

**“Intelligences dayly broughte hither to the marchants from sundry ports”: news networks in late-Elizabethan Devon**

**Abstract:** This article examines the oral and manuscript exchange of news and intelligence that flowed into the ports of late-Elizabethan Devon. In doing so, the primary aim is to encourage a reassessment of the current London-centric model of early modern news. In its place a new model is proposed; one which is equally sympathetic to the role played by local government officials in servicing the localities, as well as the centre, with information. Existing research on early modern news has outlined a network prominently focused on the single ‘hub’ of London. Consequently, little attention has been paid to the more complex sets of news networks that operated in the first instance at a local level, but which also had connections with the centre. In particular, whilst the regional ports of early modern England have been acknowledged as hubs for receiving continental news and intelligence, detailed elaboration on this matter has not been forthcoming. This article engages directly with this proposition, providing a detailed examination of how the ports of south Devon operated as important provincial news centres during the Elizabethan war with Spain (1585-1604). The county’s maritime significance and geographical location served as the underlying reason for this with daily advertisements arriving aboard merchant vessels concerning the whereabouts and intention of the Spanish fleet. Late-Elizabethan Devon thus provides an ideal case study for excavating the richness and complexity of provincial news networks.

**Key words:** Armada; Devon; intelligence; networks; news; merchants; ports

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Manuscripts, and completing a volume on this recently discovered collection of Elizabethan and Civil War correspondence for the prestigious List and Index Society.

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The purpose of this article is to map and interpret the oral and manuscript exchange of news and intelligence that flowed into the ports of late-Elizabethan Devon. In doing so it seeks to reassess the predominantly London-centric model of early modern news. In its place a new model is proposed; one which is equally sympathetic to the role played by local government officials in servicing the localities, as well as the centre, with information. Existing research on early modern news has outlined a network prominently focused on the single 'hub' of London. Consequently, little attention has been paid to the more complex sets of news networks that operated in the first instance at a local level, but which also had connections with the centre. In particular, while the regional ports of early modern England have been acknowledged as vital hubs for receiving continental news and intelligence in their own right, detailed elaboration on this matter has not been forthcoming. This article therefore engages directly with this proposition, providing a detailed examination of how the ports of south Devon operated as important provincial news centres during the Elizabethan war with Spain (1585-1604). The county's maritime significance and geographical location served as the underlying reason for this with daily advertisements arriving in the county aboard merchant vessels concerning the whereabouts and intention of the Spanish fleet. Late-Elizabethan Devon thus provides an ideal case study for excavating the richness and complexity of provincial news networks. This article surveys how news and intelligence of the Spanish fleet arrived in Devon, highlighting the important role played by merchants, prisoners and eyewitnesses as purveyors of noteworthy information; it scrutinises how the county gentry diligently transcribed the extensive amount of oral information available to them in order for it to be circulated locally and nationally. It also examines the motivational factors which incentivised them to do this so as to appreciate how the county's news and intelligence network was glued together and upheld. Finally, the article discusses the extent to which the county's general population had access to this information as well as the tactics deployed by the crown for limiting this.

### **'What news at London?'**

Existing historical and literary research on early modern news has outlined a network prominently focused on the single 'hub' of London. The capital has been described as 'a melting-pot for information' and 'a magnet, drawing in visitors and their news stories from

around the country and then radiating them out once again'.<sup>1</sup> St Paul's Cathedral has been labelled a news 'emporium' in which visitors to London could learn the latest parliamentary proceedings; while the Royal Exchange has been identified as operating in a similar fashion for those wishing to learn the latest foreign news from the mercantile community.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, 'what news at London?' became the customary greeting to those travelling home from the capital along England's highways. The country's thoroughfares thus acted as the arteries through which London news was pumped into the country's principal towns of trade and commerce. Once there the oral exchange of information continued. In particular, on market days visiting traders from smaller towns, villages and outlying areas learnt the latest London news before returning home and retelling the information that they had heard amongst their friends and families. As a result, 'the towns and villages of England were' as Adam Fox has argued 'linked with London, and to some extent with each other, through a verbal web woven by travellers.'<sup>3</sup>

As well as the oral exchange of London news, scholars have also shown that from the 1590s onwards it became increasingly prevalent for newsletter writers to collate and transcribe the information that circulated in the capital.<sup>4</sup> Originally these newsletters had been informal, that is to say, writers were amateurs who inserted news amongst the personal correspondence that they wrote to their absent friends or relations. Both men and women participated in this process, a fact that has been illuminated by Professor James Daybell in his detailed investigation of the news and intelligence networks of Elizabeth Talbot, countess of Shrewsbury.<sup>5</sup> However, as the demand for information concerning the war with Spain grew ever more insatiable during the last decade of the Elizabethan era there developed a second type of newsletter: the 'pure' newsletter. Richard Cust defines the 'pure' newsletter as being 'given over wholly to news, both domestic and foreign' and describes them as 'the forerunners of the internal news-sheets of the 1640s'. Indeed, whilst the informal newsletter constituted an intimate exchange of information between friends and family, the proliferation

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Cust, 'News and Politics in Early Seventeenth-Century England', *Past and Present* 112 (1986), 60-90 (70); Adam Fox, 'Rumour, News and Popular Political Opinion in Elizabethan and Early Stuart England', *The Historical Journal* 40:3 (September, 1997), 597-620 (605).

<sup>2</sup> Harold Love, *Scribal Publication in Seventeenth-Century England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 193; Natalie Mears, *Queenship and Political Discourse in the Elizabethan Realms* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 168-9.

<sup>3</sup> Adam Fox, *Oral and Literate Culture in England, 1500-1700* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 354.

<sup>4</sup> F. J. Levy, 'How Information Spread Among the Gentry, 1550-1640', *The Journal of British Studies* 21:2 (Spring, 1982), 11-34 (23).

<sup>5</sup> James Daybell, "'Suche newes as on the Quenes hye wayes we have mett': the News and Intelligence Networks of Elizabeth Talbot, countess of Shrewsbury (c.1527-1608)" in Daybell (ed.), *Women and Politics in Early Modern England, 1450-1700* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 114-30.

of the 'pure' newsletter represented the emergence of semi-professional journalism.<sup>6</sup> 'Pure' newsletter writers, such as John Chamberlain, Rowland Whyte, John Pory and Edmund Rossingham gleaned juicy tit bits of information at St Paul's, the Royal Exchange and Westminster; information that was sifted through and summarised in the weekly manuscript bulletins that they dispatched to their discerning subscribers throughout the provinces, as well as overseas.<sup>7</sup> This provided the county and expatriate aristocracy with a vital 'lifeline to the wider world' and as such newsletter writers were able to charge yearly subscription fees in the region of £20.<sup>8</sup> Manuscript newsletters – informal and 'pure' – thus played a vital role in the dissemination of political ideas and information from London to the provinces.

The political attitudes of early-seventeenth-century English society also developed as a result of the burgeoning printed periodical news market. This has been identified as beginning in around 1620 when the first coranto – a single printed sheet containing various foreign news items – was published in English by the Dutch printer, Pieter van den Keere, and exported to England to be sold on the streets of London. Throughout the remainder of the decade London-based printers began to produce their own corantos and an English foreign news market, stimulated largely by the onset of the Thirty Years War (1618-48), steadily grew.<sup>9</sup> However, as the political situation within England deteriorated into civil war during the 1640s the desire for foreign news ebbed and the demand for domestic news intensified to such an extent that both parliamentarian and royalist printers began to produce the first English newsbooks. These newsbooks took the form of multi-paged weekly diurnals and kept the nation up to date with the latest domestic developments in a particularly partisan manner.<sup>10</sup> With regards to the production and dissemination of English newsbooks, London once again served as the preeminent hub.<sup>11</sup> Once printed, editors organised the initial distribution of their newsbooks by employing street vendors – known to contemporaries as 'hawkers' and 'mercuries' – to sell their relatively cheap publications throughout the capital to a broad spectrum of society.<sup>12</sup> This exchange constituted the initial

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<sup>6</sup> Cust, 'News and Politics', 62-3.

<sup>7</sup> F. J. Levy, 'Staging the News' in Arthur F. Marotti and Michael D. Bristol (eds), *Print and Manuscript Performance* (Ohio: The Ohio State University, 2000), 252-78 (264); Jonathan Gibson, 'Letters' in M. Hattaway (ed.), *A Companion to English Renaissance Literature and Culture* (Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 615-22 (618 n.7); Chris R. Kyle, *Theater of State: Parliament and Political Culture in Early Stuart England* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012), 90.

<sup>8</sup> Jason Scott-Warren, 'News, Sociability, and Bookbuying in Early Modern England: The Letters of Sir Thomas Cornwallis', *The Library* 1:4 (December, 2000), 381-402 (389); Levy, 'Staging the News', 264.

<sup>9</sup> John Thompson, *Ideology and Modern Culture* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), 175.

<sup>10</sup> For a detailed account of the history of the English newsbook see Joad Raymond, *The Invention of the Newspaper: English Newsbooks, 1641-1649* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

<sup>11</sup> Levy, 'How Information Spread', 13.

<sup>12</sup> Cyprian Blagden, 'The Stationers' Company in the Civil War Period', *Library* 13 (1958), 1-17 (16).

distribution; however, it was customary for a secondary distribution to take place whereby individuals purchased one or more newsbook in order to enclose them within their letters of correspondence to friends and relatives living throughout the realm as well as overseas.<sup>13</sup>

To reiterate, existing scholarly research on early modern news has tended to privilege the role of the capital. Consequently, little attention has been paid to the existence of more complex sets of news networks that operated in the first instance at a local level, but which also had connections with London. In particular, while the regional ports of early modern England have been acknowledged as being important centres for receiving news and intelligence (especially those involved in continental trade) there has as yet been no detailed study of their broader significance in the transmission of news.<sup>14</sup> This is not to say that the circulation of information throughout the provinces of early modern England has not been studied. However, the overriding tendency has been to map the dissemination of information that emanated outwards from the capital rather than vice versa.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, even recent research conducted in relation to Elizabethan intelligence and espionage – which, by its very nature, demands an analysis of the ways and means that information flowed into London – has predominantly bypassed provincial intelligence networks and the important role played by local government officials as gatherers and purveyors of vital information.<sup>16</sup> Robert Hutchinson, for example, has acknowledged that ‘international intelligence was ... flowing into London ... domestically from the Lord Lieutenants of the counties’ and that customs searchers at the major English ports were responsible for ‘stopping and questioning travellers from abroad’.<sup>17</sup> However, he does not elaborate any further, preferring instead to provide a detailed account of Sir Francis Walsingham’s role as the Queen Elizabeth’s London-based spymaster at the centre of an international web of professional intelligencers.

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<sup>13</sup> Raymond, *The Invention of the Newspaper*, 252.

<sup>14</sup> John P. D. Cooper, *Propaganda and the Tudor State: Political Culture in the Westcountry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), 29; Wallace T. MacCaffrey, *Exeter, 1540-1640: The Growth of an English County Town* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1975), 171 and 241; Mears, *Queenship and Political Discourse*, 171.

<sup>15</sup> Fox, *Oral and Literate Culture*, 350-1, 354 and 369-70.

<sup>16</sup> John Michael Archer, *Sovereignty and Intelligence: Spying and Court Culture in the English Renaissance* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993); Paul E. J. Hammer, ‘An Elizabethan Spy Who Came in from the Cold: the Return of Anthony Standen to England in 1593’, *Bulletin of Historical Research* 65 (1992), 277-95; Paul E. J. Hammer, *Polarisation of Elizabethan Politics: The Political Career of Robert Devereux, 2nd Earl of Essex, 1585-1597* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 152-98; Alan Haynes, *The Elizabethan Secret Services* (Stroud: Sutton, 2000); Robert Hutchinson, *Elizabeth’s Spy Master: Francis Walsingham and the Secret War that Saved England* (London: Phoenix, 2007); Robyn Adams, ‘A Most Secret Service: William Herle and the Circulation of Intelligence’ in Adams and Rosanna Cox (eds), *Diplomacy and Early Modern Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 63-81; Robyn Adams, ‘“The Service I am Here for”: William Herle in the Marshalsea Prison, 1571’, *Huntington Library Quarterly* 72:2 (2009), 217-38.

<sup>17</sup> Hutchinson, *Elizabeth’s Spy Master*, 84.

Thus, the primary purpose of the remainder of this article is to begin to rectify this historiographical shortfall.

### **Late-Elizabethan Devon's continental trade links**

On 14 March 1602 Sir Francis Godolphin wrote an appraisal to the Privy Council of the importance of fortifying the Isles of Scilly, which 'lieth xxx [30] miles from the lands end of Cornwall west, south, west'. Part of Godolphin's assessment stressed the role that the islands played with regards to continental trade: 'being the nicest part of her Maiesties Dominions towards Spaine, It is as an Inne, by w[hi]<sup>ch</sup> Ships trading westerly or Sutherly, are to passe and retorne, whearby it both succoreth and secureth oure trafiques'.<sup>18</sup> The south Devon ports of Plymouth, Dartmouth, Totnes and Exeter were equally well placed geographically to provide both foreign and domestic merchant shipping with a haven where they could stop off to take on food and water, seek shelter during rough weather, or obtain refuge from Spanish privateers. In addition, as J. Crofts has argued 'it was the regular custom for ships ... to touch at Plymouth in order to land supercargoes and agents, who thereupon posted up to London with their bills of lading and letters of advice'.<sup>19</sup> However, unlike the Isles of Scilly merchants did not only utilise the ports of south Devon as a halfway house en route to their final destinations; some chose to operate directly in and out of the county and by the late-Elizabethan era a thriving trade existed between the merchants of Devon and their counterparts situated elsewhere in England and on the continent. The merchants of Elizabethan Exeter, for example, not only traded with other domestic ports in the Southwest, Wales and London, but also they had trade links with all of the Norman-Breton ports (including the Channel Islands), the 'salt ports' of Western France, Portugal, as well as further afield in Newfoundland.<sup>20</sup> While in Plymouth by the 1580s the port books indicate that on average one hundred merchant vessels utilised the haven each year for foreign trade and a further sixty-four did likewise for domestic 'coasting' trade.<sup>21</sup> Late-Elizabethan Devon's exports were restricted primarily to just two commodities: woollen cloth and tin. However, the fact that the county's ports also 'functioned both as feeders to and redistributors of England's trade with her European neighbours' meant that there was a

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<sup>18</sup> State Papers, Domestic, The National Archives, Kew, London (hereafter SP) 12/283a, fol.103.

<sup>19</sup> J. Crofts, *Packhorse Waggon and Post: Land Carriage and Communications Under the Tudors and Stuarts* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967), 97.

<sup>20</sup> Devon Record Office (hereafter DRO), Exeter City Archives (hereafter ECA), Customs Rolls, 34-40 Elizabeth; W. G. Hoskins, *Old Devon* (London: Pan Books, 1966), 75-6; MacCaffrey, *Exeter*, 160-73.

<sup>21</sup> Mark Brayshay, 'Plymouth's Past: So Worthy and Peerless a Western Port' in B. Chalkley, D. Dunkerley and P. Gripaios (eds.), *Plymouth: Maritime City in Transition* (Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1991), 38-61 (41).

much more varied import and re-export business.<sup>22</sup> Consequently, there was a daily influx of merchants arriving in the ports of Devon from across England and throughout Europe and, in addition to the dried fruit, fish, salt, sugar, tin, wine, woollen cloth and the various other goods that appeared on their bills of lading, all of them carried one other valuable commodity: news.

### **News of Spanish invasion threats after 1588**

Following the Armada crisis of 1588 the one topic of news that was of particular importance to all spheres of Elizabethan society was the whereabouts and intention of the Spanish fleet. As a result of Devon's geographical location and continental trade links, the county's ports all served as vital hubs for receiving relevant news of this nature, 'w[i]<sup>th</sup> diuers intelligences [being] dayly broughte ... from sundry ports'.<sup>23</sup> Thus, in October 1597, Martyn Orgarsabal, a mariner from the port of St Jean de Luz in south western France, arrived at Plymouth and reported that 'eleven dayes sence beinge in Bayonnde [Bayonne] in Galesey [Galicia] there came a spanish souldier from Farould [Ferrol], whose newes was, that their fleete consistinge 120 sayle greate and smale, weare gon from thens to the Groyne [La Coruña]'.<sup>24</sup> Devon merchants such as Nicholas Bugans of Totnes arrived home similarly bearing information that they had gathered on their travels to the continent. For instance, on his return from southern Spain in June 1599, Bugans was able to recall that 'At S<sup>t</sup> Lucas [there were] 50 shippes, at Cales [Cadiz] 40 shippes, and 50 Gallies out of the straightes then daylie expected, and 6000 souldiers lyeing in S<sup>t</sup> Lucas & at Cales, readye to be shipped'.<sup>25</sup> Reports of this nature convey clearly the fact that Elizabethan merchants served as 'key purveyors' of news which would be circulated both within the locality as well as being carried beyond.<sup>26</sup>

However, merchants were not the only group of people who operated as purveyors of news and intelligence for the inhabitants of late-Elizabethan Devon. Men who had been held prisoner by the Spanish were also common suppliers of information on their arrival in the county. Having been captured by Spanish privateers at sea, many of these men were taken to Spanish controlled ports where they were incarcerated. During their imprisonment they

<sup>22</sup> Joyce Youings and Peter Cornford, 'Seafaring and Maritime Trade in Sixteenth-Century Devon' in M. Duffy (ed.), *The New Maritime History of Devon: From Early Times to the Late Eighteenth Century*, vol. 1 (Exeter: Conway Maritime Press, 1992), 98-107 (101).

<sup>23</sup> Cecil Papers, Hatfield House, Hertfordshire (hereafter CP) 42/65: 21/7/1596.

<sup>24</sup> CP 56/10: 11/10/1597.

<sup>25</sup> CP 70/96: 14/6/1599.

<sup>26</sup> Mears, *Queenship and Political Discourse*, 180. For other examples of merchants arriving in Devon with news see SP 12/212 fol. 100: 17/7/1588; SP 12/255 fol. 20: 23/12/1595; SP 12/256 fol. 26: 17/1/1596; SP 12/256 fol. 197: 16/3/1596; SP 12/256 fol. 224: 25/3/1596; SP 12/261 fol. 41: 23/12/1596; SP 12/262 fol. 183: 11/4/1597; SP 12/271 fol. 158: 19/7/1599; SP 12/271 fol. 159: 19/7/1599; SP 12/271 fol. 164a: 20/7/1599; SP 12/271 fol. 191: 26/7/1599; SP 12/271 fol. 193: 27/7/1599; SP 12/271 fol. 201: 29/7/1599; SP 12/275 fol. 203: 25/11/1600.

often saw the Spanish making military and naval preparations and were able to gain knowledge, even if only rumours, concerning the reasons for such preparations. Once they secured their release, these men often obtained passage back to England in merchant shipping destined for Devon and so arrived in the county with an account fresh in their minds of what they had seen and heard.<sup>27</sup> One such occasion occurred in February 1597 when a man who had been held captive in Lisbon was able to declare on his arrival in Devon that ‘there be at Lisbone the Groyne [La Coruña] Cales [Cadiz] and Farroll [Ferrol] 240 sayle preparinge for the sea [and] That they had a purpose to send 10000 men into Irelande.’<sup>28</sup> While on 19 March 1602, John Lattlye, who had endured two years imprisonment in Spain, arrived in Dartmouth claiming that ‘there were at S<sup>t</sup> Lucas ... twelue sayle of the kings shippes neere readye, and eighteene other shippes w[hi]ch<sup>ch</sup> came thither out of the Straites, all w[hi]ch<sup>ch</sup> were reported to be bound for Ireland’.<sup>29</sup> Foreign mariners captured by English privateers were also transported to Devon where they were pressed to divulge what they knew of the Spanish fleet. Most notably, during the initial skirmishes between the English and Spanish navies in summer 1588 a Spanish vessel called *The Rosario* was captured by the English and towed into Tor Bay by Captain Jacob Whiddon in *The Roebuck*. From Tor Bay *The Rosario* was taken to Dartmouth where her Spanish crew were interrogated and billeted under the directions of the Devon deputy lieutenants, Sir John Gilbert and George Cary.<sup>30</sup> Less high profile instances were, however, much more common, such as when Pedro Tamayo of Palermo in Sicily arrived in Plymouth in July 1599 as the prisoner of John Stone (a Devon shipmaster) claiming that ‘the Lantado: w[i]th<sup>th</sup> his wyfe his children and 13000 men [were] bounde for Lyshbone [Lisbon]’.<sup>31</sup>

However, the inhabitants of Devon were not always obliged to await the arrival of merchants or prisoners from Europe with news of the Spanish fleet because enemy ships were often sighted from land. Famously, on 21 July 1588 the initial skirmishes between the English fleet and the Spanish Armada were in ‘playne viewe’ of those watching on Plymouth Hoe.<sup>32</sup> John Gibbons and Henry Wood were also watching the approaching Armada from their vantage

<sup>27</sup> For a personal account of William Pitts’ incarceration at La Coruña see SP 12/268 fol.111: 9/1598.

<sup>28</sup> SP 12/262, fol. 99.

<sup>29</sup> CP 85/98: 20/3/1602.

<sup>30</sup> For further information on the subsequent handling of *The Rosario* and her crew see Paula Martin, *Spanish Armada Prisoners: the Story of the Nuestra Señora del Rosario and Her Crew, and of Other Prisoners in England, 1587-97* (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 1988).

<sup>31</sup> DRO, 1392M/L1599/6: 29/7/1599. For other instances of prisoners arriving in Devon with news see SP 12/252, fol. 149: 19/6/1595; SP 12/256, fol. 125: 20/2/1596; SP 12/264, fol. 1: 1/7/1597; SP 12/266, fol. 1: 2/1/1598; SP 12/279, fol. 103: 16/4/1601; SP 12/281, fol. 45: 24/7/1601; SP 12/283, fol. 38: 13/12/1601.

<sup>32</sup> SP 12/212, fol. 134.

point at Rame Head, before returning to Plymouth to report what they had seen.<sup>33</sup> Thereafter, there were numerous eyewitness sightings of opportunistic Spanish raids at vulnerable inlets and creeks along the south Devon coastline. Notably, on 15 March 1596, one eyewitness saw a Spanish ship arrive in Cawsand Bay in Plymouth Sound and there land about twenty-five men all of whom carrying 'muskettes vppon their shoulders'. They then proceeded to place 'five barrells of powder and brimstone to the doores of five ... howses, and two others, to two ... boattes and sett [them] ... on fier'.<sup>34</sup> Those that manned the county's beacons also reported sightings and the 'speedye aduertisementes of the fleete discovered by suche as watche at Bewestocke Beacon' were gratefully noted by Devon's Lord Lieutenant, William, earl of Bath on 26 July 1599.<sup>35</sup> There were also regular instances of brazen piracy taking place in view of Devon's ports which provoked an exasperated John Howell to complain on 21 April 1600 that 'the Spaniardes & Dunkurkers are such heauiie oppressors of the merchantes inhabitinge in all the westerne Coastes ... beinge Chased att the verye entrances of our Portes'.<sup>36</sup>

Overt acts of Spanish aggression were not the only way that the war with Spain was brought to Devon's doorstep. The county also served as a military holding area in which the commanders of Elizabeth's navy and army, along with the men under their command, converged periodically between 1588 and 1603. They did so because Plymouth was the ideal rendezvous point for the English fleet to await the Spanish Armada in 1588 and to launch a pre-emptive strike on Cadiz in 1596.<sup>37</sup> In addition, between 1591 and 1594, various ports along the south coast were used to victual and deploy troops to help Sir John Norris eject the Spanish from Brittany, while between 1594 and 1603 the north Devon port of Barnstaple was similarly engaged as a military staging post for the embarkation and transportation of English forces into Ireland.<sup>38</sup> During these periods of increased military activity those that commanded England's forces urgently needed news of the Spanish fleet in order to formulate and modify their tactics. Therefore, Charles, lord admiral Howard and Robert Devereux, second earl of Essex are known to have ordered that pinnaces and other nimble vessels be dispatched from the county 'to lye on and of betwixte Englande and ...

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<sup>33</sup> Plymouth and West Devon Record Office, Plymouth, Devon (hereafter PWDRO), 1/132, Widey Court Book,, fol. 79.

<sup>34</sup> SP 12/256, fol.189.

<sup>35</sup> DRO, 1392M/L1599/3.

<sup>36</sup> CP 78/86.

<sup>37</sup> William H. Bartlett, *The Pilgrim Fathers* (London, 1853), 117. For a contemporary description of all the forces that gathered in Plymouth before the Cadiz Expedition see CP 41/29: 30/5/1596.

<sup>38</sup> Wallace T. MacCaffrey, *Elizabeth I: War and Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), 1992), 152-95; John McGurk, *The Elizabethan Conquest of Ireland: the 1590s Crisis* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), 174-8.

[Spain] to watche the comminge of the Spanishe forces'.<sup>39</sup> Cruising between the Bay of Biscay, Brittany and Devon, the masters of these spy boats were ordered 'to speake w[i]<sup>th</sup> all Fleminges or Easterlinges that shall Come from the Southwardes'.<sup>40</sup> Letters were also commonly dispatched to the Governor of Brest 'to knowe what spanishe shippinge ... [was] alongest that Coast'.<sup>41</sup> Once these reconnaissance expeditions had completed their missions they would return to Devon where the shipmasters would convey the information that they had acquired to their commanders, who would in turn disseminate the information by letter.<sup>42</sup>

In the absence of military commanders, reconnaissance expeditions were conducted by Devon's gentry living in and around the ports of south Devon in a bid to obtain news of the Spanish fleet 'on demand'.<sup>43</sup> Robert Scarlett and Edward Hill were hired on a number of occasions between 1588 and 1593 by the mayors of Plymouth 'to goe to discou[er] c[er]taine shippes suspected to be Spaynyards'.<sup>44</sup> In many cases these expeditions were ordered by central government, such as on 28 October 1596 when the Privy Council asked William Cecil, lord Burghley to send a 'letter vnto the Mayor of Plymouth and c[er]taine others, for the present dispatche of three Pynnaces or Caravelles to be sent to the Coast of Spayne for discoverye'.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, during periods of acute uncertainty there was a concerted effort on the part of the Privy Council to utilise the services of local officials located in a number of different port towns along England's south-western coast – from Penryn in Cornwall to Portsmouth in Hampshire – to deploy spy boats in a bid to seek out noteworthy information.<sup>46</sup> Thus, throughout the late-Elizabethan period a concerted effort was made by

<sup>39</sup> SP 12/210, fol. 51: 23/5/1588.

<sup>40</sup> CP 40/61: 4/5/1596.

<sup>41</sup> CP 40/61. Governor Sourdeac was more than willing to provide the English with information concerning the Spanish fleet because he wanted Elizabeth to secure England's coastline by ejecting the Spanish from Brittany. For other instances of newsgathering involving Governor Sourdeac see SP 12/271, fol. 205: 30/7/1599; SP 12/271, fol. 206: 30/7/1599; SP 12/271, fol. 217: 31/7/1599; SP 12/272, fol. 116: 24/8/1599; SP 12/272, fol. 122: 25/8/1599.

<sup>42</sup> For other instances of military commanders coordinating reconnaissance missions in Devon see SP 12/212, fol. 70: 13/7/1588; SP 12/212, fol. 94: 17/7/1588.

<sup>43</sup> Mark Brayshay, 'Plymouth's Coastal Defences in the Year of the Spanish Armada', Transactions of the Devonshire Association 119 (December, 1987), 169-96 (189-91).

<sup>44</sup> PWDRO, 1/132, Widely Court Book, fols 77, 81, 88, 96.

<sup>45</sup> SP 12/260, fol. 112. For other instances of Devon's gentry coordinating reconnaissance missions on behalf of central government see SP 12/272, fol. 34: 9/8/1599; SP 12/272, fol. 43: 10/8/1599; SP 12/272, fol. 69: 13/8/1599; SP 12/272, fol. 160: 4/9/1599; SP 12/272, fol. 181: 19/9/1599. There is also evidence of the Spanish conducting similar reconnaissance expeditions of their own, for example, see SP 12/270, fol. 165: 26/4/1599; SP 12/281, fol. 65: 30/7/1601; SP 12/281, fol. 80: 3/8/1601; SP 12/281, fol. 169: 21/9/1601; SP 12/283, fol. 149: 1601.

<sup>46</sup> British Library, London (hereafter BL), Harley MS., 168 fols 149-50. The port towns were Penryn, Plymouth, Dartmouth, Lyme Regis, Portsmouth and Southampton. There are also numerous orders of this nature in the Privy Council Register. For example, see John Roche Dasent (ed.), Acts of the Privy Council, vols. XV-XXXII (London: HMSO, 1897-1907) (hereafter APC), XXVI, 279-80; APC, XXVIII, 50-1; APC, XXXII, 132, 228 and 260.

both local and central government officials to exploit Devon's geographical position and continental trade links proactively to seek out news about the Spanish fleet that might verify miscellaneous and fragmentary items of information that were daily brought to England from the continent aboard merchant vessels. However, the veracity of much of the information that was gathered was often questionable.

It is clear from the examples outlined above that the amount of news and intelligence arriving in the ports of Devon whilst hostilities with Spain persisted was extensive. However, it is important to stress that this information did not constitute 'top secret' intelligence in the modern sense, but was rather a combination of hearsay and rumour.<sup>47</sup> The obvious issue with this sort of unprivileged and widespread information was that it was 'highly prone to distortions and inaccuracies'.<sup>48</sup> This problem was recognised by John Dakyns who complained in November 1596 that 'euery sodaine Rumoure procureth A suspicion of an Invation to bee attempted by Spaine againste this country (the prevention wherof enforceth her Ma[jes]<sup>tie</sup> to greate charge) ys the wante of perfect Intelligens'.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, those who occupied positions in local and central government had to contend with the fact that many of the individuals who were either the original source or the secondary purveyors of information were foreign strangers whose loyalty to the crown was at best unknown. This was definitely a concern for the commander of Plymouth fort, Sir Ferdinando Gorges who complained to Sir Robert Cecil on 28 April 1597 that there was a 'wante of intellygens from men of Iudgmente and reputacon'.<sup>50</sup>

Obviously then the credibility of individual accounts supplied by merchants and prisoners, especially those that were not English, was questioned by the authorities on their arrival in Devon. This led the earl of Bath to write despairingly on 26 August 1599 that the 'uncerteinties of reportes do mucche trouble me and I knowe not what to thinke of them'.<sup>51</sup> Feelings of uncertainty were ameliorated to an extent by retaining English shipmasters proactively to seek out news; however, the reports that they made on their return to Devon also relied heavily on the rumours and hearsay of foreign mariners. Yet despite these inadequacies in July 1588 and August 1599 central government did refer to the available news and intelligence when deciding where to concentrate their defensive forces.<sup>52</sup> Nevertheless, the Privy Council was prudent enough to retain a high degree of flexibility

<sup>47</sup> Hammer, *Polarisation of Elizabethan Politics*, 185.

<sup>48</sup> Fox, 'Rumour, News and Popular Political Opinion', 598.

<sup>49</sup> SP 12/260, fol. 182.

<sup>50</sup> SP 12/262, fol. 233.

<sup>51</sup> DRO, 3799M-3/O/1/21.

<sup>52</sup> Ian Cooper, 'Networks, News and Communication: Political Elites and Community Relations in Elizabethan Devon, 1588-1603' (Ph.D, Plymouth University, 2012), ch. 3.

during both invasion scares. After all, in the words of Gorges, it was ‘better not to say what they will doe, but what they may doe, and to prevente what is possible rather then to leaue yt’.<sup>53</sup> By adopting this stance it did not matter whether individual reports were accurate or not, England’s governors would plan for the worst and hope for the best using the multitude of news and intelligence that they received as a barometer for measuring the perceived threat levels that persisted throughout the late-Elizabethan period.<sup>54</sup>

### **Local government newsletters: production and transmission**

In order for the oral news and intelligence that arrived in the ports of southern England to serve as a barometer for measuring the perceived threat level of a Spanish invasion it first had to be transcribed and conveyed to the key decision-makers at court. Consequently, the Privy Council instructed local government officials (that is to say, deputy lieutenants, justices of the peace, vice-admirals and the mayors of port towns) to interrogate all merchants, prisoners and other ‘passengers’ that arrived in the ports of southern England – from Falmouth in the west to Dover in the east.<sup>55</sup> In Devon, William, earl of Bath and his deputy lieutenants formulated a clearly defined strategy to achieve this; a strategy that is revealed by a set of orders that they agreed upon during a meeting at Exeter on 20 March 1598. The four relevant orders make the following provisions:

[1.] That straight orders be taken in all portes Creekes & other places that all passengers not knowne either outwarde bound or inward bound be straightly examined by the next Iustices of the peace according to form[er] directions & Comaundem[en]t from the LI[ord]es of the Counsell.

[2.] That all Constables & other offic[er]s doe bring before the next Iustices of the Peace all suspected or vnknowne p[er]sons latelie come in this land to be exam[ined].

[3.] That Comaundem[en]t be gyven vppon great paine that all own[er]s or maisters of ffisher boates bring before the next Iustices of the Peace all such p[er]sons as they shall happen to receaue or take in into their said boates at the sea to be examined.

<sup>53</sup> CP 56/10: 11/10/1597.

<sup>54</sup> APC, XXXII, 121-2.

<sup>55</sup> SP 12/244, fol. 291: 4/1593; SP 12/247, fol. 98: 17/2/1594; APC, XVI, 199; APC, XXX, 367-8; APC, XXXII, 435; CP 85/117: 29/3/1602. For examples of examinations conducted by local government officials in Cornwall, Dorset, Hampshire, Kent and the Channel Islands see SP 12/271, fol. 128: 4/7/1599; SP 12/284, fol. 147: 23/7/1602; CP 182/141: 8/8/1601; SP 12/260, fol. 114: 29/10/1596; SP 12/266, fol. 86: 16/2/1598; SP 12/275, fol. 192: 12/11/1600. For similar arrangements in Ireland see Mears, *Queenship and Political Discourse*, 171.

[4.] That the own[er]s & maisters of any bryttayne or French boates or other stranger vessells be exa[m]ined what passeng[er]s they haue brought on shoare or sett on land in any place.<sup>56</sup>

Accordingly, on their arrival at one of the county's ports, individuals who claimed or were suspected of having noteworthy information were greeted by local government officials and either asked, or forced, to impart the information they had obtained in the course of their voyage.<sup>57</sup> Throughout these official examinations a written record was made of what was said and then enclosed within covering letters sent to central government officials. Such a process underlines the fact that early modern manuscript news derived from oral report, which blurs the distinction between oral and manuscript news cultures.

It is clear from the prevalence of these written transcripts in the State Papers that central government was inundated with information concerning the Spanish fleet.<sup>58</sup> It therefore must have been helpful that covering letters were typically short and succinct. This no doubt enabled under-secretaries and clerks at Whitehall to sift and separate the multiplicity of reports that arrived on their master's desks.<sup>59</sup> Examinations could then be grouped together (possibly by origin or date) and prioritised so as to limit the time that privy councillors spent reading them and ultimately quicken the process by which patterns and trends were discovered. Thus, the Mayor of Dartmouth, Gilbert Staplehill, wrote a brief covering letter to the Privy Council on 3 November 1596 notifying them of the fact that he had examined seven Flemish mariners. The examination had been recorded and enclosed within the covering letter so that the council members could refer to the lengthier document should they so wish:

O[u]r duties Right Honorable most humblie remembred. Maie it please yo[u]r L[ordsh]:<sup>60</sup> to be aduertised, that this daie here aryued from Morles in a small barke of Lyme, Seven Fleminges of Hambroughe, whose Shippe and goodes were confiscate[d] by the Kinge of Spaine, who being examined of the newes and busines there, haue declared as appeareth by this scedule hereinclosed, whereof we thought it o[u]r duties to aduertise yo[u]r Hono<sup>rs</sup> with all convenient speede. And so most humblye Craving pardon for o[u]r boldnes herein with

<sup>56</sup> DRO, 3799-3/O/2/13.

<sup>57</sup> MacCaffrey, *Exeter*, 240-1.

<sup>58</sup> For example see SP 12/215, fol. 61: 19/8/1588; SP 12/240, fol. 153: 13/12/1591; SP 12/256, fol. 117: 7/2/1596; SP 12/259, fol. 167: 7/1596; SP 12/260, fol. 131: 11/1596; SP 12/262, fol. 67: 3/2/1597; SP 12/262, fol. 131: 22/3/1597; SP 12/266, fol. 32: 18/1/1598; SP 12/270, fol. 154: 20/4/1599; SP 12/272, fol. 82: 17/8/1599; SP 12/272, fol. 105: 23/8/1599; SP 12/279, fol. 134: 5/1601; SP 12/281: 9/1601; SP 12/285, fol. 3: 13/9/1602.

<sup>59</sup> Haynes, *Elizabethan Secret Services*, 15.

farther remembrance of o[u]<sup>r</sup> duties, do most humbly take o[u]<sup>r</sup> leaue and committ yo[u]<sup>r</sup> L[ordshi]:<sup>ps</sup> to the protection of the almightie. Dartmouth the third of Nouemb[er]. 1596.<sup>60</sup>

Likewise, on 3 May 1601 the Mayor of Plymouth, Thomas Payne wrote a brief précis to Sir Robert Cecil of his examination of Thomas Halle (a Plymouth mariner who had been newly released from Spanish imprisonment). In addition, Payne ensured that the more detailed transcription of the examination was enclosed within his covering letter in the customary way:

Right honorable my humble Duetie remembred, It maie please yo[u]<sup>r</sup> honor to receave herewith the Examinacon of one Thomas Halle of our Towne Marrinor who hath byn p<sup>r</sup>isoner in Spaine and is lately arryved as by thesame his examinacon may appeare. And so leaveinge the farther consideracon of the same to yo[u]<sup>r</sup> honorable wisdom And praieing th[e]almightie for yo[u]<sup>r</sup> ho[no]<sup>rs</sup> increase of all happines I humblie take my leave Plymouth this third of Maie 1601.<sup>61</sup>

Copies and extracts of these examinations were often circulated simultaneously to local political elites in order to place them in a state of readiness prior to any official orders being sent by the Privy Council. For example, the Devon deputy lieutenant, Sir John Gilbert wrote to Sir Francis Walsingham from his home in Greenway on 7 November 1588 to inform him that a merchant named Richard Blackaler of Totnes had reported that ‘the Kinge [of Spain] prepares for another Ffleete’ and that this fleet was to be supplied with ‘plentye of newfoundelande ffishes, & Pilcherds ... out of theis weste p[ar]tes’. In addition to notifying Walsingham, Gilbert had also circulated the news to local government officials located elsewhere in Devon and Cornwall in order for them ‘to make staye of the Pilcherds’ until further orders were received from the court.<sup>62</sup> A similar episode occurred on 15 March 1596 when the Deputy Mayor of Plymouth, George Baron wrote to the Privy Council to inform them of the Spanish raid at Cawsand Bay. As well as informing the council of the raid, Baron noted that he and his brethren had ‘given notice hereof eastwarde alongest the Coaste’

<sup>60</sup> SP 12/260, fol. 130.

<sup>61</sup> SP 12/279, fol. 133. For other examples of covering letters written by Devon’s gentry to accompany their examinations see SP 12/262, fol. 124: 15/3/1597; SP 12/262, fol. 147: 27/3/1597; SP 12/263, fol. 128: 2/6/1597; SP 12/265, fol. 21: 18/11/1597; SP 12/268, fol. 17: 30/7/1598; SP 12/278, fol. 209: 23/2/1601; SP 12/281, fol. 62: 29/7/1601; SP 12/281, fol. 153: 11/9/1601; SP 12/281, fol. 159: 17/9/1601; SP 12/281, fol. 166: 20/9/1601; SP 12/285, fol. 17: 17/9/1602.

<sup>62</sup> SP 12/218, fol. 11.

and 'there is advertises hereof given by Mr Edgecomb westward'.<sup>63</sup> Likewise, on 29 July 1599 the Mayor of Plymouth, John Blithman wrote three letters containing information of the Spanish fleet extracted during the examination of Pedro Tamayo of Palermo. One was directed to the Privy Council for their Lord's 'goode Consideracons'; a second was dispatched to Sir Richard Champernowne of Modbury together with a postscript from Blithman beseeching Champernowne to 'advertise M<sup>r</sup> Seymour ... and the Maior of Dartmouthe'; and a third was conveyed to William, earl of Bath, at Tawstock Court near Barnstaple.<sup>64</sup> All three examples demonstrate the existence of an interlocking local news network; a network that was used to transmit important pieces of information from the initial point of contact to the key decision makers scattered across the county. Indeed, sending the same news to more than one local recipient not only ensured that the appropriate political actors within the county were alerted to a potential threat, it also acted as an insurance policy against the possibility of letters addressed to central government being lost in transit. It seems that it was therefore customary for central government to receive the same information from multiple sources within Devon. In July 1599 a merchant of Dartmouth named John Ashley arrived home from Brittany having heard whilst moored in Roscoff that there were '200 shypps ... in the Groyns [La Coruña] bownde for England ... [carrying] 22000 men'.<sup>65</sup> Having interviewed Ashley following his return to Dartmouth on 27 July, the Mayor of Dartmouth, Robert Martin hurriedly dispatched a written copy of his examination to the nearest available deputy lieutenant, Edward Seymour who lived just over ten miles away in Berry Pomeroy.<sup>66</sup> On receiving Ashley's examination at Berry Castle, Seymour forwarded the information to Sir Robert Cecil at the court, the earl of Bath at Tawstock and Sir Ferdinando Gorges at Plymouth. Ashley's examination was then copied again by Bath on 29 July and enclosed in a covering letter addressed to the Privy Council, providing them with 'a trewe transcripte' of what the merchant had reported.<sup>67</sup>

To summarise, the way in which Devon's political elites circulated and transmitted news and intelligence amongst each other, as well as across to central government officials at Whitehall, did not have a permanently rigid or proscribed format. This meant that those local officials who conducted examinations of merchants, prisoners and other 'passengers' arriving in Devon had a discretionary choice as to which politicians they would notify and in what order. This choice was especially pertinent when the threat of a Spanish invasion

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<sup>63</sup> SP 12/256, fol. 189.

<sup>64</sup> SP 12/271, fol. 201; DRO, 1392M/L1599/6; DRO, 1392M/L1599/8.

<sup>65</sup> DRO, 1392M/L1599/4; SP 12/271, fol. 198: 27/7/1599.

<sup>66</sup> CP 71/95: 28/7/1599.

<sup>67</sup> SP 12/271, fol. 200. For other instances of central government receiving the same information from more than one source see SP 12/253, fol. 48: 23/7/1595; SP 12/253, fol. 49: 23/7/1595; SP 12/272, fol. 114: 24/8/1599; SP 12/279, fol. 148: 7/5/1601.

appeared imminent making the speedy advertisement of the threat a necessity. In that instance information tended to be transmitted laterally and vertically amongst both local and central government officials simultaneously. In doing so, the time delay between newsgathering and notification was minimised. Consequently, Devon's governors did not have to wait to learn news of the Spanish fleet from the Privy Council; instead they could place the county's defences in a state of readiness prior to orders being received from central government. Thus, whereas Richard Cust has identified two types of early modern newsletter (the informal and the 'pure') this section has identified a third: the local government newsletter. Official in nature, local government newsletters were similar to 'pure' newsletters in the sense that they were entirely made up of news and intelligence, however, they also differed in that they were non-profit making (at least in the monetary sense) and were intended for a small, elite and exclusively male readership. However, their most important characteristic was the fact that they were produced provincially. They therefore provide historians with a solid documentary foundation from which to explore and expose the more complex sets of early modern news networks that operated in the first instance at a local level, but which also had connections with London.

### **The commodity of news and intelligence**

The evidence discussed in the previous section revealed that the entire framework of Devon's news and intelligence network was readily connected to central government. However, what has not been made plain is why this connection was so strong? In contrast to the intricate networks of overseas intelligencers who received monetary recompense for supplying Elizabeth's chief ministers with vital information from behind enemy lines, local government officials received no financial remuneration for supplying their superiors at Whitehall with news and intelligence from the frontline.<sup>68</sup> Therefore, why do it? On a purely humanistic level the acute fear of invasion that persisted throughout the late-Elizabethan period combined with an impassioned anti-Spanish sentiment to ensure that the supply of news and intelligence from Devon – as well as from other maritime counties, such as Cornwall, Dorset, Hampshire and Kent – remained plentiful.<sup>69</sup> The strength of the sense of duty felt by local government officials is also plain in the letters of news and intelligence that they sent to central government.<sup>70</sup> However, local government officials were not simply driven by fear, anti-Spanish sentiment and public duty. Indeed, whilst they did not profit

<sup>68</sup> For the costs involved in Sir Francis Walsingham's espionage operations see Hutchinson, *Elizabeth's Spy Master*, 90 and 100-1.

<sup>69</sup> Helen Rawlings, *The Spanish Inquisition* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 4; Benjamin Keen, 'The Black Legend Revisited: Assumptions and Realities', *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 49:4 (November, 1969), 703-19.

<sup>70</sup> For example, see SP 12/224, fol. 48: 11/5/1589; SP 12/234, fol. 7: 6/11/1590; SP 12/259, fol. 172: 25/7/1596; SP 12/272, fol. 82: 17/8/1599; SP 12/278, fol. 209: 23/2/1601.

financially from the information that they supplied, they did seek profit in a non-monetary sense. The fact that local government officials in Devon were situated so far from the centre of government meant that it was much harder for them to acquire the patronage necessary to further their political careers because they did not have regular face-to-face access to the principal patrons of the Elizabethan court. In contrast, their courtier counterparts enjoyed regular personal contact with these powerful men. Therefore, transmitting news and intelligence served as a tangible way of overcoming the disadvantages of distance and enabled men residing in peripheral counties such as Devon to trade information as a commodity that might earn them favour.<sup>71</sup> Supplying a prominent courtier with news and intelligence of the Spanish fleet thus acted as a form of gift giving, a process that was 'among the glues which bound together superior and subordinate'.<sup>72</sup>

Consequently, it was a common occurrence for local government officials in Devon to solicit for favours from powerful men such as William Cecil, lord Burghley and his son, Sir Robert Cecil when they sent local government newsletters and other noteworthy information concerning the Spanish fleet. Such an arrangement was equally appealing to these powerful politicians who relied on an extensive network of informants to buttress their own standing with the Queen.<sup>73</sup> This symbiotic arrangement of reciprocal benefit is clearly referred to in a letter that Cecil wrote to the Devon deputy lieutenant, Edward Seymour in summer 1599:

S[i]f I haue receaued a l[ett]re from yo<sup>u</sup> dated y<sup>e</sup> xiiij[14]<sup>th</sup> of lune wherby I fynd yo<sup>u</sup> haue a desire to contynue the same affeccion towards me that it seemes yo<sup>u</sup> haue borne heretofore to my Lo[rd]: my Father, w[hi]ch I doe very thanckfully accept, w[i]th the desire that as occasion serves, yo<sup>u</sup> would make me p[ar]taker of such materyall Spanysh advyses as come to yo[u]r handes, wherof I haue receaued some already, in yo[u]r l[ett]re, wherin was contayned y<sup>e</sup> examynacon of one Buggens, assuring yo<sup>u</sup>, that yo[u]r l[ett]res shalbe very wellcome to me, and for requyttall of yo[u]r kyndnesse, yo<sup>u</sup> shall ever fynd me yo[u]r very assured frend.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Daybell, 'The News and Intelligence Networks', p. 120; Kristen Brooke Neuschel, *Word of Honor: Interpreting Noble Culture in Sixteenth-century France* (Cornell, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), 72-3; Gary Schneider, *The Culture of Epistolarity: Vernacular Letters and Letter Writing in Early Modern England, 1500-1700* (Cranbury, NJ: Rosemont Publishing, 2005), 152-60; Barbara Stephenson, *The Power and Patronage of Marguerite de Navarre* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 38.

<sup>72</sup> Linda Levy Peck, *Court Patronage and Corruption in Early Stuart England* (London: Routledge, 1993), 4.

<sup>73</sup> For a detailed survey of the earl of Essex's intelligence network – which was established to rival the networks of Burghley and Cecil – see Hammer, *Polarisation of Elizabethan Politics*, 152-98.

<sup>74</sup> DRO 1392M/L1599/40.

One of Seymour's fellow deputy lieutenants, Sir Richard Champernowne appears to have had his own similar bilateral relationship with Cecil, which he revealed in a letter to the Secretary of State dated 23 February 1601.<sup>75</sup> Indeed, it was not just individual members of Devon's gentry who sought to trade information in return for patronage, the county's town corporations also regarded news and intelligence as a currency that could be used to purchase political backing – a fact confirmed by a letter Lord Admiral Howard wrote to the Mayor of Plymouth on 2 October 1594 'givinge thankses for Intellygence that was sent hym.'<sup>76</sup> The competition to be the first to send a vital piece of information was no doubt fierce amongst Devon's political elite; after all to lose out to a competitor in the race to notify a patron was a sure fire way of diminishing one's credit balance of court patronage. This may well have been playing on the earl of Bath's mind when he wrote to the Privy Council from Tawstock on 29 July 1599. Bath dedicated a section of his letter to explaining why he had failed to notify their Lords of 'a late Fleete discovered neere vnto the shoare [of Plymouth] ... supposed to be Enemyes'. His excuse hinged on the fact that the suspicious fleet turned out to be Flemish merchants which he apparently 'alwaies tooke them to be: And therefore thoughte yt not good to trouble' their Lords.<sup>77</sup> Quite how Bath could have been so certain of this from his home in north Devon is not made clear. It therefore seems likely that Bath's excuse was made to deflect any charges of negligence that may have been levelled at him and thereby help preserve his political standing at the centre of affairs.

The quest for patronage therefore encouraged Devon's gentry proactively to gather and transmit information that daily arrived in the county's ports. In return, central government enjoyed a web of informants situated on the frontline of England's war with Spain who readily transcribed and conveyed the multitude of predominantly oral reports concerning the Spanish fleet which would not otherwise have been accessible from the confines of the court. Thus, the news and intelligence network of late-Elizabethan Devon portrays a relationship of mutual advantage to both spheres (local and central) of Elizabethan government. In addition, it also provides an important case study to help exemplify how provincial regions, particularly ports, served the political nation as 'important nexi of news' during the early modern period.<sup>78</sup>

### **News circulating amongst Devon's general population**

From the above analysis of local government newsletters it might be supposed that the news and intelligence which arrived in Devon circulated only amongst local and central

<sup>75</sup> SP 12/278, fol. 209.

<sup>76</sup> PWDRO, 1/359/21.

<sup>77</sup> SP 12/271, fol. 200.

<sup>78</sup> Mears, Queenship and Political Discourse, 171.

government elites. However, archival evidence reveals that this was not the case. A number of letters survive from the late-Elizabethan period which indicate a much more widespread circulation of information concerning the Spanish fleet throughout the lower echelons of Devon society. Thus, when the Mayor of Plymouth, John Sparke wrote to the Privy Council in February 1593, he articulated his concerns that ‘sondrie of thinhabitauntes [were] putt into suche feare’ as a result of the reports made ‘by divers Englishmen and manye other straungers that are come latelie out of Spaigne’; on 12 April 1596 Sir Ferdinando Gorges complained in a letter to Lord Burghley that the ‘daylye rumores of th[e]nemies intent, to put for these p[ar]tes to burne and spoyle theym’ was causing most men to be ‘full of feare & in doubt what to doe’; while on 29 July 1599 the earl of Bath informed the Privy Council that there was ‘some feare and terro<sup>r</sup> putt into the myndes of those of Plymouthe and the rest of the southe Coaste by reason of a late Fleete discovered neere vnto the shoare there aboute supposed to be Enemeyes’.<sup>79</sup> The Privy Council responded to letters of this nature by ordering the earl of Bath ‘to apprehend & Comytt to prison the aucthors & spreaders of such fals idle & mutynous reportes’ and suggested that he should ‘appoynte a Provoste martiall who may haue authoritie to apprehend such ... vagrant p[er]sons that goe vpp & downe the Country, lyeing losslye w[i]thout labouring & to see them Comitted to pryson’.<sup>80</sup> Such an order reflects the Elizabethan government’s concern that the passage of rumour and news amongst the ordinary folk of England was politically destabilising. Thus, just as it was an offence to speculate on the health of the Queen, it was also an offence to speculate on the perceived threat of Spanish invasion.<sup>81</sup> For that reason it seems highly unlikely, in contrast to what Lindsay Boynton has argued for earlier periods in relation to Hampshire, that during the late-Elizabethan period Devon’s beacon network was ever ‘fired’ to convey messages within and beyond the county’s borders.<sup>82</sup>

<sup>79</sup> SP 12/244, fol. 119; SP 12/257, fol. 28; SP 12/271, fol. 200.

<sup>80</sup> DRO 1392M/L1599/17; Lindsay Boynton, *The Elizabethan Militia, 1558-1638* (Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1971), 149. A provost marshal was a royal officer charged with enforcing public order (a precursor to the modern military policeman). For more on their role and remit see Lindsay Boynton, ‘The Tudor Provost-Marshal’, *The English Historical Review* 77:304 (July, 1962), 437-55.

<sup>81</sup> Robert P. Adams, ‘Despotism, Censorship, and Mirrors of Power Politics in Late Elizabethan Times’, *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 10:3 (Autumn, 1979), 5-16; Michael Braddick, *State Formation in Early Modern England, c.1550-1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 151 n.52.

<sup>82</sup> Boynton, *Elizabethan Militia*, 132-9. One would suppose that if the beacons were customarily fired between 1588 and 1603 reference would be made to this in the Privy Council Register. However, a detailed inspection of the register’s entries reveals just one mention of a beacon being fired and in that case those responsible were imprisoned for a time in the Marshalsea (APC, XV, p. 14). Much more common are the entries that relate to watching and guarding the beacons (APC, XV, 273; APC, XVI, 194; APC, XVII, 222 and 397; APC, XXI, 131, 133 and 166; APC, XXIV, 39; APC, XXV, 304 and 440; APC, XXVI, 289; APC, XXX, 367), dismissing beacon sentries during the winter months (APC, XVI, 297 and 302; APC, XIX, 79 and 480; APC, XXI, 470; APC, XXII, 160; APC, XXIII, 264-5); APC, XXV, 51-3; APC, XXIX, 191 and 288), and arbitration of disputes pertaining to the funding of the beacon network (APC, XVIII, 167; APC, XXIV, 39; APC, XXVI, 289; APC, XXVII, 77, 226 and 316).

To elucidate this viewpoint it is helpful to provide a case study. On 25 July 1599 the threat of Spanish invasion appeared to have become a reality for the inhabitants of Plymouth when an unidentified fleet was spotted offshore. At seven o'clock that evening Lieutenant Edward Dodington chose not to fire Plymouth's beacon.<sup>83</sup> Instead he wrote a hurried note to the Privy Council in which he informed them that there 'is a Fleete at this instant coming in vpon vs the wind at north west, by all liklyhoode it should be the enemy'. Having scribbled his signature and sealed the letter Dodington dispatched it post haste to the council utilising the royal post-horse service.<sup>84</sup> However, Dodington had been too hasty in his dispatch and, shortly afterwards, with some embarrassment, he wrote again to the council to explain that the fleet he had feared as hostile was in fact merely 'Fleminges bounde for Rochell [La Rochelle]'.<sup>85</sup> Had Plymouth's beacon been lit on this occasion Devon and the rest of the south-western counties would have no doubt been mistakenly placed on alert, and panic would have ensued. As it has been revealed, the Privy Council were at pains to ensure that this sort of widespread chaos was minimised. It was therefore ordered by the earl of Bath that the county's beacons were only to be fired 'upon show of 10 sail of ships that shall offer any attempt of landing'.<sup>86</sup> As it panned out, such a large force never actually attempted a landing in Devon and therefore the county's beacons evidently remained unlit throughout the late-Elizabethan period.<sup>87</sup> Thus, the romanticist notion that the intricate network of beacons strategically positioned in each of England's counties was used to relay the news that the Spanish Armada had arrived off the coast of Devon in July 1588 would appear to be unfortunately nothing more than a myth.<sup>88</sup> Instead the beacon network was, in reality, a measure of last resort only to be used in the event of an actual landing (not an offshore sighting) in order to alert the local authorities and initiate the mustering of the county militias.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Plymouth's beacon was situated on the Hoe and was one of a network of approximately eighty-nine strategically positioned throughout Devon. This would appear to be a 'considerable total, [and] probably the highest for any English county' – Kent had just forty-three while Hampshire and southern Sussex possessed twenty-four apiece (Percy Russell, 'Fire Beacons in Devon', Transactions of the Devonshire Association 87 (1955), 250-302).

<sup>84</sup> SP 12/271, fol. 184.

<sup>85</sup> SP 12/271, fol. 185.

<sup>86</sup> Historical Manuscript Commission, The Manuscripts of the Duke of Somerset, The Marquis of Ailesbury, and Sir T. H. G. Puleston (London: HMSO, 1898), 4; APC, XVII, 397 and 402.

<sup>87</sup> However, even if there had been a Spanish landing of ten sail or more John Roberts has convincingly argued against the idea that all of England's beacons would have been fired. Instead, he describes a less grand system whereby a small number of beacons were to be used to pinpoint the location of a landing (John Roberts, Devon and the Armada (East Wittering: Gooday Publishers, 1988), 156).

<sup>88</sup> David H. Montgomery (ed.), Heroic Ballads with Poems of War and Patriotism (Boston, MA, 1890), 50-8.

<sup>89</sup> Paula Martin has agreed with this contention when discussing the approach of the Spanish Armada in July 1588. However, she does concede that 'some fires were definitely lit, and were assumed by

Nevertheless, such attempts to restrict the circulation of information likely to engender panic amongst the ordinary inhabitants of late-Elizabethan Devon was futile given the fact that the sources of much of the alarming talk shared by the county's inhabitants were the land based sightings of the supposed Spanish fleet. Indeed, the evidence used throughout this article has demonstrated that much of the information circulating in the county was largely unprivileged and so by implication it can be inferred that it was readily accessible to a broad spectrum of Devon's society in one form or another, especially those living in and around the county's ports where land-based sightings of the Spanish were most common. Thus, by identifying a number of references that were made by the political elites in their correspondence concerning the widespread fear and anxiety that was endemic amongst the county's general population, this section has been able to offer more than just an inference of widespread circulation. Indeed it has provided an important, albeit indirect, glimpse at a much broader network of news and intelligence to the one which is predominantly depicted in the extant documents. This is crucial as it sheds light directly on the issue of whether or not ordinary folk were folded within local news networks; providing some rare concrete evidence to confirm that which would intuitively have been expected.

### **Conclusion**

By focussing on late-Elizabethan Devon's news and intelligence network this article has examined one of the key ways in which the county was exploited by local and central government officials during the Elizabethan war with Spain. Because of their geographical location and extensive continental trade links the ports of south Devon all served as vital hubs for receiving information concerning the whereabouts and intention of the Spanish fleet. While the veracity of this information was often questionable it was nevertheless diligently pooled, recorded and circulated by Devon's political elite in the form of local government newsletters in order to measure the likelihood of the worst case scenario: a Spanish land invasion. The prevalence of local government newsletters in the State Papers and other centrally held archives provides historians with a substantial documentary platform from which to expose how other provincial news networks served the localities, as well as the centre, with information. Indeed, this article has revealed that part of the reason why local government newsletters exist in such large quantity is because they provided the political elite living in Devon and other counties distant from the court with a mechanism for acquiring patronage from Elizabeth's chief ministers. The article has also briefly discussed the social depth of late-Elizabethan Devon's news networks. Central government attempted

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the Spaniards to be a system of beacons, spreading news of their arrival' (Martin, Spanish Armada Prisoners, 21). This may well have been the less grandiose system outlined by Roberts.

to restrict the general population's access to information likely to instil panic by ordering the appointment of provost marshals and, it would appear, choosing not to fire the beacons during times of emergency. Nevertheless, this was largely futile in light of Devon's frontline location and the unprivileged nature of early modern intelligence gathering. Thus, by exposing the complex, multi-faceted and socially inclusive intelligence network that operated in the first instance within late-Elizabethan Devon, but which also had connections with the capital, the vital role played by local government officials in servicing the localities, as well as the centre, with information has been recognised and the current London centric model of early modern news has been challenged.

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