

**"STREETS OF OLD  
PLYMOUTH"**

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"Streets of Old Plymouth" by Charles E. Eldred & W. H. K. Wright

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**CHARLES E. ELDRED & W. H. K. WRIGHT**

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## HISTORIC PLYMOUTH.

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**T**WO characteristic forces of the times which go hand in hand are the destruction of the picturesque and the creation of the hideous. This sweeping assertion is made under great provocation. The few traces of the past which stand upon the ground whereon old Plymouth stood are getting fewer day by day. As one by one the old gabled houses vanish so the ghosts which haunt them are laid, and the legendary or historic associations of a spot become forgotten when a factory smoke-stack marks the site. These however are signs which denote a town's increasing prosperity.

Unhappily the old streets where once the wealthy merchants of the town resided have degenerated into a region of courts and alleys and decaying tenements given over to squalor and poverty. From crazy casements peer unwholesome faces,—too often of women,—slovenly, bloated, and unkempt. The sky-line of the roof-ridge suggests a wave of the sea. The plaster is falling from the walls in flakes. The windows lean awry in every direction, and the whole tottering structure is only saved from falling like a pack of cards by a stout warehouse at its side, against which it leans incapable of self-support.

A lamentable state of things, truly; but observe the remedy.

The old houses disappear, to be replaced by a red brick foundry or factory. From the confines of the town there shoot forth endless rows of hastily built dwellings in unsightly and monotonous sequence. They stretch and multiply like the limbs of some foul hydra, poisoning what they cannot devour of field and hedgerow. And here you shall in time see multiplied counterparts of the faces which thronged the courts and alleys of the old town.

If you would raise the ghosts which haunt them, walk through these narrow streets at dusk. The time-worn corbels supporting the projecting window-frames or gables will come to life as grotesque carvings. The craftsmen who chiselled them may have worked on board the ships of Drake or Hawkins and found inspiration in stories from the lips of the first men to sail round the globe.

It is but a step down to the wharves of Sutton Pool, where on one side the tawny-sailed fishing boats cluster thick as bees, and on the other grimy colliers are discharging coal with a rattle of winches in a cloud of exhaust steam. The little Anglo-Saxon fishing settlement which the Normans discovered



upon the shores of this well-sheltered natural harbour they registered as Sutone—South Town—which has come to us as Sutton. Its importance as a harbour slowly but surely increased, until in 1298 we find it contributing a ship to the King's Fleet. The town's history as a naval port may be considered to commence from this time.

Sutton Pool was the centre about which Plymouth grew, and from the margin of which the main thoroughfares radiated more or less irregularly. The most convenient landing place was probably near the end of Southside Street, for no quays or wharves were built till the days of Drake.

The earliest days of the 14th century witnessed the introduction of the ducking-stool. The one last in use, and which had its place in this neighbourhood, is still preserved in the Municipal Offices of the town.

We may picture the stocks as being somewhere hard by, and can even feel a certain amount of envy for an occupant as we imagine the scenes he was privileged to witness. He sees parties of pious pilgrims embarking to journey to the shrines of France and Italy. They are met, and rudely jostled by the rough mariners swarming ashore from the ships of war, and riotously disappearing into the narrow streets. Towards nightfall the sound of their roystering and singing in the taverns is drowned by the shouts and clamour of an approaching crowd. The cries and exclamations tell of a conflict at close quarters. He hears the surging mass stumbling over the thwarts of boats. As the splash of oars dies away it does not need the voices of excited women to inform him that Sir Reginald Cobham's press-gang has made a successful raid. He counts himself fortunate that he escaped observation, else would the gang have made little ado in adding him, stocks and all, to the tale of captives.

These were days, too, when brave pageants fringed the shore, and with one consent the folk kept universal holiday. As when fresh from the victory of Poitiers, the Black Prince landed with a company of royal prisoners, chief among them King John of France himself.

As yet the town maintained no regular garrison, but lay open to the attacks of marauding French, who, whenever they effected a landing, spread terror through the district, burning and pillaging houses and taking prisoners to be held for ransom. An unusually audacious raid provoked one William Wilford, then in command of the Western Navy, to fall upon their fleet with such effect that he captured forty ships laden with wine, oil, soap and iron. Yet not content with this he landed on their coasts, burning and laying waste many towns and villages. These attacks resulted in a fortified wall being built about the town, the money being raised by the sale of indulgences granted by Bishop Stafford. The inhabitants next petitioned Henry VI. to grant a Charter of Incorporation. It embodied a request that the Mayor and commonalty might

lawfully and without punishment strengthen the walls and fortify and embattle the towers. This petition was acceded to upon the Prior of Plympton agreeing to relinquish the ancient rights he held over the town for an annual equivalent in money.

Sutton Pool was at one time part of the Duchy of Cornwall, and was in 1617 let by Prince Charles of Wales and Duke of Cornwall, for twenty-one years, at an annual rental of £13 6s. 8d. to be paid in good and lawful money of England. It entitled the holders, John Hawker and John Howell, to some curious profits, viz. :—

“Anchorage, keyladge, measuradge or busheladge, fines of fisher boats and pottage due.”

But the most excellent Prince reserved a few perquisites to himself, such as “prisadge, butteradge, goods of pyrates” and a few other such items.

The name of Plymouth's first Mayor is perpetuated in the saying, “As big as Ketherich's pie.” This “great Pye,” to which fish, flesh and fowl all contributed, was made for the feast of the Mayor's installation, and was of so huge a size that an oven had to be built for its baking.

A few years later a feast took place which must have outdone Ketherich's. Thomas Greyle, on being a second time chosen Mayor, gave a great banquet and held a tournament on the Hoe. A brave gathering attended this, of Knights, Lords and Ladies, of noble family from far and near, who were accommodated in a gay pavilion erected at the Mayor's expense.

While Columbus was opening the way to the New World and the Spaniards, conquering Mexico and Peru, ranged unchallenged lords of the seas, most of the vessels sailing out of Plymouth were small merchant ships trading with France, Spain, and Portugal.

Under the direct influence and encouragement of Henry VIII., the seamen of Plymouth went further afield. One of these, a Captain William Hawkins, came especially under the King's notice. He undertook a voyage down the Coast of Guinea, where he loaded with gold and ivory. Then crossing to Brazil, he established friendly relations with the natives, bringing home the King as a willing guest.

Another Plymouth captain, Robert Thorne, set out in the *Dominus Vobiscum*, in a search for the North-West Passage. There was never a lack of volunteers to man ships for these expeditions, some influenced only by the spirit of adventure, others by a hope of making their fortunes. Yet whatever their hopes and motives, the last act of a crew before embarking was to go in a body to St. Andrew's Church and there take the Sacrament together. With their hopes realised or shattered and their numbers lessened, their first errand on landing was to repair to the same Church to give thanks for their safe return.

In Looe Street and St. Andrew's Street are houses still standing that may have sheltered sailors who worked the *Great Harry*, that wonder of her day, manned by a crew of seven hundred men. This ship, and the fleet which surrounded her, gathered together by Henry VIII. after the Pope's sentence of excommunication, so drained the seaport of mariners, that for a long time the fishing-boats went in and out of Sutton Pool worked by the women.

Then merchant ships returning from abroad brought strange stories of how men of their crew had been seized by the officers of the Inquisition and thrown into Spanish dungeons or burnt. To avenge these, vessels were built and equipped at the risk and expense of private individuals, and that system of privateering commenced which developed into piracy and buccaneering and culminated in the exploits of Drake.

Though men of Plymouth pined in the cruel captivity of Spain, yet the town lived the life of the times. The May-pole was set up in its season, and holiday kept, while mummers and morris-dancers performed their antics. Upon St. John's Day, a company of players performed miracle plays in the Church. Archery was practised as a sport in the open spaces outside the walls or on the Hoe. Beggars were kept out of town,—beaten out,—by a man who received ten shillings yearly for the duty.

Down by the water-side were shops for the sale of astrolabes and cross-staves, those clumsy implements from which the sextant has been evolved. Here the earliest problems of scientific navigation were discussed by the pilots. What heated arguments there must have been concerning the wonderful new method of rigging vessels which Mr. Fletcher, of Rye, invented, which enabled them to sail to windward by setting sails fore and aft.

The name of Drake was not well known,—although tradition says he lived in Looe Street,—till the *Judith* in sorry plight arrived at Plymouth with the story of the loss of the *Jesus*, at San Juan de Ulloa, with her rich cargo of treasure, the proceeds of a slaving expedition. But when he returned from his voyage in the *Dragon*, his ship coming into harbour on a Sunday morning, the news spread, and quickly reached his family, who were at service in St. Andrew's Church. And the story goes that the people passed out of Church, leaving the preacher to follow, and streaming down the narrow streets, gathered to await his landing upon the new quay which had been built under the Castle.

If stones could speak, the unrevealed secrets of the *Dragon's* mysterious expedition might be divulged by some of the old houses still standing in Looe Street or New Street. In the trawlers and fishermen who inhabit these to-day we see the lineal descendants of men who sailed with Drake.

Plymouth sailors took a part in all the romantic incidents of the *Pelican's* voyage, witnessed the execution of Doughty, weathered the fierce gales of the