Craven had not had any knowledge of the agreement between the company and Davies for the latter to take over the loan, only after some of the repayments had been made had she been informed of this. According to the executors, Davies role in the repayment changed nothing of the original agreement, and in addition Davies had evidently not taken his responsibility seriously and allowed the debt to go unpaid. Before her death, lady Craven had seen no other option but to seek a judicial verdict against the original debtors, and this she had achieved through the court of the King's Bench. The list of debtors had thinned since 1621. Sir Francis Blundell was dead and left little behind. The same was true of Dunscombe and Jones. Apesley was still alive but was struggling financially and could not repay. Mompesson ran away already in 1622 and had "*lived for manie yeares obscure*".¹³³ Their questionable financial dealings have already been discussed above. As for pursuing the company which, after all, was a legal entity with limited liability, the executors exclaimed: "*and against the said company or the Administrators of the said John Davies' estate these defendants have neither cause of suite or hope of relief.*"¹³⁴ The deal had, according to their testimony, never really been with Davies, or with the company, but with the aforementioned group around Apesley and Mompesson. If Slaney was unhappy with shouldering the responsibility alone, the executor dryly suggested he took his complaint to his fellow debtors.

The practice of taking up loans for a company on the personal credit of select members, often the directors, was not unusual, as has been shown by Oscar Gelderblom, Abe de Jong and Joost Jonker in the case of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) from the same period.¹³⁵ The executors of Lady Craven's testament did not see the arrangement for the loan as being between her and the company, but instead between her and the persons that had specifically requested it. The decision to leave it to certain company members to take up the loan had become established practice, and, as will be discussed below, caused problems for other company members as well, not just Slaney. It cannot be determined whether Craven was truly unaware that the company was responsible for the repayment, and by extension, whether the company's credit was too bad to procure capital at that point. It is not unlikely, the statement from the executors suggests they did not see it as viable to go after the company, and felt their chances improved by going after company members. Yet, the VOC, a far larger organization than the GC, had established limited liability for its

¹³³*Ibid.*

¹³⁴*Ibid.*

¹³⁵Oscar Gelderblom, Abe de Jong, and Joost Jonker, "The Formative Years of the Modern Corporation: The Dutch East India Company VOC, 1602–1623," *The Journal of Economic History* 73, no. 4 (December 2013): 1050–76.

members, both shareholders and directors, only in 1623, and the English equivalent - the East India Company (EIC), only introduced the practice by the middle of the century.¹³⁶ The content of the case was therefore not unique for the GC, nor an unequivocal sign of financial weakness, and it will be shown below that the GC maintained the practice until the middle of the century, before passing it on to its successor, the Royal Adventurers into Africa, after the Restoration.

5. Internal strife and changes in membership

According to the executors, it was not their concern how Slaney handled the matter from then on so long as they received their money. Beyond that, Slaney was free to then pursue the other debtors for compensation in his own legal process if he so wished. They knew nothing of how the company had organized such matters originally, nor do they appear particularly interested. The records do not reveal the outcome of the case, although it appears the matter ended in the Whytmores' favour, with Slaney being forced to repay the missing money. This is suggested by the fact that one year later the matter was again brought up in court. This time Slaney went after the only person left to share the financial responsibility of the loan, Sir Allen Apesley.

In his response to Slaney's complaint, written down in June 1628, Apesley made his thoughts of both Slaney and Davies known, and his testimony is a rare insight into how the internal relationship between the GC members had both deteriorated and polarized. Apesley, claimed, he "*knoweth not (...) of any good the said complainant [Slaney] hath done to the said company. The Complainant hath much hurt and damnified the said company*".¹³⁷ He admitted to having had a role in the loan, but stated in no uncertain terms "*that hee for his parte had nor parte or parcel of the said sume of one thousand pounds secured by the said bond nor any benefit at all of it*".¹³⁸ He went on to give Slaney full responsibility for the decision, as he "*undertook to manage a voyage to the River of Gambra & [this] was the meanes for the taking upp (as hee pretendeth) of the sume (...) which he promised to employ for the general good*".¹³⁹ Slaney had been responsible for acquiring the necessary ships, crews, victuals and goods, as well as where to position diverse factors, but Apesley claimed he "*[did not] know howe it was employed nor had he (...) any dealing therein but the said complainant who procured the said money was left to receive the same*

¹³⁶Gelderblom, Jong, and Jonker, 3.

¹³⁷TNA: C 2/ChasI/S94/34

¹³⁸*Ibid.*

¹³⁹*Ibid.*

‡ howe much hee received or disposed thereof [he, Apesley] knoweth not, But the said complt. (who was trusted by the said company therewith) undertook to receive ‡ employed the said whole sume...”¹⁴⁰

The company had trusted Slaney to manage the matter, trusting his experience in the trade, but Apesley clearly questioned whether Slaney had been true to the company in his dealings and stated he had never seen any accounts from the voyage. He went on saying that he “*hath heard ‡ doth believe it to be true that the said complainant contrary to (...) the expressed orders of the said company did undertake ‡ sett forth other ships to Gynney and Bynney for his own proper account without lysence of the said company and that hee made unto himself a greate profit thereby*”.¹⁴¹ Apesley explained that he had indeed been present when the company made the agreement with Davies, for “*his sole entire trade ‡ traffique of the River of Cerelion*”¹⁴² in return for taking over the payments on the loan, and he knew that Davies had made a payment of £400 to Craven. From the testimony of the Whytmores, it is clear that miscellaneous sums had been given also by the others, and now £400 remained.¹⁴³ Regarding this remaining sum, Apesley said, he had “*presumed that the said debt had been long since wholly satisfied*”.¹⁴⁴ And interestingly, he saw no problem in asking the two merchants to pay up, as he felt certain they both had funds owed to them in the company coffers, “*And if any part thereof be yet behind ‡ unpaid then ought the said [Slaney] or the said John Davies or one of them to pay the same they having (as this defendant hath heard) sufficient means of the said company as yet unaccounted for to satisfy and discharge the said debt*”.¹⁴⁵ To him this was Davies and Slaney’s problem, stemming from their own illegal dealings and should neither be left to Apesley or the company to solve. Not only claimed Apesley to have contributed sufficiently into the company’s dealings, “*But the said complaynant. ‡ John Davies (as this defendant believeth) had the whole managing of the said money and goods of ‡ belonging to the [company] and the whole benefit of the trade aforesaid to their owne great advantage ‡ enrichment ‡ the losse ‡ damage of the said company.*”¹⁴⁶

The verdict of the case is not known, but Apesley was known for his financial trouble, and appear from his testimony to be not only unwilling to pay anything towards the debt, but resentful towards both Slaney and Davies. Slaney had organized the loan, he had managed how it was spent, the company had trusted

¹⁴⁰*Ibid.*

¹⁴¹*Ibid.*

¹⁴²*Ibid. Cerelion - Sierra Leone.*

¹⁴³TNA: C 2/ChasI/S85/4

¹⁴⁴TNA: C 2/ChasI/S94/34

¹⁴⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁴⁶*Ibid.*

him, and instead he had secured his own private trade at the company's expense. Not only had he damaged the company financially but - if Apesley's accusations were true, probably also its credit and reputation. The continuous court cases did not help matters. Davies had not been much better, having promised to take the debt of the company's hands in return for a valuable privilege he enjoyed for nearly five years at the cost of the company's profits, but had in fact not done as promised. Now Davies was dead, and Apesley appear happy to leave Slaney to tidy up his own mess.

The accusations of Apesley against Humphrey Slaney did indeed come from a man who had every interest in painting Humphrey Slaney in a bad light, and they must be seen in that context. However, Apesley's claims are not grotesque. Slaney openly admitted to private trading in front of the Privy Council, and was responsible for the organization of voyages, of which the *Syon's* voyage to the Gambia in 1621 was a not-too-successful example. He had also proven to be willing to go far to ensure his private access to the coast when it was under threat by Davies. Furthermore, his long track record for trade on the coast, combined with the accusations that he made "*unto himself a greate profit*" by breaking the rules laid down in the patent, makes it not unlikely that he was personally enriched by his trade even if the company was withering.

Whether Slaney's presence in the company was for good or bad, he undoubtedly left his mark and ensured its continued existence after the courtiers and naval officers were out of the picture. By the second half of the 1620s changes to the company dynamic were evident. Slaney was responsible for introducing several new traders as members, all experienced in overseas trade, stemming from his own, close, personal network. This group included his own son-in-law, William Cloberry - a London merchant who invested in both overseas trade and colonial ventures; the brothers Nicholas and Samuel Crispe, also wealthy London merchants with interest in both the Spanish and East India trade, though for Nicholas the Africa trade soon become the main focus; and the more anonymous John Wood, who had served as Slaney's apprentice.¹⁴⁷ These men all had their impact on the company's trading activities in the decades to come, and most prominent were Nicholas Crispe and John Wood who both came to take on the position of governor in the decades to come. These traders brought new vigor and much needed funds to the company, as well as a pool of experience from overseas trade. The experience would help them as they first had to tackle the effects of poor financial dealings, and the distinct lack of trust among members that had been developed, largely as a result of Slaney and Davies

¹⁴⁷Henry St George, *The Visitation of London: Anno Domini 1633, 1634, and 1635. Made by Sr. Henry St. George, Kt., Richmond Herald, and Deputy and Marshal to Sr. Richard St. George, Kt., Clarencieux King of Armes* (The Harleian Society, 1880), 173. William Cloberry, of Billingsgate, marriage to Dorothy Slaney. Brenner, *Merchants and Revolution*; Robert Porter, "The Crispe Family and the African Trade in the Seventeenth Century," *The Journal of African History* 9, no. 1 (1968): 57-77.

exploitation of company privilege to better facilitate their private trade and protect it from competition.

But before the new members had time to make much of a mark, the company turned on itself again. Beyond the court cases over the Craven loan, which added to the existing problems of William St. John's failed expedition, there were other signs of the eroding long-term effects of the first few years. With St. John's departure, the company needed a new governor and the task was for a short while assigned to the elderly, wealthy George Digby, who had participated in the purchase of St. John's fateful ship and governed the company for the last year of his life, passing away in the same year as John Davies, 1626. The job then passed to his relative, Kenelm Digby, a well-respected courtier and diplomat, who by 1627 showed an increasing interest in privateering and overseas trade. Digby remained in the position until 1631, when the new patent was granted. Neither of the men in the group surrounding Slaney appears to have taken the governor chair before the new patent was granted, though Nicholas Crispe served as deputy governor for some of this time. Slaney was still caught in conflict over the debt to Craven, and with internal disagreements splitting the company it may have been impossible for Slaney, or his closest group, to receive the necessary acceptance to take on the role of governor. In addition, Digby was well-known and connected at the court of king Charles I, who had recently inherited the throne at the death of his father on the March 27, 1625. Compared to his sons, Charles I did not prove to be the most interested in the Anglo-Africa trade, though he invested in a company venture to the Gold Coast, lent the company one of his naval ships for protection, and granted generous privileges with the new patent in 1631.¹⁴⁸ The new king did, however, appreciate the many wonders that were brought home from the discoveries and explorations done by the company's men. Already in the summer of 1625, the privy council made a note of *'things desired from Guinea'* by the new king. The list included "*an elephant's head with the teeth very large; a river horse's head; strange sorts of fowls; birds and fishes' skins; great flying and sucking fishes; all sorts of serpents, dried fruits, shining stones*".¹⁴⁹ Despite the changes in governorship the privy council did not turn to the new head of the company, instead the note was addressed to the "*merchants of the Guinea Company and the Gold Coast, Humph. Slaney, Capt. Crispe, and [Wil.] Cloberry, and John Wood, Cape merchant*". St. John

¹⁴⁸Gray, *A History of the Gambia*, 27–28. BHO: "America and West Indies: October 1626," in *Calendar of State Papers Colonial, America and West Indies: Volume 1, 1574-1660*, ed. W Noel Sainsbury (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1860), 82. *British History Online*, accessed November 7, 2017, <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/cal-state-papers/colonial/america-west-indies/vol1/p82a>.

¹⁴⁹"America and West Indies: July 1625," in *Calendar of State Papers Colonial, America and West Indies: Volume 1, 1574-1660*, ed. W Noel Sainsbury (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1860), 74–75. *British History Online*, accessed November 7, 2017, <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/cal-state-papers/colonial/america-west-indies/vol1/pp74-75>.

and the Digby's may have held the position of governor, but the group around Slaney seems still to have been seen as the face of the company.¹⁵⁰

Illustration 6:

Sir Kenelm Digby and King Charles I



Source: Studio of Anthony van Dyck, ca 1630, National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, UK.



Source: Studio of Anthony van Dyck, ca. 1630, Sewerby Hall, Yorkshire, UK.

6. The end of the first patent

It is possible that this was a source of contention, at least it seems evident the Humphrey Slaney found a new adversary in Kenelm Digby. The attempt to set out a new shared voyage to the Gambia river in 1628 brought the Guinea traders into the court room yet again, and this time the issue centered on missing payments on subscriptions.¹⁵¹ Despite an agreement to send ships to the Gambia, followed by a

¹⁵⁰ "America and West Indies: July 1625," in *Calendar of State Papers Colonial, America and West Indies: Volume 1, 1574-1660*, ed. W Noel Sainsbury (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1860), 74-75. *British History Online*, accessed November 7, 2017, <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/cal-state-papers/colonial/america-west-indies/vol1/pp74-75>.

¹⁵¹TNA: C 2/ChasI/C129/94

round of subscriptions of investments for this purpose, a group of fifteen members defaulted when the time came to pay up. Led by governor Digby himself, the defaulters denied all requests to honor their commitments. Money had already been paid out and goods delivered in preparation of the voyage, and now, as the project was put on hold, there were again creditors pressuring the company for their money. Nicholas Crispe had extended his credit on the company's behalf and was especially eager to force the defaulters to make good on their promise. Digby had, according to the court documents subscribed £200 in the venture, but this, he claimed, had only been for show - in an attempt to draw in more investments, proving that the status of certain company members was indeed used actively to draw in capital. The same was true for other members, such as Joseph Ward and Lewis Powell. They had subscribed in order to create investment hype, but never intended to follow through on their subscriptions. Therefore, Digby said, as the voyage did not go to plan, he and his friends would refuse to pay, seemingly unwilling to acknowledge that his own actions had led to the venture's failure from the start. Instead he deflected all guilt, stating that he refused to pay as long as Humphrey Slaney was permitted to interlope on company trade. A fellow member, Sir John Brooks, confirmed this. Digby apparently also publicly proclaimed that he would adventure nothing in the company while it was giving out licenses to Slaney and others. He placed the blame for the lacking success of the voyage on Crispe, Slaney, and their partners - on their lack of skill, and how they focused on personal gain. The conflict quickly hardened, splitting the members into two groups, those who had paid and those who defaulted. The members who had paid rallied around Slaney and Nicholas Crispe - who, after honoring their subscriptions, denied any responsibility for the debts that arose when others defaulted. The others gathered around governor Digby - who, on behalf of the defaulters, blamed the private trade of Slaney and his partners.

The court of wards ruled in favor of the company's creditors on three separate occasions, ordering the company to pay their debts, but still the members could not agree, and no money was transferred. The matter of the missing subscriptions lingered on into the 1630s, and a threat of being ruled in contempt of court was necessary to get the company members to agree to a meeting on the matter. The meeting, held in the spring of 1631 and led by Richard Young and Nicholas Crispe, was attended mainly by members who were actively trading, and who therefore had paid their subscriptions. They, unsurprisingly, decided the only fair thing to do was for the defaulters to pay the creditors. The defaulter, on their side, reached the conclusion that they should not. The matter remained at a stand-still until 1637, ten years after the initial subscriptions were made, when governmental forces intervened, deciding the debt was to be covered through the collection of an import duty on the redwood

Illustration 7:

Overview of debt accumulated and missing subscriptions for the Guinea Company's attempted Gambia venture

82 II

Debts to be paid by the several Services of
this honorable Court.

£ 153

To Edward Curlew	100	00	00
For charges of suite	020	00	00
To William Cudde	040	00	00
For damage and charges	010	00	00
To John Harvey & John Whitcomb	097	18	08
For rest of suite & damage	020	00	00
To Thomas Andrews	110	07	01
For rest of suite & damage	020	00	00
The debt directed	418	05	09

A particular of the debt for w^{ch} some of the members
of the Company are now bound in this honorable Court.

Thomas Osborne demands for wages	100	00	00
Edward Shethen for wages	040	00	00
Thomas Hanson for money lent	100	00	00
John Good here for wages	022	10	00
For goods brought home of his owne	014	07	06
For money disbursed in w ^{ch} charge	001	16	11
Henry Gunder for wages	072	18	09
Timothy Stuberius for wages	040	10	00
Henry Groat for wages	024	11	06
Edmond Curlew & Eric Flemming	100	16	10
Samuel Hewes for wages			
The debt due for	527	11	06

The total of the debt directed & due for

945 17 09

The names of those of the Company that have underwritten
but not paid in their adventures and who in equitie ought
to paye the said debt.

John Hurte	050	00	00	his pte	039	08	04
Alisugham Crisley	050	00	00	his parte	039	08	04
Harold Wade	050	00	00	his parte	039	08	04
Henry Powell	050	00	00	his parte	039	08	04
George Forster	050	00	00	his parte	039	08	04
S ^r John Crane	050	00	00	his parte	039	08	04
Joseph Wood	200	00	00	his parte	157	13	04
S ^r Rowen Clarke	050	00	00	his parte	039	08	04
S ^r Thomas Button	100	00	00	his parte	078	16	08
S ^r Rincine Jigby	200	00	00	his pte	157	13	04
Walter Clarke	050	00	00	his pte	039	08	04
Marwarduke Bell	100	00	00	his pte	078	16	08
Robert Sampson	050	00	00	his pte	039	08	04
S ^r Tho. Clarke	050	00	00	his pte	039	08	04
Frauncis Rumbie	100	00	00		078	16	08
	1200	00	00		946	00	00

Source: TNA SP 16/540/1, f.153, May 26, 1631, The National Archive, Kew, UK.

and ivory brought into London.¹⁵²

These were Slaney's preferred commodities of import, and perhaps it was that which made the suggestion seem acceptable to the defaulters. Either way the matter was finally solved, if ten years late. Estimates from the trade suggested that in this way the £900 debt that remained would be covered within three years.

Despite their private trade splitting the company down the middle, Slaney, Crispe, and their trading partners showed no intention of slowing their private trade down. In the month of January 1628, Slaney, Crispe and others, sent the 300 tons vessel the *Benediction* to the Senegal River to conduct "*their accustomed trade*". The war between France and England which had been ongoing since 1627 had recently ended, making voyages to the African coast less risky. Or so the merchants thought. The *Benediction* was laden with merchandize and arrived safely. There the ship was "*surprised and taken*" in the month of June 1629 by a captain Bontemps and his "*Frenchman of Warr*" from Dieppe in Normandy. The *Benediction* had been busy in trade with the French and "*because of the league of amity then lately concluded [the petitioners] showed all the respect & curtesie that they could, little suspecting that they would have used any hostilitie against them.*" The cargo of the ship, which was taken to Dieppe after the ship's seizure, was "*worth as upon oath it will be proved more than twentie thousand pounds*". One half of that cargo reportedly belonged to Slaney and Crispe. The two merchants had tried to get their goods and ship back, but despite their best efforts both ship and cargo went up for sale in Dieppe. The two therefore had little hope of restitution and asked that the privy council intervened to have the sale stopped, "*this greate losse being almost the undoing of them, their wives & children.*"¹⁵³ The losses were not only affecting the merchants, to which the petition from the "*diverse poore widdowes with a great number of fatherless children*" can testify.¹⁵⁴ They were now, according to the petition, "*in greate wante and misery by reason of the losse of their husbands and goods, burned by fire and taken by the French in Guinney (...) long after the war was concluded.*"¹⁵⁵ The merchants had reportedly paid out some money for their survival, but also they were dependent on the return of their goods and the ship on order to compensate the widows. The desperation is evident as the widows describe themselves as "*at the point to perish and be put out*

¹⁵²£3 pr. ton of all redwood, and 4s. pr. cwt of all ivory. "America and West Indies: November 1636," in *Calendar of State Papers Colonial, America and West Indies: Volume 1, 1574-1660*, ed. W Noel Sainsbury (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1860), 241. BHO, accessed November 7, 2017, <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/cal-state-papers/colonial/america-west-indies/vol1/p241a>.

¹⁵³TNA: SP 16/155, no. 29

¹⁵⁴TNA: SP 16/181, f.186, no. 122

¹⁵⁵*Ibid.*

of our houses, the times being so harde and we (...) not able to paye our debts.”¹⁵⁶ A conclusion to the matter lingered on for another two years, until the *Benediction* was so derelict that the ship-owners, which did not include Slaney or Crispe - had lost any hope of retrieving it. Instead they requested the king’s permission to sell it, offering it to any Englishman that might be interested and who would bring the ship back to England, for the sum of £150. Their request was granted only in November 1633, almost four years after the ship left London. Whether the families of the crew ever received any restitution is not known.¹⁵⁷

The fate of the *Benediction*, alongside a smaller vessel fittingly called the *Humphrey*, which reportedly carried £600 worth of redwood, had consequences not only for Slaney and Crispe but for the future of the GC. Shortly after these losses were known, peace was restored with governor Digby. Indeed, the matter of the missing subscriptions from the Gambia voyage of 1628 lingered on for many years still, but when the request for a new patent was sent to Charles I, Kenelm Digby’s name appears alongside Slaney’s and Crisp’s as one of only six members. The additional members were Canada discoverer Sir George Kirke, Sir Richard Young, and William Cloberry. A likely reason for their burying of the hatchet was the need, brought on partly by the loss of the *Benediction*, for financially strong partners in the company, which appeared in 1631 with a new and extended patent.

7. Conclusion

The first decade of the Guinea Company’s existence was a tough one. Bad luck haunted the company’s expeditions and choices, and financial trouble soon ensued. A membership with an overall lacking knowledge of the African coast and markets, loss of experienced personnel and ships, and rising European competition all contributed to making the first years difficult. The death of George Thompson; the catastrophic purchase of bad ships; refusal to honor subscriptions; and the loss of ships to European competitors, did not help the company’s situation.

However, as has been shown above, not everyone was equally concerned with solving the company’s problems. None other would control and use the company to

¹⁵⁶*Ibid.*

¹⁵⁷TNA: SP 16/247, f.162, no.80, “Charles I - volume 236: April 1-15, 1633,” in *Calendar of State Papers Domestic: Charles I, 1633-4*, ed. John Bruce (London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1863), 1-21. *British History Online*, accessed November 6, 2017, <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/cal-state-papers/domestic/chas1/1633-4/pp1-21>. “Charles I - volume 251: November 20-30, 1633,” in *Calendar of State Papers Domestic: Charles I, 1633-4*, ed. John Bruce (London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1863), 293-312. *British History Online*, accessed November 6, 2017, <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/cal-state-papers/domestic/chas1/1633-4/pp293-312>.

the same degree as John Davies and Humphrey Slaney, who together and individually turned the company structure into a shelter for their own personal ventures. Within months of the company's launch Davies turned the fragile financial state of the company to his favor, holding it hostage through extending - or at least promising to extend, much needed capital, denying other traders access to the coast as a result. The GC, despite being a more extensive operation than both Slaney and Davies' smaller personal ventures had been in the past, mainly included members that had little experience with the conditions of the coast of Africa, little mercantile expertise, and were – in some situations rather famously, bad at managing their finances. They were quickly brought to the experienced merchants' heel when the financial pressures from the first unlucky voyages started appearing.

As shown, the only real threat to Davies' initial control came from other merchants in the company, most notably from Slaney and later also his collaborators. Slaney; soon joined by Nicholas Crispe, William Cloberry and John Wood, were, unlike most of the other members, personally affected to a far higher degree by Davies dominance of company affairs. There is little evidence to suggest that this group, Davies included, felt any sense of responsibility for the company's well-being at this early stage, beyond what it could offer them in terms of protection from the competition of other private traders. In fact, a patent-holding company with little ability to pursue trade offered them the ideal environment for their own operations. The continued trade on private account by both Slaney and Davies; the reported profits they were making while the company struggled; and the internal strife their actions caused, indicate their perception of the company as little more than a means through which they could to organize their private operations. At times the two traders did this side-by-side, without problems, at other times they stepped on each other's toes and sparks flew. The conflicts that arose, firstly between Slaney and Davies; later between Slaney and the other debtors to the loan form Elizabeth Craven; and lastly the issues of the missing subscriptions, were all caused or connected to the accusations of private trade. These conflicts divided the company, sowed mistrust, and problematized the company's trade. Furthermore, the members of the company were not able to resolve these situations internally, having in the end to turn to various state institutions for assistance and mediation. Conflicts that involved the privy council; the court of ward and chancery; and the court of king's bench, all took time and money, and brought unwanted attention to the company's issues.

How well known this internal conflict was among contemporaries is difficult to assess, though some indication can be gleaned from the fact that the GC was pulled forth as a seemingly well-known example of a mal-functioning patent in parliamentary debates over the extension of trade monopolies. The observations of internal strife and its effects included in the writings of Richard Jobson; the

declaration of the GC patent as a grievance in 1624; the risk of being found in contempt of court from being unable to agree on financial issues; and, in the end, the need to instill a duty on company imports in order to ensure the repayment of company debts, are further examples. The City was a tight knit community and the internal struggles of the company must have become known among merchants that were in search of investment opportunities, and it was unlikely to make investment in the company tempting. To free the company from its reputation was, undoubtedly, part of the motivation behind the request for a new patent by the group surrounding Slaney in 1631.

Thus, the main problems of the early GC stemmed, not from its inexperienced courtiers as has been believed, but instead from its most experienced merchants. Their loyalty had never been to the company, but to their own personal affairs. Davies focus had always been the redwood trade, and though his personal request was initially denied, it only delayed his take-over of the trade by a few years. As for Slaney, his mercantile activities on the African coast were already established when the company was launched, and he had little choice but to adapt his operation to fit within the company structure. This he managed with success as both traders found it was possible to operate privately from within the company structure, especially once the rest of the company members had begun to rely on their expertise, trusting them with the arrangement of voyages to the coast, with the negotiation of necessary loans, and eventually the repayments of the same. Operating privately within the company had added benefits of course, offering protection against outside competition through the patent privilege of exclusive access, and legitimacy when establishing new trading relations on the coast. These privileges were enough to instill in Slaney, and his group of traders, the need to maintain the company structure after tailoring it to their need. The altered parameters in the patent of 1631, securing a wider geographical scope and favorable privileges for tackling private traders, along with reduced and altered membership, meant that the GC the emerged in 1631 was tailored for the needs of this group. What had been private trade, soon became company trade.