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

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CHAPTER 2:

FIT FOR PURPOSE: THE GUINEA COMPANY IN THE 1630S AND 1640S.

1. Introduction

In the previous chapter, the first decade of the first chartered joint-stock company trading to Africa was presented. From its launch in 1618 to the end of the 1620s the Guinea Company, despite making several attempts at establishing its trade on a stable footing, was distracted by disputes over private trade, limited liability, and company debt management. Private traders were exploiting the company for their own personal gain, while the remaining membership grew increasingly resentful. After the handling of internal conflicts throughout most of the 1620s the GC altered its operations in the 1630s and 1640s, starting in 1631 when the company entered into new patent negotiation with king Charles I.¹⁵⁸ John Davies was gone by 1626, along with many of the original members, and financial difficulties led company governor William St. John to abandon his post to new governors from the wealthy Digby family after his catastrophic ship purchase. Financial problems and internal struggle continued to follow the company until the end of that decade and beyond. But by the beginning of the 1630s a new patent was secured and, as will be shown, a new management structure based on high levels of trust and strong connections between the company management ensured the company's ability to better serve its now predominantly mercantile leadership. Despite a general lack of surviving company material, this chapter will present a "snap shot" of company activity as it stood in the early 1640s. This reveals that, despite a general perception of the company as struggling and unsuccessful, the extreme fluctuations of the trade give cause for a reconsideration. By the 1640s the company had established a trade connection with the Caribbean; it was attracting the attention of major Atlantic traders; it had acquired land in Barbados; and employed a substantial number of staff on the West African coast.

Out of the original 30 or so members of the 1620s, only eight remained after 1631, forming the core of the company. And as will be seen, this core now organized trade dynamically around their small circle, putting together ventures in

¹⁵⁸TNA: Patent rolls, 7 Chas. I, no.14.

agreement, and keeping risks low. The new patent they were equipped with had wider geographical boundaries than the former, stretching from Cabo Blanco at 20°N, on the border of today's Mauritania and Western Sahara, to the Cape of Good Hope at 34°S. No Englishman could legally trade within those boundaries without company permission, and none other than the company's members could legally bring any African merchandise into England unless otherwise agreed with the company itself. The charter was to last for 31 years, and in return the company pledged to contribute to English coffers through gold import, customs- and excise payments.¹⁵⁹ The intention was also for the company to expand its operations by attaining an English foothold and presence on the Gold Coast in modern day Ghana, a task that was managed by Humphrey Slaney's partner, and fellow company member, Nicholas Crispe. The company's expansion of its activities to include the Gold Coast did not represent the first presence of Englishmen in those parts. Traders realized, already in the reign of Elizabeth, the potential of the stretch of coast reaching from Cape Three Points, on Ghana's west coast towards the River Volta in the east. But, decades had passed since then, and in order to ensure all competitors were made aware of the change, the company asked the king to make a proclamation of its newly gotten privilege: "*forbidding any one to trade to Guinea, Binney, and Angola, except Sir Rich. Young, Sir Ken. Digby, Geo. Kirke, Hump. Slaney, Nich. Crispe, and Wil. Clobery, to whom the King has granted letters patent for the sole privilege of trading to those parts for thirty-one years, having annulled their former letters patent granted by King James.*"¹⁶⁰

The patent process consolidated the power Crispe had built up within the company structure, resulting in a strong, lasting association between him and the trade, among contemporaries, as well as in modern scholarship.¹⁶¹ Not only had Crispe championed changes in the way the company conducted its business, by 1628 he had also invested (according to himself) £50,000, becoming the majority shareholder with over 50% of the company's stock, and for a further £1600 he secured himself the ownership of the properties the company were currently holding on the coast.¹⁶² The European competition on the Gold Coast was fierce in the early 1630s as the Dutch, represented by their West India Company (WIC), was putting pressure of the long-established Portuguese. To Crispe, along with his other companions, the

¹⁵⁹Scott, *The Constitution and Finance of English, Scottish and Irish Joint-Stock Companies to 1720*, 2:15.

¹⁶⁰"America and West Indies: November 1631-1638," 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), 135-136. *British History Online*, accessed November 10, 2017, <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/cal-state-papers/colonial/america-west-indies/vol1/pp135-136>. TNA: Proclamations of Charles I, PRO 31/8/63/4, no. 148

¹⁶¹Porter, "The Crispe Family and the African Trade in the Seventeenth Century."

¹⁶²BL: *To the Right Honourable the Commons of England assembled in Parliament. The humble petition of Sir Nicholas Crisp Knight* (1660). Porter, "European Activity on the Gold Coast, 1620-1667," 118.

escalating conflict formed an ideal backdrop for a settlement attempt by the small English company, while the two rivals were fully occupied with each other. With a new charter in hand the company believed itself ready to tackle the challenges that lay before it: the search for gold and a growing number of interlopers and challengers within the English sphere - as well as European competitors without it.

The core leadership, circling the older and experienced long-distance trader Humphrey Slaney, remained. Slaney's son-in-law, William Cloberry, followed into the new company along with Crispe. Despite the central role played by Sir Kenelm Digby in the conflict over the company's debts at the end of the previous decade, Slaney and Digby maintained collaboration for a short while under the new patent. Slaney had the experience of trade on the coast, while Digby's wealth helped the company's financial footing. Though not long after the patent was granted Digby disappears from company records.

Illustration 8:
"Sir Nicholas Crisp, first baronet"



by Cornelius Johnson, date unknown.

Source: Private collection, via Oxford Dictionary of National Biography.

As for the two remaining patentees, George Kirke and Sir Richard Young, they appear intermittently, Young served as governor for a short while assisted by Crispe as deputy. But beyond that first post, neither appear to have taken on any role comparable to that of Slaney and Crispe. Slaney, along with Cloberry and Crispe, were soon joined by Slaney's apprentice, John Wood, and Crispe's brother Samuel. Together they came to make up the core of the company, controlling it until the 1640s and beyond.¹⁶³

2. The Guinea Company's format of trade

Very few records from the daily running of company business remain, and as was the case for the company's 1620s activities, judicial records remain a key source. Several of these records originated in the later 1640s and 1650s, though they discuss former practices in retrospect. One such example is the records generated by a legal case that arose after the death of Cloberry in 1640.¹⁶⁴ Cloberry was not only a fellow Africa trader, participating in the request of the new patent in 1631, he was, as mentioned, Humphrey Slaney's son-in-law, and the conflict surrounded the management the Cloberry children's inheritance, of which the shares in the GC made up a substantial part. The records reveal that the GC of the 1630s ran as an "*indenture quadripartite*". This meant that ownership of the company was divided into four parts, represented by four merchants, possibly with more investors standing behind each of the four. In the case of the GC, one fourth-part was owned by Nicholas Crispe, another by William Cloberry – now being passed on to his heirs, one-fourth by Humphrey Slaney – who by 1640 had left the company, selling his part to Samuel Crispe, brother of Nicholas.¹⁶⁵ Since the company's launch, also Slaney's former apprentice, John Wood had become a part owner in the venture, making up the fourth part.

The group was tightly linked, both through family and business ties, with several years of experience working together. Each of the four core partners contributed £20 per year towards the company, in addition to further funding for each voyage the company organized. The funding of single ventures was adopted after the large-scale subscription default in 1627/8 of which both Slaney and Crispe, but likely also Cloberry, were personal victims. When the format of trade was agreed upon in 1631 the conflict over this debt was still ongoing, with no likely end in sight, and the need for more control must have appeared essential. In the exchanges

¹⁶³George, *The Visitation of London*, 173..

¹⁶⁴TNA: C 2/ChasI/C52/38, f. 1-4

¹⁶⁵Porter, "The Crispe Family and the African Trade in the Seventeenth Century," 59.

regarding the company's running, the records refer to these four merchants as the four main participants in the trade. Others from outside the group involved themselves in company ventures at the partners invitation. Such persons are only indirectly referred to in company documents, rarely appearing more than once, and little can be learnt about the nature of their involvement. Though not much can be gleaned of the composition or size of any potential investment groups standing behind these main four, the infrequency of names, and the tendency to wind up each venture and settle accounts, suggests involvement by others took place on a voyage-by-voyage basis only.

Despite former issues of default, the *indenture quadripartite* of the GC was one of extensive trust, indicating a conscious choice of who was to participate, as well as a close bond between them. Though we do not know how Crispe and Slaney started doing business together at the beginning of the century, they had collaborated for years, soon accompanied by Cloberry who was now a member of the Slaney family, and John Wood – long term apprentice of Slaney. For at least ten years England's official Africa trade was run by this group, only replacing Slaney with Crispe's brother Samuel towards the end of the decade. Participation and subscription to the GC voyages was not mandatory for any of the parties, though the payment of £20 per year was. A venture was planned when three or more of them agreed to it, though additional funds could be added to company coffers as the individual members saw fit. This opened for outside participation. If one of the members wished but were not financially able to participate at any given time, the other members stepped in on their behalf, making up what was missing. After the venture was complete, any postponed or missing payments were deducted from the profits. Such a format gave room for flexible activity, a considerable benefit in a very volatile trade, where a merchant's fortune could fluctuate over time. It relied on a close partnership where at least some of the members were financially strong at any given moment, and the records suggest Crispe certainly was, though, as will be discussed, also Slaney was dealing in ventures of substantial cost. According to himself, also Crispe invested large amounts of his fortune in the trade, enough to warrant himself and posterity to see him as the founder of the trade, and for the company to be referred to colloquially as "*Nicholas Crispe's Company*".¹⁶⁶ The members were familiar with each other and acquainted with each other's affairs, knowing the causes of a potential default or postponed payment, and were able to assess the likelihood of retrieving any money paid out on another's behalf. If a repetition of the 1620s occurred, where one participant was not able to make good on a subscription he had made, the rest covered the sum, and the defaulter paid it back either from potential profits or through a down-payment plan of an

¹⁶⁶Porter, "European Activity on the Gold Coast, 1620-1667," 123.

additional £20 per year until the missing subscription was covered. Any losses were also shared equally among the participants, even if one or more had relied on another to help them make up the initial subscription. Thus, any venture should, despite the flexibility of the agreement between them, not be entered into lightly as any losses would apply as equally as any potential profits. After a voyage was complete, a true written account was drawn up and agreed upon amongst them. Potential returns were calculated, and any outstanding debts and duties settled, before one fourth of the remaining, this included any gold, redwood, ivory or other sundry commodities, went to each party.

The GC ran its business according to this agreement from the 1630s, and the records indicate no major changes in the decades leading up to the Restoration. The members, however, changed substantially, and by 1640 both Slaney and Cloberry had left the venture. In the early 1640s Nicholas Crispe followed at the behest of the parliamentarians who had by that point challenged the Stuart monarchy and taken charge of Parliament. John Wood remained, possibly still accompanied by Crispe's brother Samuel, though he never features prominently in the surviving documents and his actual activity level is therefore difficult to assess.

The reorganizing of company activity, and the expansion of official company operation into the Dutch- and Portuguese- dominated Gold Coast was planned with the help of two former employees of the Dutch WIC, Arendt de Groot and Jeremias

Illustration 9:
The early English settlements on the Gold Coast underlined



Source: Detail from 1869 map of the Gold Coast in the Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collection.
Originally published in the *Scottish Geographical Magazine*, Volume XII, 1896.

Nuyts.¹⁶⁷ Crispe started planning for an expedition to the Gold Coast by the remodeled company as soon as the patent was granted by Charles I in June 1631. In this expedition, de Groot took on the role of commander and head-factor, assisted by Nuyts. The expedition consisted of two larger ships, where the flagship was fittingly named the *Crispina*, accompanied by two smaller yachts and left England on 1 May 1632. The total cost of the expedition was said to have reached £30,000.¹⁶⁸ An astronomical sum, considering the recent loss of the aforementioned ship *Benediction* to the French at Dieppe, and the on-going conflict over a company debt worth £946.¹⁶⁹ The expedition reached the area around Kommenda, on the Gold Coast, just over three months later. There an agreement was reached with king of Kommenda to set up a trading lodge. While there de Groot received word that also the leader of the Fante, known as the *Braffo* was interested in reaching a deal with the newly arrived English. De Groot sailed to Kormantine and met with the Fante king, where it was agreed that another settlement would be built. The trading station that was settled after that agreement, was to become the company's head quarter on the Gold Coast and known as Fort Kormantin. Just two months after their arrival de Groot could send a yacht back to England with initial good news and the first quantities of gold he had managed to acquire. In less than a year the same yacht was on its return voyage to the coast with more cargo. The geographical scope of the trade was expanded, and so also was the company's operations. To an increasing degree the mobile mode of trading from ships along the coast came to an end, as the gold trade was better facilitated and protected by permanently settled trading factories staffed by company representatives.

The agreement with the Fante king included the right to set up lodges and forts in the coastal areas under his rule and the company soon set up posts at Anamabo¹⁷⁰ and Egya as well. The grant from the king included an agreement of trade and exchange between the Fante and the English. According to de Groot himself this was publicly proclaimed and ratified by the raising, with the help of the Fante, of the English flag over Fort Kormantin.¹⁷¹ The trade out of Kormantin was further supplemented by vessels returning with cargoes of sugar from the islands of São Tomé, as well as smaller yachts trading westward into the Bight of Benin, returning with ivory, pepper and cloth.¹⁷² Another large vessel arrived from England in the summer of 1633, loaded with cargo. The trading lodge at Kommenda was still being expanded, and by 1633 a factor was stationed also there. Despite the initially

¹⁶⁷Daaku, *Trade and Politics on the Gold Coast, 1600-1720*, 15, 61.

¹⁶⁸Porter, "European Activity on the Gold Coast, 1620-1667," 123.

¹⁶⁹Blake, "The Farm of the Guinea Trade in 1631," 100.

¹⁷⁰Also written Anomabu

¹⁷¹Porter, "European Activity on the Gold Coast, 1620-1667," chap. 3, p.129.

¹⁷²Porter, 131.

positive relationship between local powers and the English factors at Kommenda, obstacles and hinderances occurred. Rifts had to be overcome as, later that same year, the company factor was expelled from the area after claims emerged that English vessels had sailed past Kommenda without engaging in trade. The ousting was the result of what was considered dishonest behavior in breach of the agreement.¹⁷³ It underlined to the English their reliance of local collaboration, and a need to play by the rules laid down by local authorities. While the company representatives worked to patch up the relationship at Kommenda the importance of the lodge at Kormantin steadily grew.

Illustration 10:

“Fort Hollandois de Cormantine Nommé Amsterdam, tire de Barbot.”

Fort Kormantine, renamed Fort Amsterdam in 1665 after being taken over by the Dutch Republic during the second Anglo-Dutch War, 1665-1667. The English gained Cape Coast Castle in the same conflict.



¹⁷³Porter, 132.

Source: Engraving, artist unknown. Published by Pierre d' Hondt, 1757.

The trade in gold was expanding, a matter of great importance to the company for obvious reasons, including the expectations by the English king for a return on the exclusive privileges he had granted. Still, the company spent some time completing its post there and two years after de Groot's arrival work was still ongoing. De Groot had hoped for exclusive trading rights off the harbour of Kormantin, of preference for the English over their Dutch rivals, but despite the exclaimed support of the local trading community, there was little doubt that it was beneficial to the Fante to allow the Dutch to remain for intra-European competition and potential underselling.¹⁷⁴

The next company post to be developed was Wiampa¹⁷⁵, which per an answer from the company dated 25 May 1650, was commenced 17 years previous, in 1633/4, after a plot of land was purchased from the ruler of Agona. According to the same petition the son of the ruler learnt English, and assumed the role of a local liaison for the help of the company, an important step forward in the company's process of cementing and strengthening their local ties in the area.¹⁷⁶ In 1634, as the lodges at Wiampa and Kormantin were being completed, and sugar, cloth, pepper and ivory was coming from the Bight of Benin and the Guinea gulf, the *Crispina* and Arendt de Groot left the Guinea coast for England.¹⁷⁷ In London all attempts at retrieving the *Benediction* and her cargo from the French admiralty had failed, but the company's establishment on the Gold Coast had been an relative success. A new vessel with cargo from England was expected to arrive on the coast presently, and good relations, except for the initial rifts with the rulers of Kommenda, had been established with the African states and merchants the company had been in contact with.

But despite this overall promising situation problems were occurring, first in the form of overstretched funds and Dutch competition, later through English political turmoil and competing English traders. The Dutch activity was at this point in time, according to the work of Robert Porter, double that of the English – with the Dutch having at least twelve trading vessels in operation, while the English may have had as many as five.¹⁷⁸ It did not take long before their African partners saw the English struggling to make good on their promises of goods, trade and payments. As a result, many African merchants decided to turn towards the Dutch again. It must be considered that for some of the African rulers and merchants the positive side

¹⁷⁴Porter, 129,133.

¹⁷⁵Also referred to as Wiamba, Biemba and Winneba.

¹⁷⁶"America and West Indies: May 1650," 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), 339-340. *British History Online*, accessed December 2, 2017, <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/cal-state-papers/colonial/america-west-indies/vol1/pp339-340>.

¹⁷⁷Porter, "European Activity on the Gold Coast, 1620-1667," 135.

¹⁷⁸Porter, 137.

effect of increased competition and offers of better trading conditions from the Dutch was the main motive when they accepted the small English newcomer within their realms. Between the Dutch and the English, trade competition often took the shape of underselling, where one party would drop the prices on left-over commodities often at the moment a ship departed the coast for Europe. From the journal of Pieter van den Broecke we learn of how he joined his cargo with a fellow Dutchman he met when visiting the coast at the beginning of the seventeenth century: “*we entered into a contract (...) and combined together our tradegoods and cargoes so as to not spoil the market*”.¹⁷⁹ Van den Broecke’s agreement even saw his short-term partner, who had already spent some time on the coast at the time of de Broecke’s arrival, departing the coast with their earnings, leaving van den Broecke to manage the sale of the remaining shared goods. How prevalent such practices were for English traders in the time before the patent is not known, but it complicates the already intricate collaborations that accompanied long-distance trade, as even after a vessel had left Europe its ownership could change. Underselling was especially prevalent as a strategy in the first decade of English establishment on the Gold Coast, until the two companies entered a mutually beneficial spoken agreement of similar price levels in an attempt to avoid such practices, damaging as they were to both sides.¹⁸⁰ At this early stage, however, no such agreement had been reached, and the WIC was in a far better position to handle underselling and price drops on the coast than its English equivalent. They had more trading stations – many of which were in more fruitful areas of gold trade, a stronger military presence, and more ships with goods in circulation. Their mobility in trade allowed profits from one region to make up for potential losses from underselling elsewhere. The English were not yet able to attempt anything similar. Such competition was taking place around Kormantin in the decades that followed the English settlement there, where both violence and attempts at market hegemony was instigated not only by English and Dutch traders, but later also by Swedes, Danes and Brandenburgians.¹⁸¹

3. John Wood and the Guinea Company of the 1640s

John Wood, starting out as an apprentice to Humphrey Slaney in the 1620s became a constant in the Anglo-Africa trade of the mid-century. Though very little is known about him personally, enough material exists to conclude that he was among the most experienced Africa traders of his day, who ferried the company through some

¹⁷⁹Broecke and La Fleur, *Pieter van Den Broecke’s Journal of Voyages*, 29.

¹⁸⁰Porter, “European Activity on the Gold Coast, 1620-1667,” 420, 423.

¹⁸¹Daaku, *Trade and Politics on the Gold Coast, 1600-1720*, 15.

of its biggest challenges and innovations. During his role as governor and treasurer of the company, a number of strong competitors, interlopers in the growing trade on the coast, entered the company as members. He also represented the company in an in-depth parliamentary investigation which followed the departure of primus motor Nicholas Crispe, while maintaining a string of company ventures of - typical of the trade, fluctuating success.

In the years that followed de Groot's departure from the Gold Coast, the company was represented by Wood as head factor of Kormantine, and the company benefitted from Wood's in-depth experience from the coast and its trade in the decades to come. Few sources from the life of the Englishmen on the coast exists for this period, but trade in gold, combined with a relatively prosperous trade in São Tomé sugar and Benin merchandize, occasional slave trading, and the reliably lucrative redwood and ivory trades, allowed the company to keep up the operations de Groot had started. Jeremias Nyuts was still operative, charged with managing the yachts going to the Bight of Benin.¹⁸² The fruits of their activity were harvested in autumn of 1636, five years after their arrival on the Gold Coast, when a ship arriving from the coast was valued at £30,000¹⁸³. After reaching the coast, Wood entered into a new, favorable trade deal with the Fante authorities that resulted in a more permanent construction being raised at Kormantin in 1638. This was no small feat, as the Fante were unimpressed with their part in the outcome of the English activity in their ports. De Groot had made promises of high numbers of goods and vessels in return for near sole access to the Fante market.¹⁸⁴ The results were not quite as overwhelming as the Fante had hoped.

John Wood remained on the coast until Arendt de Groot's return in 1639, and witnessed the Dutch take-over of Elmina, the long-standing Portuguese head-quarter on the coast. This was the beginning of increased tension between the Dutch and the English as the Portuguese were gradually expelled from the coast. In or around 1638 Humphrey Slaney exited the company, and was replaced by Samuel Crispe, though at the death of William Cloberry he briefly returned to manage Cloberry's share on behalf of his grandchildren. The norm, according to the court documents appears to have been for Cloberry's wife, Slaney's daughter, to manage her late husband's share, but she is dismissed as "*non compos mentis*", not of sound mind, and her father stepped in instead. These matters may have been why in 1639 it was decided that Arendt de Groot should return to the coast, and John Wood to return and assist with

¹⁸²Porter, "European Activity on the Gold Coast, 1620-1667," 131.

¹⁸³"Charles I - volume 336: November 18-30, 1636," in *Calendar of State Papers Domestic: Charles I, 1636-7*, ed. John Bruce (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1867), 199-217. *British History Online*, accessed November 7, 2017, <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/cal-state-papers/domestic/chas1/1636-7/pp199-217>.

¹⁸⁴Porter, "European Activity on the Gold Coast, 1620-1667," 132-33.

company business in London. Not only was there a need to decide what to do with Cloberry's share, but Nicholas Crispe was beginning to become preoccupied with difficulties between himself and the increasingly powerful Parliament.¹⁸⁵ Increased competition was also appearing in 1638-39, as the company had to intervene in the departure of two known interloping vessels in the last years of the decade.¹⁸⁶

To answer how the company fared in the 1640s and 1650s is not easy, as this period was exceedingly tumultuous both at home and abroad. From the early 1640s the company's men on the coast was in near constant struggle with the Dutch and the Scandinavians for their trading stations along the coast, which in the early 1650s escalated further with the outbreak of the 1st Anglo-Dutch War (1652-1654). This war proved far less damaging for the GC compared to that which followed it, as the second Anglo-Dutch war (1665-1667) made survival near impossible for the GC's successor, the Royal Adventurers into Africa (RA).¹⁸⁷ Throughout the 1640s and 50s African rulers changed European favorites frequently, leaving the Englishmen, Scandinavians and Dutchmen on the coast in perpetual insecurity. In this environment the English were attempting to settle and improve their positions at their main trading post, Fort Kormantine, but progress was exceedingly slow. This lack of progress was again making the African leaders increasingly impatient.¹⁸⁸

From the records that remain it becomes clear just how difficult the early 1640s proved to be, not just for the organization but for certain individual members as well. From discussions of the company's situation in 1642-1644 it appears Nicholas Crispe owed, in the eyes of the Commonwealth, a significant amount for money. It was claimed that in his position as farmer of the customs, to which he was appointed by the king in 1639, he had siphoned away £16,000 owed to the state. Now that the conflict between the king and his Parliament was turning in the latter's favour, Parliament wanted the money returned. It was decided that the sum should come out of the Crispe estate, which was sequestered by Parliament in a process completed in 1644.¹⁸⁹ Crispe's estate included, as already seen, a substantial part of the company, its settlements, and its goods. Already in 1642, the first claim, for £5000, was made by

¹⁸⁵British Library, Thomason / 669.f.14[17]: *To the Right Honourable the Commons assembled in Parliament. The humble petition of Sir Paul Pyndar, Sir John Jacob, Sir Job Harby, Sir Thomas Dawes, Executor to Sir Abraham Dawes, late deceased, Sir Nicholas Crispe, Sir John Nulls, and Sir John.* April 12.1649. British Library - 669.f.26.[40.]: *To the Right Honourable the Commons of England assembled in Parliament. The humble petition of Sir Nicholas Crisp Knight.* 1660. Porter, "The Crispe Family and the African Trade in the Seventeenth Century."

¹⁸⁶Porter, 66.

¹⁸⁷Zook, *The Company of Royal Adventurers Trading into Africa*, 1919.

¹⁸⁸Blake, "The Farm of the Guinea Trade in 1631"; Hilary Jenkinson, "The Records of the English African Companies," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 6 (1912): 185-220; Porter, "The Crispe Family and the African Trade in the Seventeenth Century."

¹⁸⁹TNA: SP 16/540

the Navy.¹⁹⁰ Crispe himself was at that point serving on the king's side in the growing conflict, but it had come to the attention of the House of Commons that Crispe had a substantial part of his estate tied up in the GC. The House had been informed that Crispe owned 50% of the venture, suggesting he may have eventually taken over the share left by Cloberry, and maintained much of his goods on the coast of Guinea. Conveniently the company ship the *Star* had recently returned from Guinea carrying gold to the value of £10,000, and it was suggested that one half of that gold should be paid out of Crispe's share immediately, leaving it to the company to retrieve their money through the sale of Crispe's goods still stored on the coast. John Wood, on behalf of the company, tried to protest the decision. He claimed the goods belonged not only to Crispe, but to the joint-stock and to other members of the company as well. Upon hearing this claim, the House decided that if that was the case, John Wood and his partners should still advance £5000 for the goods, but they should then prepare the company's accounts and hand them over for examination by the Treasury, the Customs Committee, and the Navy. It would be left to the committee to decide whether the goods did indeed belong to Crispe, or other members - 'partners' as they are simply and anonymously referred to in the documents. If sufficient evidence was given for alternative ownership, the company was to be reimbursed the sum with an interest of 8% from the Custom of London. Though the demand from the Commonwealth administration undoubtedly caused stress for the company and John Wood personally, who appeared in capacity of governor, the claim commenced a documented discussion on the company's situation. Accounts, appraisals, stock takes, and wage lists had to be handed over to a Committee of Accounts and was thus spared in an addendum of state papers connected to the Interregnum regime. In these scattered documents from the 1640s the contours of the company's situation emerge in more detail.¹⁹¹

4. The Guinea company: a 1640s snapshot

John Wood did as he was asked by the Commons and extended £5000 to the Commonwealth, but the matter of reimbursement was going to be a drawn-out battle. Wood was forced to petition, in the spring of 1644, for the company to get the sum reimbursed. According to that petition, several orders had been sent out from the House of Commons and the Treasury to pay the company, but the money was not forthcoming. Wood complained that because he was forced into "*the disbursement*

¹⁹⁰TNA: SP 16/540, no.365

¹⁹¹All the following records can be found in SP 16/540, no. 365-400. I have rounded sums up to nearest pound for clarity.

of the said sum (it) altogether disfurnished [him] of money to cleere away the debt of the said company's joint-stock for which he had with much importunity entreated the several creditors forebearance."¹⁹² This was the first of two petitions by John Wood, and though the other is undated, it shows that the situation was becoming increasingly difficult for the company and for Wood personally. In his second petition the £5000, to which £1912 paid to the Navy was added, had still not been returned. Wood disclosed that he had indebted himself, for the benefit of the company, by borrowing £8000 personally before the return of the *Star*. He was of course under the assumption that he would be able to pay back the loan with the £10,000 in gold coming from the coast. Therefore, the sudden demand for the £5000 had put him in debt personally, and he was now fearing for his reputation. The company had continued their practice from the 1620s of relying on the personal credit of certain company members when borrowing funds. And much like this had caused problems for Governor St. John in 1625, and for Crispe and Slaney with the default in 1627/8, it was now becoming problematic for Wood. Paradoxically Wood referred in his petition to the company's limited liability, or more precisely, its entity-shielding.¹⁹³ Without using such a term, he argued that Crispe's personal financial responsibilities should not be spilling over into company affairs. Before seizing any assets Crispe may hold, the debts of the company should first be cleared away, so as to not damage its reputation with its creditors. Wood pointed to the agreement he had made together with Crispe and his fellow partners, not to engage in personal trade without the consent of the others and seeing as such consent was difficult to retrieve now with Crispe gone, he was hindered from selling goods on the Guinea coast to make up for the debt he now personally owed his creditors. Bound by the agreement, Wood could not adventure to Guinea in his own capacity to make up his losses. The company's practices regarding private trade under the patent never appear clearly in this period, and it is possible Wood overestimated his strong stand against private trade—though the difficulty of the situation was likely no exaggeration. In conclusion to his petition, Wood explained that this was a matter of some urgency, not only to himself but to England. Only when he was paid and a separation of Crispe's stock from the rest had been completed, could the company continue to "*prosecute the said trade which will bring great benefit of this kingdome, otherwise the whole trade is like to fall into the hands of the Dutch*".¹⁹⁴

A report into the company accounts, prepared by the Treasury's Committee of Examination, was completed in early May 1644, and it confirmed that Crispe was not hiding a fortune in the coffers of the company. Upon reviewing the accounts,

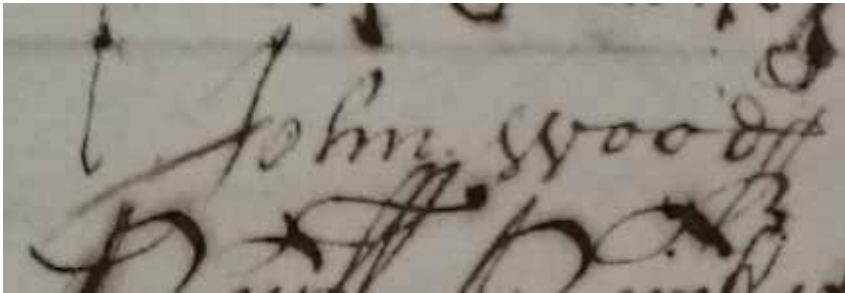
¹⁹²TNA: SP 16/540, no. 366

¹⁹³Dari-Mattiacci et al., "The Emergence of the Corporate Form," 199.

¹⁹⁴TNA: SP 16/540, no. 374

given to be true under oath from Wood himself along with GC treasurer, John Ballow, the committee members “*doe find that the said Joynt-Stock is indebted unto severall persons to the sume of tenn thousand four hundred eighty and one pounds fifteen shilling and four pence(...). And in good debts owing by sundry persons four hundred and five pounds and fifteen shilling and four pence, and from the Committee of the Navy five thousand pounds (...)*”.¹⁹⁵ Lastly, the short report declared that the ownership of the premises connected to the company, understood to mainly refer to the forts on the Guinea coast, was as follows: one half belonged to Nicholas Crispe, while the remaining half was split equally between John Wood and Nicholas’ brother, Samuel Crispe. The company was indeed in the red by over £10,000. Yet, this is not as bad as one would perhaps assume – considering the negative portrayal the company has so often received. The trade of the 1640s was still one of great fluxes, and a successful voyage could bring in sums many times that of the debt, as the 1638 return of the company’s ship the *Star* suggests.

Illustration 11:
Signature of John Wood



Source: detail from TNA CO 1/11, p.62

The preliminary conclusions in the report were deemed not to be detailed enough, and before the committees would consider repaying the company it was decided that the accounts needed further examination. A more thorough “*referreed appraisal*” was handed in by the middle of June 1644. The Appraisal Committee had gone through all stock connected to the company, spanning from ships and crews, to factories and warehouses.¹⁹⁶ The company had five ships in circulation, and two

¹⁹⁵TNA: SP 16/540, no. 368, 369. John Ballow had been an old associate of William Cloberry, who likely brought him in to contact with the company – which granted also him the position of company factor in Barbados, see Brenner, *Merchants and Revolution*, 165, fn.181.

¹⁹⁶TNA: SP 16/540, no.370

of them, the *Star* and the *James*, were currently away from England. The *Star* was “employed in the service of Rowland Wilson, jr. and sr”, and signifies the entry of two new large-scale overseas traders among the company members. Rowland Wilson senior (? -1654) and junior (1613-1650) involved themselves in the company trade in the 1640s and remained active in company management through the 1650s, bringing in large gold cargos - but also experiencing some painful losses. Despite appearing to have had little to do with the coast of Guinea before appearing in the company records, their previous connection to the Guinea Company was not non-existent, a familial link between the Wilsons and the Crispes existed as Rowland Wilson senior’s daughter Mary had married another of Nicholas and Samuel’s brothers, Tobias.¹⁹⁷ Ships operating in the service of specific persons may suggest a practice of accepting private trade, despite Wood’s previous claims, but it is hard to conclude upon the matter without knowing the full arrangement. There are several examples of John Wood having voyages organized in “his service” at this time, but such a definition did not necessarily exclude them being organized on behalf of the company.¹⁹⁸

Returning to the ongoing appraisal, out of the company’s five ships, only the *Star* and the *James* got good merits. Upon their return from their voyages the *James* was appraised to be worth £943 and the *Star* £760.¹⁹⁹ The remaining three ships; the *Goodhope*, the *Flowerdeluz* and the *Reformation*, were all deemed old and in need of repair. Their collective value was set at £2200, and the total value of the company’s ships thus reached £3900.²⁰⁰ The report does not include potential freighting of other ships however. It is possible that several of the company members freighted out their own ships for the company’s service. Slaney was certainly a shipowner, realizing the benefit of combining long-distance trade with ship ownership at an early stage.²⁰¹ The content of the company’s warehouses was also valued, and included 177 tons of redwood (the *James* returned with 150 tons) valued at £2720, estimated to be bought at £16 per ton on the coast, and sold at £30 in London, a markup of nearly 90%.²⁰² 3¾ ounces of gold worth £11 (estimated to be sold at £3 per ounce) was also included. The remainder of the stock consisted of different kinds of wax, copper, and iron (“very rusty”). This put the total worth of the company’s shipping and goods at £6818.²⁰³ In addition, the appraisers noted sums related to the company

¹⁹⁷Porter, “The Crispe Family and the African Trade in the Seventeenth Century,” 68.

¹⁹⁸For some examples see HCA 24/109, no 342, 190, 195, 283, 201.

¹⁹⁹TNA: SP 16/540, no.382, 383

²⁰⁰For a more detailed break-down of the appraisal of the *Goodhope*, see TNA: SP 16/540, no.371, *Reformation*: no. 372, *Flowerdeluz*: no.373.

²⁰¹Kenneth R. Andrews, *Ships, Money and Politics: Seafaring and Naval Enterprise in the Reign of Charles I* (Cambridge University Press, 1991).

²⁰²TNA: SP 16/540, no. 397

²⁰³Because the *James* and the *Star* only returned in the fall of 1644, their evaluations were done slightly later. The complete sum does therefore not appear in the documents and have been calculated by me.

business which they refrained from including in the final calculations. Included in those sums were freight charges for previous voyages in the *Goodhope*, the *James*, and the *Reformation* totaling near £2700, and unsold goods kept at the company factory at Sierra Leone for which the company hoped to fetch £4000. In addition to coral and ivory on the Gold Coast came three trumpets “*battered and left*” by the current chief factor on the Gold Coast, Nicholas Davis, which could potential fetch 3 shillings for their brass.²⁰⁴

The part of the appraisal pertaining to wages concluded that the company owed their various employees overseas, sailors and factors, £1164 in outstanding wages.²⁰⁵ The temporal terms of employment differ, but some of the men had served the company continuously from the late 1630s until the accounts were reviewed in the summer of 1644. It is worth noting that Robert Porter claimed the English activity had reached such low levels by the middle of the 1640s that the company came close to being eradicated from the coast during the years 1643-1644. But those claims fit poorly with these accounts, showing shipping activity, and several employees working for the company both on the Gold Coast and further north in the Senegambia region during the period in question.²⁰⁶

Most of the wages owed, £1009, was to employees connected to ‘*Sirra Leon & Cerbero*’. The remaining £155 were owed to employees on the Gold Coast. This is perhaps surprising, as it would suggest that the company’s operation was far more extensive, at least in 1644, in the Sierra Leone/Sherboro region. Indeed, the company employed twenty people in their trading centers in Sierra Leone and the Sherboro River, as opposed to six on the Gold Coast. The average wage at the Gold Coast was slightly higher than in the trading centers to the north, differing from an average of £30,5 per month on the Gold Coast to £25,45 per month in Sierra Leone and Sherboro. The post of chief factor, based on the Gold Coast at Fort Kormantine, fetched the highest salary: £50 per month, and was held by Nicholas Davies. The equivalent position further north, held by James Prosore(?), fetched £40 per month. The factories employed among them three men categorized as ‘black’: Thomas Wood and Anthony in Sierra Leone/Sherboro, who were paid £15 per month each; and James Kingson, paid £20 per month for his work for the company on the Gold Coast.²⁰⁷ The more detailed investigation turned up further debts owed by the company, and several of them proved to be owed to the personal accounts of former company employees.²⁰⁸ As an example, Arendt de Groot, who returned for a brief

²⁰⁴TNA: SP 16/540, no. 397

²⁰⁵TNA: SP 16/540, no. 377

²⁰⁶Robert Porter, “English Chief Factors on the Gold Coast, 1632-1753,” *African Historical Studies* 1, no. 2 (1968): 203–4; Porter, “European Activity on the Gold Coast, 1620-1667,” 230–31. 1

²⁰⁷TNA: SP 16/540, no. 377, 380

²⁰⁸TNA: SP 16/540, no. 380

stint as factor on the coast after Wood's departure, was owed £73 pounds awarded him by "*the Arbitrators*", suggesting his employment for the company may have ended in financial conflict, though the document reveals no details on the matter.

The GC also had sundry debts owed by and to them from employees and others in the Atlantic, including in Virginia and Barbados, confirming company ventures in the Americas already at this early stage.²⁰⁹ It becomes clear from a breakdown of these overseas debts that the company held 225 acres of land at Barbados, not an insignificant amount, and received debt payments in both tobacco and cotton from a number of Barbadian and Virginian planters. According to the appraisal committee the total debt owed the company in the Atlantic stood at £117, as payment of 56232*lb* of cotton and tobacco. However, their calculation deserved investigation as it appears exceedingly low, considering recent research into prices of colonial products from the period. Frustratingly no distinction has been made between the amounts owed in cotton and those in tobacco for the debts in Barbados, rendering a true valuation of the debts troublesome. The general tendency for using cotton for colonial transactions also fluctuates strongly in the years covered in the committee's appraisal. From 1642 cotton went from being used in 72% of Barbados transactions to only 26% in 1644. Tobacco rose correspondingly from 28% to 43%.²¹⁰ Also the company plantation was geared towards cotton production, with an expected annual yield of ca.50,000*lb*, amounting to just over £104 according to the appraisal committee's calculations.²¹¹ The outstanding debts owed to the company from planters in Barbados stood at 42,000*lb* (tobacco and/or cotton) and from this 2208*lb* had to be deducted for payment to George Reid, the company's representative at Barbados. The company owned or was owed over 89,500*lb* in "*the cost and charges of the Plantation & debt at Barbados*". From Virginia the company was owed 16,619*lb* in tobacco *only*, which gives us a chance to calculate the amounts into pound sterling, thus reconsidering the numbers produced by the appraisal committee. By making use of the calculations of Russel Menard for farm-gate prices of Chesapeake tobacco, published in his book *Sweet Negotiations*, we can estimate the value of tobacco in the year 1642²¹² to be 57*lb* pr. £1. Meaning the company's debt in Virginia amounted to £291.5.²¹³ Interestingly, the appraisal committee, by contrast valued the same far

²⁰⁹TNA: SP 16/540, no. 389, 394

²¹⁰Russell R. Menard, *Sweet Negotiations: Sugar, Slavery, and Plantation Agriculture in Early Barbados* (University of Virginia Press, 2006), 18, table 1.

²¹¹TNA: SP 16/540, no. 394

²¹²The appraisal, though conducted in 1644, was looking at the last few years of company activity.

²¹³Menard, *Sweet Negotiations: Sugar, Slavery, and Plantation Agriculture in Early Barbados*. In his table 2, p.20 Menard gives estimates for the price in pence per pound of tobacco, 1640: 2,50*d.*, 1641: 2,00*s.*, 1642: 4,20*s.*, 1643: 1,80*s.*, 1644: 2,30*s.* I have relied on the prices for 1642, as the appraisal looks back in time. I add here for information that £1 consists of 20 shillings, and one shilling 12 pence.

My calculation has then been as follows:

lower - only about £35. This of a total debt of only £177. Whether this means that vastly different prices were in operation in the same year, or whether there were unknown factors impacting the low estimate of the committee, can be speculation only.

The eventual outcome of the 1644 investigations into the company's account the House of Commons concluded, in the late summer of 1644, that it owed £3040 to John Wood and company, once the money belonging to Crispe, £2125, had been deducted.²¹⁴ Whether Wood received his money at the end of the investigation is not known, but his continued activity in the company suggests his reputation survived.

5. Early English slave trade –formal and informal.

The account gives us little information on the interaction with the debtors beyond the thirteen names and the amounts owed, but one must assume that these debts accumulated from sales on credit to planters.²¹⁵ The highest amount was owed by the governor of Barbados, Phillip Bell: 19,850*lb*, under who's leadership Barbados made the change from indentured to slave labour.²¹⁶ Whether these debts arose from the sale of African slaves is difficult to know with certainty as it is not clear what these debts stemmed from, nor in what manner they were paid and repaid. However, unless the company operated purely as a colonial creditor - of which there is no indication, or was selling cotton to other planters, it is hard to imagine any other African commodities being vented at noteworthy levels in the developing colony. Menard's work further suggests this, as he makes references to one plantation owner that also appears as a debtor in the records of the GC, Jonathan Hawtayne. He owed the company 1343*lb* of tobacco, and owned, according Menard, 100 acres of land worked by eight slaves in 1643.²¹⁷ The amounts owed by different planters to the company, regardless of the nature of the loans, suggests that the company's role and position in overseas trade was changing. It now included extending colonial credit.

1642: 1*lb* tobacco valued at 4,20 pence (*d.*) $\times 2,85 = 11,97d. \approx 12d. = 1s.$ 2,85*lb* of tobacco worth 1 shilling.

2,85*lb* tobacco = 1 s. $\times 20 = 57lb = £1.$ 57*lb* of tobacco worth £1

16,619*lb* owed in Virginia /57 = £291,5 owed in Virginia. Calculating with the prices of 1643: £127, and for 1644: £160.

²¹⁴TNA: SP 16/540, no. 397

²¹⁵See Appendix 2 for a list of the company's colonial debtors in 1643-1644

²¹⁶Bell was governor of Barbados from 1640-1650, before that he had been governor of Providence Island, the company of earlier GC member Richard Rich, the Earl of Warwick. Slaves had been shipped to Providence Island as early as 1619.

²¹⁷John J. McCusker and Kenneth Morgan, *The Early Modern Atlantic Economy* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), Ch. 9, 157.

Simultaneously it must be mentioned, that the reference to Africans, either as slaves or as employees, are limited in the account documents, though some smaller indications of slave trade do appear. In a summary from the appraisal committee of matters in need of clarification we find a reference to “*what Goods & Debts and negroes att Cormantyne at the tyme of this account*”. This included twenty-one slaves kept at Sierra Leone in 1642, valued at £40 each.²¹⁸ Considering the committee’s appraisal above, this makes their low estimate even more remarkable, as the combined debt owed from Virginia, divided between nine different debtors, would, according to their calculations, not be enough to cover the cost of one African laborer. Lastly, we find in the inventory from the warehouse at Sierra Leone, among “*rotten carpets*” and copper rings, an entry for £2 worth of “*old Iron Shackells*”. These scattered entries confirm previous knowledge of the company’s dealing in slaves. The 1640s saw the beginning of a regular trade in enslaved African laborers to the English territories in the Caribbean, and the company increasingly took part. Though the trade was only brought under patent in 1663, Barbados went from reportedly only having a few hundred Africans among its inhabitants in 1640 to 13,000 by 1650. By 1660 the numbers had reached 27,000.²¹⁹ The company’s continuous involvement in the slave trade is evident from additional court records, dated in 1649, though the events discussed took place a few years previous. These records suggest that the company was willing put a fair amount of money towards further establishing itself in land ownership and plantation production. Though the outcome was, as is with most ventures appearing in the court records, unsuccessful.

John Wood had organized a venture along with Rowland Wilson, sr. and jr. - and for the first time, the large-scale overseas trader Maurice Thomson accompanied them. Thomson (1601-1676) had already operated as an interloper in company territory since the 1620s, focusing mainly on slave trade, and the change in company activity may have one of the motivations for now joining the company. Thomson’s involvement in the Guinea Company came to impact it greatly, as will be seen in later chapters.²²⁰ Together with “*other members of that company*” the three men freighted the *Jonathan* for a voyage via Guinea to “*St. Cruz*”, in order to bring over 41 hired English servants. “*St. Cruz*” is in this instance understood to be St. Croix, which at the time was held, though only temporarily, by England. It would later form a key part of the Caribbean colonies controlled by Denmark-Norway. The plan was for the voyage to include slave trading as well, and from the records a clear distinction is drawn between the two groups. This indicates that, not only was the

²¹⁸TNA: SP 16/540, no. 399

²¹⁹John J. McCusker and Russell R. Menard, *The Economy of British America, 1607-1789* (University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 151.

²²⁰TNA: HCA 24/111, no. 27

company involved in developing plantations on a relatively large scale, holding land both in Barbados and St. Croix, but they, in keeping with the general norm at the time, initially made use of indentured European servants, in combination with slave labour. The voyage represents an example of how the practice of indentured servitude overlapped with an increasing reliance on slave labor. The voyage got off to a bad start when the captain, Robert Harding, deviated from the company's instruction by allowing extra passengers to accompany the ship. This, in combination with what the company saw as avoidable delays, resulted in the death of 25-30 of the hired servants, likely from lack of sufficient victuals. Though some of these deaths likely also stemmed from disease, the records suggest a perception of negligence on behalf of the captain. The captain had apparently needlessly missed his chance to cross the Atlantic, delaying his departure to help other English ships belonging to interlopers and bartering away valuable victuals on his private account, in return for ivory. The *Jonathan* picked up 180 slaves at Guinea, but Harding was accused of selling several of them privately instead of handing them over the company factor Francis Soame, at Barbados. Francis Soame was John Wood's nephew and served the company in Barbados for much of the 1640s and early 1650s. The total losses to the company was allegedly £5000, to which was added any land or goods they may have held at St. Croix when the English were expelled from the island by the Spanish in 1650.

By 1638, as work was commencing in earnest on the company trading fort at Kormantin, increasing reports of interlopers trading in African commodities, and to an increasing degree in slaves, were being recorded. Among the private traders who shaped the English interloper trade on the coast in this developing phase were two soon-to-be company directors, Maurice Thomson and Samuel Vassall (1586-1667).

The GC monopoly legally restricted this private activity, but it was still growing as the plantation production in the Americas expanded. The company members spent much energy keeping track of, and stopping, private ventures. The work of John C. Appleby on private slave trade in this period has, in addition to giving us valuable insight, shown how word travelled quickly in the London mercantile community regarding upcoming ventures.²²¹ This resulted in a private trade shrouded in secrecy, and problematizes the work of trying to assess its size. Still, several English slave traders had already operated for a substantial amount of time by the 1640s and 50s, and there is no reason to believe they had not built up the same amount of knowledge and experience in the trade as the Dutch, who only by the 1650s had fully established their slave trading hub at Curacao. Piet Emmer and Ernst van den Boogaart went further still, commenting that the contract that was agreed upon between the English company of Royal Adventurers into Africa, the GC's successor launched in 1660,

²²¹ John C. Appleby, "'A Business of Much Difficulty': A London Slaving Venture 1651-1654," *The Mariner's Mirror* 81, no. 1 (February 1995): 3-14.

and the Genoese firm of Grillo and Lomellino - holders of the Spanish slave trading contract (the Asiento) - would never have been agreed to if the English did not have some form of established experience in the slave trade already.²²² The Asiento trade will be returned to in later chapters.

Illustration 12:

A topographical Description and Admeasurement of the Yland of Barbados in the West Indyaes



By Richard Ligon, 1657,
First published in "A True and Exact History of the Island of Barbados" written by Ligon and published
by Humphrey Moseley in 1657. Held at the British Library, London, UK

From the granting of the first GC patent in 1618, the number of traders realizing the potential of West African slave trade increased throughout the 1620s

²²²Pieter Emmer and Ernst van den Boogaart, "The Dutch Participation in the Atlantic Slave Trade," in *The Uncommon Market: Essays in the Economic History of the Atlantic Slave Trade*, ed. Henry A. Gemery and Jan S. Hogendorn (Academic Press, 1979), 374–75.

and 1630s, leading to a growing number of interlopers setting out for the coast.²²³ Robert Brenner lists, in his work, at least five private syndicates setting out for the coast in the 1630s and 1650s.²²⁴ Of the names appearing behind the ventures can be find several soon-to-be GC members. Some of the private ventures were stopped by the admiralty and the privy council upon the request of the company before even commencing, several others managed to complete their journeys. One example, from the work of Appleby, follows the preparations and voyage of a private slave trading partnership in the years 1651-1654, and shows how despite the company hearing of the illegal venture, and the matter being addressed by the high court of admiralty, the vessel was still allowed to set out for the coast of Africa. Appleby points to a pervious incident, from 1638, where the GC went as far as to pay £500 to have a vessel stopped.²²⁵ The company's patent, despite being an obstacle for the private traders, was evidently not unsurmountable even though we do not know the reasoning behind the courts verdict. The case also shows how the organizer of the venture attempted to keep it under the radar of the company, though this failed when a disagreement with the captain of the freighted ship used the company's patent as an excuse to cancel his agreement with the private traders, forcing the matter in front of the courts and to the company's attention.

As, alluded to above, among the recorded cases of interloping in the period, merchants who were soon to join the company feature prominently. Already in 1626 came the first reports of Maurice Thomson breaking into the company monopoly for the first time.²²⁶ There would be several others. Thomson's first voyage, which was planned with partner and planter Thomas Combes, consisted of three vessels that sailed to the African coast in search of slaves. As a result, 60 slaves were taken across the Atlantic and sold at St. Kitts. The buyer was large-scale planter and colonial settler Thomas Warner, who was active in establishing tobacco production. The return cargo from St. Kitts consisted of 20,000 pounds of tobacco. This was one of the earliest examples of English Atlantic "triangle" trade. The year after, Thomson

²²³Emmer and van den Boogaart, 361.

²²⁴Brenner, *Merchants and Revolution*, 163–66. Brenner actually lists six syndicates but counts among them the company. In addition to the GC he lists the following:

- Samuel Vassall carried out at least one voyage to Guinea coast between 1642-1645.
- Michael Cawton and syndicate, 1642-1645
- William Pennoyer and Richard Hill, series of voyages, 1645-1647
- William Pennoyer and syndicate including brother Samuel, apprentices Michael Davidson and John Terringham, Robert Thomson, Elias Roberts (former's brother-in-law), William Fletcher.
- Samuell Vassall and syndicate including Peter Andrews (brother-in-law), Jeremy Blackman, Richard Cranley.

²²⁵Appleby, "A Business of Much Difficulty," 5.

²²⁶J. E. Farnell, "The Navigation Act of 1651, the First Dutch War, and the London Merchant Community," *The Economic History Review* 16, no. 3 (1964): 439–54; Paul G. E. Clemens, "The World of Maurice Thomson," *Reviews in American History* 21, no. 4 (1993): 575–83; Brenner, *Merchants and Revolution*.

joined in the St. Kitts plantation activity, developing land for tobacco production together with Combes. In the end the two partners fell out, but not before shipping back tobacco worth £40,000 by 1634²²⁷ Thomson's interloping and privateering continued however, through a partnership between himself and William Pennoyer, a fellow interloper and privateer especially active in the Levant. Pennoyer was also to move from interloping in the GC's charter area to joining the company.²²⁸ By 1631 Thomson's interloping was getting him into serious trouble, leading to him spending time in London's Marshalsea prison for his involvement in interloping within the charter area of the Company of Adventurers to Canada.²²⁹ In 1637 Thomson was involved with another ship intending to conduct a voyage to Guinea with the hopes of participating in the early English slave trade. His partner in the voyage was a John Crispe, a likely relation of the GC director. The *Talbot* intended to 'trade "nigers," and carry them to foreign parts' but the directors of the company found out and requested the Privy Council to have the involved parties arrested.²³⁰ Then, in May 1638, just as Wood was cementing the trading relations with the Fante at Kormantin, Thomson, now out of prison, planned another interloping journey to the coast of Guinea. This time he partnered up with GC member William Cloberry's estranged brother Oliver among others, to send the ship the *Star* from London. Nicholas Crispe and his associates had been informed of the voyage however and brought the matter in front of the privy council. There the company requested that the ship was stayed. The request was granted and, a warrant was sent out to the Admiralty to stop the *Star* from leaving for 'Guinea and Binney contrary to the patent granted to the Company', and to apprehend the owners.²³¹

As the 1640s commenced the interloping within the GC charter area appear more frequently in the records. A Michael Cawton and Robert Shapden were causing trouble by sending their ships, the *Tryal* and the *George*, to trade slaves on the

²²⁷TNA: C 2/ChasI/T24/64

²²⁸Richard Pares, *Merchants and Planters*, Economic History Review, Supplement 4 (Cambridge University Press, 1960), 30.

²²⁹William Lawson Grant et al., eds., *Acts of the Privy Council of England | British History Online*, vol. I, 1613–1680 (Hereford, Printed for Her Majesty's Stationery Office, by Anthony Brothers, 1908), 178–85.

²³⁰TNA: HCA 24/109, no. 343. "America and West Indies: November 1637," 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), 259-260. *British History Online*, accessed November 13, 2017, <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/cal-state-papers/colonial/america-west-indies/vol1/pp259-260>.

²³¹"America and West Indies: May 1638," 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), 273-275. *British History Online*, accessed November 13, 2017, <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/cal-state-papers/colonial/america-west-indies/vol1/pp273-275>. "Charles I - volume 389: May 1-7, 1638," in *Calendar of State Papers Domestic: Charles I, 1637-8*, ed. John Bruce (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1869), 392-421. *British History Online*, accessed November 13, 2017, <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/cal-state-papers/domestic/chas1/1637-8/pp392-421>.

Guinean coast. The slaves they received were subsequently shipped to Barbados.²³² In 1645 Maurice Thomson's partner William Pennoyer, along with a Michael Davidson, sent another ship, the *Phillip*, to trade in breach of the GC's patent. Their cargo of slaves was also intended for Barbados.²³³ Pennoyer was stepping up his slave trading activity towards the end of the decade, in 1646-1647, becoming part of a bigger syndicate of interloping and slave trading partners.²³⁴ Between 1642-1645 another large-sale overseas trader, Samuel Vassall, decided to send ships to Guinea and on to the West Indies. What they carried is not known, but Vassall had been involved in provisioning trade to Virginia, Massachusetts Bay and the West Indian colonies since the 1620s and it is not impossible he too had realized the potential of trade in enslaved labour.²³⁵ Much like Thomson Vassall traded to St. Kitts, and taking into consideration that the shared proprietor of the colony, Thomas Warner, was making use of African slaves in his tobacco production, a market clearly existed.²³⁶ Thomson and Vassall had collaborated privately, the first documented voyage took place in 1639, and was indeed aimed at the tobacco and provisioning trade to St. Kitts.²³⁷ Vassall had, on top of this, reserved himself a place on the Committee of Appraisal and was thus part of reviewing the company's financial situation. This meant the interloper had in-depth knowledge of the company's financial situation, its trade and its plans. As the next chapter will show, he made good use of his knowledge when challenging, and later joining, the company.

6. Conclusion

The general impression of a company and a trade in crisis has followed the Guinea Company in the scholarship from the late nineteenth century through to the twentieth. The company suffered from both increased transnational competition and domestic private traders, the spilling over of the ongoing civil war conflict at home, and the ousting Nicholas Crispe - its primus motor, and the following sequestering of his company shares. These factors, paired with the loss of valuable profit, must be

²³²TNA: HCA 24/108, p.7-8, Transatlantic Slave Trade Database, TSTD: www.slavevoyages.org, Voyage ID (George) 26259, (Tryal) 26260. Accessed 15.05.2017.

²³³TNA: HCA 24/108, p.165

²³⁴TNA: HCA 24/109, no. 362

²³⁵Gragg, "To Procure Negroes": The English Slave Trade to Barbados, 1627-60," 71; Andrews, *Ships, Money and Politics: Seafaring and Naval Enterprise in the Reign of Charles I*, 60.

²³⁶Farnell, "The Navigation Act of 1651, the First Dutch War, and the London Merchant Community"; Brenner, *Merchants and Revolution*, 168-81.

²³⁷"America and West Indies: December 1639," 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), 304-306. *British History Online*, accessed December 2, 2017, <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/cal-state-papers/colonial/america-west-indies/vol1/pp304-306>.

acknowledged. However, as this chapter has shown, the picture of the company that emerges in the 1630s and 1640s is undeniably a complex one. Indeed, in one instance the company loses valuable funds due to a captain's negligence, but in the another a ship arrives in the Thames with gold to the value of several thousand pounds. The company was indebted above £10,000 in 1643/44, but in the five years between 1638 and 1643 four times that sum was brought back from the African coast. The company employed several factors on the African coast and were owed money in both the Caribbean and Virginia. Though the context surrounding the debt accumulation is not discussed in the source material, parts of the debts may have stemmed from the sale of enslaved Africans, as the company offered little other of interest to colonial planters attempting to set up their plantations. In addition to slaves, the freighting of colonial goods for the planters likely added to the colonial debts of the company. It appears highly unlikely for the company to have operated with empty cargo holds on the return leg from the Caribbean. The company's payments in cash crops had to be brought to London for sale, and the potential as a colonial freighter must have quickly become evident. Assuming that the company did not operate with empty ships, the task of planning and organizing the freighting of colonial commodities brought opportunities for both factors and captains who were charged with the managing of the ever-changing practicalities on the spot. Allowing for agency on the ground in organizing the freighting exposed the company to potential dishonest servants, but by leaving the task with the company captains it also opened for the benefits of using their personal colonial networks. A self-organized and inexpensive form of management on the spot based on interpersonal connections between the colonial community and the revisiting captains, which underlines the importance of interchanging agency and experience also between company men further down the organization's food chain.²³⁸

It is evident that any attempts at making projections for the trade was highly challenging for those involved. This volatility naturally favored the experienced and established over newcomers and outsiders, and the flexible and trusting agreement between the traders involved helped the company weather the lows and share the highs. Changes to market desires, timing, and personal connections to African traders and suppliers were important factors which could make or break a venture, as was the choice of a competent captain – as the case of the *Jonathan* shows. The Guinea Company of the 1630s and 1640s had the experience and personnel needed for successful trade, and the return of valuable cargos proved this. By the end of the 1640s they had in John Wood a director with personal experience from the African coast, and several of the company's most powerful competitors had or were about to

²³⁸Nuala Zahedieh, *The Capital and the Colonies: London and the Atlantic Economy 1660-1700* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 160–61.

join the company ranks. This influx of new experience from the Americas, personified by Maurice Thomson, the Wilsons and later Samuel Vassall, helped facilitate the company's expanding operation in the colonies.

In addition to experience, luck was needed, as *force majeure* in the form of ship wrecks, attacks from foreign privateers, death and disease impacted company and interloper alike. This problematized the search for reliable investors, appealing in a higher degree to impulsive risk-takers looking for quick profits, and often resulted in the reliance on the personal credit of members. This was seen in the petitions of John Wood from the early 1640s, but it happened also in the early 1620s, demonstrated by the conflict arising over the responsibility for the debt to Elizabeth Craven. It also led to extended ship ownership for added income and diversification of risk, a tendency, as emphasized by Appleby, prevalent among Guinea traders.²³⁹

Furthermore, it is challenging to determine if and when a venture was done by the company proper, and when it was a private initiative. Records from the high court of admiralty showed activity on behalf of the company, but the level of private investment and take of the profit must often have been high. With such a tight knit group emerging from the documents little separated company- and private trade. Thus, though the company may have struggled with its profits on paper, it did not necessarily follow that company members were not profiting. The tendency to use the company patent, not with the aim of developing England's overseas trade, but instead to shelter the traders' activity from competition, had appeared as soon as the first patent was granted in 1618. The practice was not discontinued when the new patent was granted in 1631, instead the exclusion of most of the non-active members of the 1620s, left space for traders who had an established personal connection to the African coast that could now be placed under the protection of the patent. The core group who made up the company's "*indenture quadripartite*" - Slaney, Cloberry, the Crispe brothers and Wood, developed and benefitted from a company purpose-built for their needs. As has already emerged and will be discussed further in chapter that follows, they were gradually joined and replaced by former interlopers who opted to join the company – bringing their capital, trade and experience with them.

The volatility of the trade also led to diversification of activity evident in the company's attempts to further its growing activity in the colonies, including plantation ownership, stationing of company representatives in the colonies, extension of credit to planters, the attempted introduction of indentured servants, and trade in slaves. The English slave trade at this point, despite still being in its establishing phase, was already attracting an increasing number of private merchants and partnerships, which contributed to the hardening competition both in the area covered by the

²³⁹ Appleby, "A Business of Much Difficulty," 4.

company's patent and in the Atlantic more generally. For established Atlantic traders such as Maurice Thomson, William Pennoyer, Samuel Vassall, and - as will be seen in the coming chapters - Martin Noell, who had operated since the first colonial settlements took place, the Atlantic was becoming crowded. Company membership offered a degree of protection from competition, at least nominally, and this may have been among the motives behind membership. Once members of the company, they came to have a defining impact on its direction, its goals, and its format of trade.

Maurice Thomson, and the new men of the company, will be pushed forward in coming chapters, as I argue that their experiences and methods from the colonial supply trade, and involvement in early slave trade, came to set the direction for the official Anglo-African trade until its final deregulation in the early 18th century. Thomson and his associates might not have been the first to realize the potential of neither the colonial provisioning trade, nor the trade in slaves from West Africa, but they certainly were involved in the shaping and building up of the relationship between organized Africa trade and the English colonies, and consequently impacted the shape it took.