# William de la Pole

Merchant
and King's Banker
(†1366)

E. B. FRYDE

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THE HAMBLEDON PRESS
LONDON AND RONCEVERTE

Published by The Hambledon Press 1988

102 Gloucester Avenue, London NW1 8HX (U.K.)

309 Greenbier Avenue, Ronceverte WV 24970 (U.S.A.)

ISBN 0 907628 35 4

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*British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data*

Fryde, E.B.
William de la Pole, merchant and king's banker.
1. De la Pole, William
2. Capitalists and financiers——England——Biography
I. Title
332'.092'4 HG172.D/D

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

Fryde, E.B.
William de la Pole, merchant and king's banker (1366)
On t.p. "1366" is preceded by a dagger.
Bibliography: p. 235-8.
Includes index.
1. De la Pole, William, d. 1366.
2. Merchants——England——Biography.
3. Bankers——England——Biography.
I. Title.
HF3504.6.D4F79 1988 332.1'092'4 [B] 87-26678

Printed and bound by Billing and Sons Ltd., Worcester

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# *Preface*

My interest in the career of William de la Pole of Hull goes back to 1944 when I became aware that he was one of the principal figures in the story of the financing of the early campaigns of the Hundred Years' War. In my D.Phil. thesis on 'Edward III's War Finance, 1337–1341' (Oxford, 1947), I tried to reconstruct the story of his loans but I did not discuss much his motives for lending immense amounts to the king. This is one of the things that I have tried to explain more convincingly in the present book. I have used much of the material included in my thesis but after nearly forty years of further research I have inevitably widened considerably the range of questions that seem worth asking about the significance of his career. I have covered several aspects of his activities in the meantime in a series of articles and short booklets most of which have been republished in my *Studies in Medieval Trade and Finance* (The Hambledon Press, London, 1983, cited henceforth as Fryde, *op. cit.*, 1983). On many matters the present book substantially amplifies and corrects my earlier conclusions.

Any study of Pole is bound to remain unsatisfactory, as we do not possess most of his business records. The only exceptions are some documents produced at the Exchequer during the successive trials of Pole in that court. They make it painfully clear how much we have lost. Thus, this study is reduced largely to a story of Pole's relations with the royal government and has to depend almost entirely on official records. The private archives of his family have almost completely disappeared, largely, it seems, through the destruction of his heir's muniments during the Great Revolt of 1381.

The impersonality of what we term the 'royal government' creates a further obstacle to an adequate understanding of Pole's career. Only very seldom is it possible to suggest with any conviction which members of that government were responsible for dealing with Pole and how the experience of these transactions affected their later treatment of him. The king's personal rôle forms a particularly elusive element, though there are good reasons for thinking that Edward III developed a strong aversion towards him. Because we largely lack private records of other merchants who were Pole's contemporaries, it is seldom possible to establish which of them were Pole's friends or enemies and how their

attitudes to him evolved. This impersonality of evidence is, of course, the common fate of most studies of England in the fourteenth century, but it is particularly frustrating when one is trying to reconstruct the story of a business tycoon who had clearly a powerful and overbearing personality, that compelled men to collaborate with him, but who also aroused much distrust and hostility.

A number of recent publications have made my task somewhat easier and I wish to thank their authors for their generous gifts to me of their books. I have found invaluable the short but masterly book of Dr. R. Horrox, *The de la Poles of Hull* (*East Yorkshire Local History Society*, 1983). She has solved many of the puzzles surrounding William's career and I have followed her judgement on most matters. In the same year she also edited *Selected Rentals and Accounts of Medieval Hull, 1293–1529*, vol. 141 of *Yorkshire Archaeological Society, Record ser.* (volume for 1981). Prof. J. S. Roskell in *The Impeachment of Michael de la Pole, Earl of Suffolk in 1386 in the context of the Reign of Richard II* (Manchester, 1984) has provided a realistic and convincing account of the motives and of the early life of Michael, William's eldest son and heir. His spectacular political career fulfilled William's main ambition of founding a mighty noble family.

A full bibliography of all the works cited in my footnotes would be excessively long and so would be a list of the unpublished sources kept in the Public Record Office in London. But I have provided a select list of secondary works which I have found particularly valuable or useful.

During the span of forty years in which I have been interested in Pole, I have received an immense amount of help and encouragement from many scholars. My first thanks should go to Sir Goronwy Edwards who supervised my doctoral thesis and later read an earlier draft of several chapters of this book. I have been greatly encouraged and helped by May McKisack, Alice Beardwood, Helen Cam, Bertie Wilkinson, Edouard Perroy, V. H. Galbraith, Edward Miller and R. R. Davies. The long array of my references to the records in the Public Record Office in London testifies to the amount of assistance I have received from its many officials. I wish to recall with special gratitude the invaluable help over many legal problems given me by C. A. F. Meekings. Nor could this book have been completed without the facilities offered by the National Library of Wales at Aberystwyth.

I owe thanks to Prof. A. G. Dickens for making this publication possible. My younger friends, Isobel Harvey and Philip W. Davies, have given me most valuable help in preparing this volume for the press.

# *Abbreviations*

Accts. – accounts.
*Bull. Inst. Hist. Research* – *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research.*
*Cal.* – *Calendar.*
*Cal. Inq. P.M.* – *Calendar of Inquisitions Post Mortem.*
*Cal. Pat. R.* – *Calendar of Patent Rolls.*
Chanc. – Chancery.
*Econ. Hist. Rev.* – *Economic History Review.*
*Engl. Hist. Rev.* – *English Historical Review.*
Enr. – enrolled.
Exch. – Exchequer.
Fryde, *op. cit.* (1983) – E. B. Fryde, *Studies in Medieval Trade and Finance* (London, 1983).
Horrox, *ed. cit.* (1983) – R. Horrox, *Selected Rentals and Accounts of Medieval Hull, 1293–1529*, vol. 114 (for 1981) of *Yorkshire Archaeological Society, Record Series* (published in 1983).
Horrox, *op. cit.* (1983) – *The de la Poles of Hull* (*East Yorkshire Local History Society*, 1983).
K.R. – King's Remembrancer's Records.
K.R. Mem. r. – King's Remembrancer's Memoranda Roll (E.159).
L.T.R. – Lord Treasurer's Remembrancer's Records.
L.T.R. Mem. r. – Lord Treasurer's Remembrancer's Memoranda Roll (E.368).
Parl. – parliament.
Pr.s. or pr.s. – privy seal.
P.R.O. – Public Record Office.
r. – roll or rolls.
S.C. – Special Collections, Public Record Office.
*Trans. Royal Hist. Soc.* – *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society.*
warr. – warrants.

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# *Chapter 1*

## I

The career of William de la Pole of Hull forms one of the most remarkable 'success stories' of the fourteenth century.[1] The monastic chronicler of the neighbouring abbey of Meaux, writing within a generation of Pole's death, remembered him as 'second to no English merchant'.[2] This tribute is justified. In the first half of the reign of Edward III Pole was certainly one of the most influential businessmen in England. Other English merchants followed his lead in one major enterprise after another. At times some of his associates did not entirely trust him, it seems with good reason, and yet they continued to follow him.

He was probably a son of a Hull or a Ravenser merchant, but nothing is known about his activities and assets at the start of his business career. His rise to a position of great prominence among English merchants, with his elder brother Richard as his main partner, must have been due entirely to his ability and character. He was a hard, unscrupulous man, who used his associates and then discarded them when they were no more needed. One is reminded of another great royal banker whose career remarkably parallels Pole's life, Jacques Coeur of Bourges, who financed the reconquest by King Charles VII of France of the remaining English possessions in France. Here was another immensely enterprising man, dishonest and hard, with whom many people were terrified to deal, though he differed from Pole in being more consistently loyal to his associates.[3] The financial achievements of both men were based on their ability to borrow huge sums of money from people who would not lend directly to their respective governments.

[1] Most of this introductory chapter is based on the more detailed narrative in the rest of this book. I have also drawn heavily on my various earlier articles and booklets republished in my *Studies in Medieval Trade and Finance* (London, 1983), cited henceforth as Fryde, *op. cit.* (1983).

[2] *Chronica Monasterii de Melsa . . .*, III (*Rolls Series*, 1868), p. 48.

[3] M. Mollat, 'Une équipe: les commis de Jacques Coeur', *Éventail de l'histoire vivante. Hommage à Lucien Febvre* (Paris, 1954), II, pp. 175–87 and M. Mollat, 'Les opérations financières de Jacques Coeur', *La Revue de la Banque*, 18 (1954), pp. 125–41.

Viewed from our modern vantage point, Pole's career assumes an even greater significance than could be grasped by the chronicler of Meaux. He was the first English financier to rival in importance, as a crown banker, the Italian merchants who had been financing the English kings almost continuously from 1272 to 1322.[4] On a relatively small scale he and his brother Richard achieved this position for the first time in 1327–28. But his greatest moment came in 1338–39. Between June 1338 and October 1339 the total amount provided by Pole for the king's service, or otherwise due to him from Edward III, came to just over £111,000 and it is possible that this is still a somewhat incomplete figure. At least £100,770 were advanced by Pole abroad between 20 September 1338 and his return to England early in October 1339. He claimed subsequently that he had borrowed most of it from others and we can well believe him. The amount of money furnished by Pole on this occasion was nearly as large as the loans advanced by the two wealthiest Italian firms in Europe, the Bardi and the Peruzzi of Florence, who jointly provided Edward III in 1338–39, in the space of slightly less than two years, with £125,880. By December 1340 Pole managed to recover from the king 80% of the royal debt due to him. The Bardi and Peruzzi fared far worse.

Medieval merchants might become rich through private business activity but only service to rulers could make them mighty. The fortune and position achieved by William de la Pole raised his family into the ranks of the peerage. Pole seems to have been included among the parliamentary magnates in 1339–40, when he was the lord of the immense royal estate of Burstwick in the hinterland of his native Hull. His eldest son, Michael, was personally summoned to parliament for the first time in January 1366, five months before William's death. His father's fortune launched Michael on a successful military career followed by astonishing political achievements. His service with Edward, the Black Prince, made him one of the magnates closest to Edward's son, the young Richard II. Michael became Lord Chancellor in 1383 and earl of Suffolk in 1385. The defenders of his promotion to the rank of an earl could truthfully insist that his landed fortune amply sufficed to sustain his new dignity.[5] Michael's great grandson, John, duke of Suffolk, became son-in-law of Richard, duke of York. John's eldest son and namesake was recognised in 1484 as heir to the kingdom by his uncle, King Richard III. Had the outcome of the battles of Bosworth or Stoke been different, a descendant of William de la Pole, merchant of Hull, might have become king of England. But after 1487

[4] E. B. Fryde, 'Italian merchants in medieval England, *c.* 1270–*c.* 1500', in *Aspetti della Vita Economica Medievale in Atti del Convegno di Studi nel X Anniversario della morte di Federigo Melis . . . 10–14 Marzo 1984*, pp. 215–31.

[5] J. S. Roskell, *The Impeachment of Michael de la Pole, Earl of Suffolk in 1386 in the Context of the Reign of Richard II* (Manchester, 1984), pp. 125–27.

the implacable hostility of the Tudors eliminated the de la Poles from English politics and ultimately altogether destroyed them.

For over thirty years William was involved in business dealings with the royal government. But his activities assumed a truly national importance only at the start of the war with France in 1336–7. At that time the king's main hope of financing the war lay in the exploitation of the wool trade, taking advantage of England's greatest economic asset, its virtual monopoly of supplying fine wool to the leading industrial centres of the Low Countries. Besides intervening directly in the wool trade, Edward III also reintroduced a much higher rate of duty on exported wool, as Edward I had tried to do once before during the war against France in 1294–97. His grandfather's 'maltolt' had caused universal outcry and it had to be abandoned in 1297 amidst a grave political crisis. Edward III hoped to achieve a more lasting success by securing the help of the English merchants led by William de la Pole. English businessmen became a major source of credit to the crown as an alternative to the Italian firms. It is probable that any crisis in royal finances comparable to that of 1337 would have compelled the English crown to give the native merchants similar opportunities. But it was due above all to Pole and a few of his leading associates that the English wool exporters were organized in 1337 into a Wool Company comprising the majority of the important merchants in the kingdom. The higher wool duties on exported wool (40s. per sack instead of the peacetime rate of 6s.8d. per sack) were granted by the merchants in 1337 and were destined to remain henceforth the largest single source of royal income. In the years of high exports the customs could yield a very large revenue. Thus in the fiscal year 1350–51 they produced, after the deduction of all the expenses of collection, a net revenue of about £78,250.[6]

The initial scheme for financing the war, put into operation in 1337, soon miscarried. This happened not because it was inherently impracticable, but because of miscalculations and faults on the part of both the merchants and the king's advisers. Pole took advantage of this new situation in 1338–39. He was prepared to lend personally the enormous sums that had been mentioned a moment ago. His chief prize was the acquisition of Burstwick from the king, though Edward III recovered it from Pole as soon as he could. The Hull financier got one more chance to play an important part in the history of his country when in 1343–45 he originated the scheme for the farming of the customs by English merchants. Pole retired from active share in this venture in August 1345, but the methods that he helped to devise were used most successfully to finance the campaigns of 1345–47 whereby

[6] P.R.O., Exch. K.R. Customs accts., E.122/158/37 and L.T.R. Mem. r., E.368/128, *recorda*, Michaelmas, m. 18$^{v}$.

Edward III achieved his first decisive triumphs in France with the victory of Crécy and the capture of Calais.

## II

If one were to concentrate on the failures and the near disasters that marked so much of Edward's war finance in the years 1337–49, the events of this period appear as an aberrant episode in English history. Edward III started by trying to wage the war against France by heavily subsidising a coalition of greedy and unreliable allies.[6a] This was a formula for disaster. Matters were made worse by the speedy failure of the English Wool Company, which was the king's only hope of providing quickly the immense subsidies promised to these allies. Henceforth from the beginning of 1338 to December 1340 Edward was on a financial treadmill. He chose to believe that, if only he had not quarrelled with the Wool Company between December 1337 and February 1338, all would have been well, but this was of course a delusion. It was the start of the king's deep-rooted displeasure with Pole who was blamed for the disasters that followed. For the time being the Hull financier remained indispensable. But whatever money the king could raise in 1338–39, including Pole's huge loans, always proved insufficient and usually came too late to procure any enduring results. Things got far worse in 1340. In its desperation, the government opted for a new, untried type of tax, modelled on the ecclesiastical tithes. One of the chief attractions lay in the fact that no one knew how much it might yield and, therefore, there was no realistic limit to the assignments that could be granted on it to the king's creditors. Over £200,000 were expected in two years, but this only showed that Edward III and his advisers were continuing to live in a financial cloud-cuckoo land. This tax, known as the Ninth, was a miserable failure and by the end of 1340 yielded only about £15,000. Despite his initial, important naval victory off Sluys, Edward's expedition to the Netherlands in that year (June–November 1340) proved an utterly frustrating experience. The king's anger was vented on ministers and financiers at home. Pole had prudently withdrawn in 1340 from large-scale lending to the crown. This only served to increase the king's resentment against him and between December 1340 and May 1342 he spent over two years in various royal prisons.

[6a] Between November 1337 and March 1340 at least £95,615 were paid by Edward III to his more important allies in the Netherlands and Germany. See Fryde, *op. cit.* (1983), no. II, p. 1170 and no. VII p. 1196. This total amounted to much less than the king's original promises.

Some wider considerations may add to our understanding of the events of 1337–40. It was an instance of the complete unsuitability of Edward III's government for managing the economy. The wool merchants whom it was trying to organize in 1337–8, the multitude of country dealers, who were needed to market the Ninth of 1340, all lived in an entirely different world from the magnates who shared the king's impatience to get on with the war and the royal officials accustomed to ordering about a usually fairly docile mass of taxpayers.

The wool merchants were attuned to a fairly slow rhythm of affairs, where most dealings took place on credit and a year might elapse between the original purchase of wool in England and the satisfaction of the wool growers out of the proceeds of the gradual sales of wool abroad. The merchants' wits were chiefly exercised by leisurely speculations about rates of exchange and conditions of sale so that they might squeeze somewhat greater profits out of highly competitive markets. The royal envoys, who in the autumn of 1337 were in charge of the wool shipments organized by Pole's English Wool Company, were demanding from the merchants impossibly large sums at a pace wholly at variance with these traders' normal habits and expectations. Furthermore, the merchants were determined to sell to foreign buyers of their choice, while the envoys were insisting that sales to Flemings could not be allowed until Flanders renounced its allegiance to the king of France. The wool scheme of 1337 collapsed largely on these two issues of the timetable of sales and of the freedom of the merchants to seek out the most profitable markets. Bishop Henry Burghersh of Lincoln, who was the leader of the royal mission to the Netherlands, came from an important magnate family and had been in the past Lord Chancellor and the King's Treasurer. His fellow envoys were military commanders of much distinction. These men had no patience with the leisurely speculations and devious schemes of the merchants and were wholly out of sympathy with a group of traders who did not share their sense of urgency about the king's wartime needs.

The marketing of the ecclesiastical tithes was annually one of the most important commercial events, involving most corn traders in the kingdom. By offering for sale in the summer of 1340 a second tithe in the shape of the royal Ninth, the government was depressing still further an already stagnant market, as England was suffering that year from a serious economic crisis. To expect in these circumstances that the Ninth might be sold speedily was to court disaster. Matters were made still worse by the government's insistence that sales should not be allowed below a minimum price which was fixed unduly high. No wonder that over much of England little or no money could be raised from this ill-conceived tax.

The men who made up the central government in England in the summer and autumn of 1340 included many councillors and senior

officials of long experience. But in the king's absence abroad they found it difficult to get themselves obeyed in many parts of the country, especially when they were insisting on impracticable things like sales of the Ninth at excessive prices. In the unusual emergency of 1340 these veteran administrators appear to have been dangerously out of touch with local realities. In fairness to them we should assume that the concept of an economic depression was outside their experience and thinking. They were used to an authoritarian style of government where the king's subjects were constantly ordered to carry out the king's requirements and were usually too regimented to dare to disobey. But in the summer of 1340 the royal ministers were unnerved by the experience of having to cope with mass passive resistance to the sales of the Ninth and to other fiscal exactions. They were faced by an impoverished population, terrified by the prospect of possible economic ruin or even starvation.

The respite from excessively costly warfare between 1341 and 1345 enabled the royal government to re-establish somewhat its shattered finances. The mountain of debt accumulated in 1337–40 was largely ignored. Before the war restarted in earnest, Edward had found a new Treasurer, William Edington (1344–56), who proved the most resourceful and efficient of all his financial ministers. Pole had resumed his career of creating ingenious companies based on the exploitation of the wool trade in order to secure a partial rehabilitation. But he withdrew again from large scale financial enterprises when the renewal of the war in Aquitaine in 1345 threatened to start a new period of immensely costly warfare. Its burden was sustained by Pole's former associates exploiting the farm of the customs which Pole had launched in 1343–45. This time the descent into bankruptcy was not quite so speedy. Edward III established the superiority of the English armies over the French by his victory at Crécy and captured Calais. It was not the king but his financiers that were reduced to financial ruin. The last of the succession of syndicates farming the customs, the firm of Chiriton and Co., were in a parlous state already by the early months of 1348, before the epidemic of plague hit England. The upheaval caused by it only hastened their collapse and they were declared bankrupt by the king on 21 April 1349.

The farming of the customs and the financial schemes connected with it profited only a small group of businessmen at the expense of most other economic interests in England. The wool producers, the lesser merchants and the majority of the royal creditors were especially bound to suffer. One of the principal profits of these royal bankers in the decade after 1343 came from their exclusive right to redeem royal debts on terms that offered very little to the original royal creditors. Pole had started this idea with the English Company of 1343–45. The farmers of the customs and other financiers connected with them

behaved in an arbitrary and unscrupulous way which increased still further their unpopularity. There were repeated complaints in parliaments about their misconduct and about the abuses they perpetrated, or at least condoned. What their countrymen thought about them was shown most clearly in September 1353. A Great Council procured from the king an ordinance prohibiting export of wool and other staple English commodities by Englishmen, Irishmen and Welshmen on pain of life and limb and of the confiscation of all goods and chattels. This prohibition, unprecedented in English history, was designed to ensure that the English farmers of the customs and their associates would lose their predominance over the wool trade.

Between 1350 and 1355 there occurred another lull in extensive warfare. Edward III could, at long last, assume direct exploitation of the customs without having to mortgage this largest source of his revenue to a succession of financiers. Nor did he need these men any more to persuade merchant assemblies to concede to him the renewals of the high wartime duties on exports. Parliaments were quite willing to make such grants as long as the influence of the distrusted crown bankers was ended. The high duties were accepted as indispensable as long as the war lasted. Besides, some of the annual fees of the magnates and a large proportion of the war wages could be repaid only out of the increased revenue from the customs. As Eileen Power unforgettably put it: 'The result was a parliament in which were safely corralled all interests except the financier – the rogue elephant – who was left outside and for the moment bankrupt'.[7] The greatest rogue elephant in estimation of well-informed men was William de la Pole. In November 1353 he could be safely put on trial in order to force him to abandon all his claims on the crown.

The proceedings against Pole formed only one of a whole series of trials of crown bankers and royal financial agents in the 1340s and 1350s. Treasurer Edington took a keen interest in these prosecutions. Some of them were amply justified. Collectively all these trials had important and enduring consequences. There was the discouraging realisation that too open a pursuit of profit out of lending to the king involved unwelcome publicity and unpopularity and made merchants very vulnerable to prosecution by the crown once their usefulness was ended. Many leading English businessmen became afraid to get too closely involved in financial dealings with the crown. This more cautious attitude of the majority of English merchants is well illustrated by an incident in the parliament of 1382. To a request from the government for a large loan on the security of the customs, the merchants there present replied that they neither wished nor dared to lend in this manner for fear that they might suffer the fate of 'Monsire

[7] E. Power, *The Wool Trade in English Medieval History* (Oxford, 1941), p. 85.

William de la Pole, John Wesenham, John Malwayn, Walter Cheriton and many other great merchants, who for such transactions made with the king in his great need and for a little gain, have since been impeached for this cause and in other collateral ways and in the end some of them utterly destroyed'.[8]

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 119.

# Chapter 2

## I

In the earlier part of his business career William often, though not always, acted together with his brother Richard. We still possess a detailed deed, dated 12 July 1331, dissolving their partnership.[1] The huge size of their combined assets at that time suggests a long period of previous joint activity. We also hear of a third brother, John, who sometimes joined the other two, and who occasionally served William after 1331.[2]

The biographer of the de la Poles has to face one major, initial problem. We do not know the name or the occupation of their father, though it is probable that he may have been a Yorkshire merchant. The matter is of some importance, as one would like to know what kind of assets were available to the two brothers at the start of their commercial career. To judge by the earliest glimpses we get of them, they probably inherited some kind of business which they built up by their own efforts into a much larger fortune.

The later eminence of the family has produced a long series of speculations about its origin. I have checked patiently the assertions and alleged references to sources offered since the seventeenth century by a succession of antiquarians and historians. Except for the one sober exception of William Camden,[2a] they all tried to establish an illustrious descent for the de la Poles, or at least to make them into the sons of a knight. It is a tissue of misconceptions, misquotations, and at times, one

[1] L. M. Stanwell (ed.), *Calendar of the Ancient Deeds, Letters, Miscellaneous Old Documents etc. in the Archives of the Corporation of the City and County of Kingston upon Hull* (Hull, 1951, cited hereafter as Stanwell, *Calendar* [1951], no. D. 28, on p. 7. The indenture of partition is printed in Ch. Frost, *Notices relative to the early History of the Town and Port of Hull* (London, 1827), Appendix, pp. 39–40.

[2] *E.g.* in 1337–8. See below, Chapter 7.

[2a] W. Camden, *Britannia* (6th ed., London, 1600), pp. 416, 637 (numbered erroneously 647) and p. 5 of the addition '*Ad lectorem*' (at the end of the volume). Besides the chronicle of Meaux (*cit. supra*) Camden also cited the Originalia Rolls among the royal archives and insisted that there was nothing ignoble about the descent of a great family from a merchant.

fears, pure speculation inspired by nothing save nobiliary snobbery. It all proved a wild goose chase and, on critical scrutiny, this misinformation dissolved into thin air. Of late, Dr. Rosemary Horrox, in her brief but very judicious study of the family, has reached the same conclusion independently. Her summary of these abortive past attempts gives all the information about them that anybody may need to seek.[3]

The one piece of tradition about William's origin that might be taken seriously is the assertion of Thomas Burton, abbot of the Cistercian house of Meaux in 1396–99, that William had started his career as a merchant of Ravenser.[4] This was the original harbour at the southern tip of the peninsula of Holderness. Its exposed position had led Edward I to replace it by a new harbour developed by him after 1293, higher up in the estuary of the Humber, which from that year appears in records as the royal town of Kingston-upon-Hull.[5] The new town was created on land bought by Edward I from the abbey of Meaux and its monastic chronicle is an important source for the history of the royal foundation and for the fortunes of the early notables of the new town.

Ultimately the harbour came to be known by the shorter name of Hull from the little river that flows into the Humber at this point. The town lies north of the Humber and the main settlement lay west of the river Hull. But there was a suburb of Drypool east of it, which already existed and had a church in 1297.[6] From it may have possibly originated the family name of the de la Poles.[7] It may be worth noting that William possessed some property in Drypool in 1334.[8]

John Rottenherring was one of Hull's notables with whom the de la Pole brothers were closely connected in the earlier part of their career. The family may have come from Ravenser where in 1295 a Robert Rottenherring was one of the seven most highly taxed burgesses.[9] In 1307–10 John was keeper of the royal manor of Myton that adjoined

[3] R. Horrox, *The de la Poles of Hull* (East Yorkshire Local History Society, 1983), pp. 3–8, referred to henceforth as Horrox, *op. cit.* (1983), to distinguish it from her edition of the rentals and accounts of Hull, cited henceforth as Horrox, *ed. cit.* (1983). The latter work, *Selected Rentals and Accounts of Medieval Hull, 1293–1528*, constitutes vol. 141 (for 1981), of *Yorkshire Archaeological Soc., Record Ser.* (published 1983).

[4] *Chronica Monasterii de Melsa* (ed. E. A. Bond, *Rolls Ser.*), III (1868), p. 48: 'Praescriptus autem dominus Willelmus de la Pole prius mercator fuit et apud Ravenserod mercandizandi scientia instructus' (cited more fully, *supra*, Chapter 1). The entire passage in the Meaux chronicle, of which this sentence forms a part, was cited by Camden, *op. cit.*, p. 637 (erroneously numbered 647).

[5] For the foundation of Hull by Edward I, see T. F. Tout 'Medieval town planning' (a lecture in 1916), reprinted in his *Collected Papers*, III (Manchester 1934), pp. 80–1 and K. J. Allison (ed.), *Victoria Country History, Yorkshire, East Riding*, I, *The City of Kingston upon Hull* (1969), pp. 13–20.

[6] Allison, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

[7] E. Ekwall, *Studies on the Population of Medieval London* (Stockholm, 1956), p. 288.

[8] *Cal. Pat. R., 1334–8*, p. 36.

[9] P.R.O., K. R. Tax accts., E. 179/239, no. 219.

the borough of Hull.[10] By September 1320 he was sharing with Richard de la Pole (presumably William's brother) and four other men a burgage holding with buildings in Hullstreet (facing the river Hull, the present High Street) for which they were paying jointly the considerable annual rent of 26s. 8d.[11] If Richard was our William's brother, as I think he was, it is important to note that at this relatively early stage in his career he was sharing property with other substantial townsmen. As men of the social standing of John Rottenherring would not normally associate closely with people of much inferior status, this does increase the probability that the de la Poles sprang from similar burgess stock.

Dr. Horrox believes that 'Richard was perhaps born around 1295, or even slightly later'. I shall be arguing that his date of birth might be pushed further back to *c.* 1290 at least, or even earlier. But it is true that the first undoubted appearance of Richard and William, acting jointly, dates from 1317.

Dr. Horrox, by conjecturing that Richard may have been born as late as 1295, had to assume that a Richard 'who sold wine to the archbishop of York in 1308 probably belongs to an earlier generation'.[12] I am less convinced of that, but it is true that there is a gap of seven years between this incident and the next appearance of a Richard de la Pole in business records.[13] Unfortunately only one account for the customs at Hull survives from the intervening period and the de la Poles do not figure in it.[14]

Once Richard and William begin to appear in official records in 1317, and again in 1321, they are holding posts that would usually be filled by men of some seniority. This is the reason why I am inclined to make them somewhat older than Dr. Horrox would suggest. In 1317 the two brothers were appointed as the deputies of the king's chief butler and entrusted with the purchasing of wine at Hull.[15] From January 1321 Richard was one of the collectors of customs at that harbour and in the same year the two brothers were appointed jointly as chamberlains of Hull and were thus responsible for the town's finances at a very dangerous moment in its history.[16] Lastly, William, the second of Richard's sons to survive into adult age, was born as early as 1315.[17]

[10] Allison, *op. cit.*, p. 29, n. 18.

[11] P.R.O., Rentals and Surveys, S.C. 11/746.

[12] Horrox, *op. cit.*, pp. 5–6.

[13] *Ibid.*, pp. 3, 8. Dr. Horrox assumes that all this refers to William's brother and I am inclined to agree.

[14] P.R.O., K. R. Customs accts., E. 122/56, no. 16 (1313–4).

[15] *Cal Pat. R., 1317–21*, p. 9.

[16] R. L. Baker, *The English Customs Service, 1307–1343: A Study of Medieval Administration* (Philadelphia, 1961), p. 61; Allison, *op. cit.*, pp. 21–2, 33.

[17] Horrox, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

There is no evidence whatsoever for the dates of birth of Richard's brothers but the details of their joint business activities suggest that William may have been only slightly younger. John is a shadow figure and will flit through this story only very rarely.

## II

The principal difficulty facing a historian of the business careers of William and his brothers is the almost total disappearance of their trading accounts and also of the bulk of their charters and other muniments. In the case of William, and of his widow Katherine, the losses may have been due to a later disaster, because, as she and her eldest son, Michael, complained in August 1381, 'their charters and muniments . . . were burnt by the insurgents' in 'the late insurrection'.[18] They were specifically referring to title deeds to a property at Hull and it is interesting to note that they should have been keeping these, and presumably other records as well, on one of their country estates, presumably somewhere in East Anglia. This was the area where by 1381 lay the main group of the de la Pole properties and where the depredations of the peasant rebels were particularly extensive.

Comparatively little can be pieced together about the business activities of Richard and William in the second half of the reign of Edward II. This was the period when for the first time they were beginning to achieve some prominence as merchants. The earliest notice happens to be also one of the most interesting. In February 1316, at the time of the great famine that pushed the prices of corn and other victuals to unprecedented heights, Richard secured 'a royal safe-conduct to go beyond the sea to buy corn and victuals for sale in England'.[19]

The Scottish Wars, started by Edward I's invasion of Scotland in 1296, brought widespread devastation and misery to the North of England but were a boon to some of the merchants of the leading harbours of Yorkshire and Northumberland. For long periods the king and his court resided at York giving to northern merchants exceptional opportunities for lucrative contacts with the royal government.[19a] Hull

[18] *Cal. Close R., 1381–5*, p. 75 (20 August 1381).

[19] Horrox, *op. cit.* (1983), p .3. For the famine see most recently J. Kershaw, 'The great famine and agrarian crisis in England, 1315–22', *Past and Present*, 59 (1973). The king's chief banker in those years, Antonia Pesagno of Genoa, was importing massive cargoes of grain from the Mediterranean. *Cf.* N. Fryde, 'Antonio Pessagno of Genoa, King's Merchant of Edward II of England', *Studi in Memoria di Federigo Melis*, II (Naples, 1978), p. 173.

[19a] For the importance for York of the government's residence there see E. Miller, 'Medieval York' in *Victoria County History, Yorkshire: the City of York* (1961), pp. 54–6.

became 'a principal supply port for armies and garrisons in Scotland'.[20] Richard de la Pole was not exaggerating when in a memorandum of 23 February 1330, concerned with the taxation of the wine trade, he said that Hull 'was and is one of the best ports of England', producing large revenues from the imports of wine through it.[21] As deputy butler at Hull Richard was accused in 1320 by some Gascon and German traders of forcibly purchasing much more wine than the king required and 'in very truth makes purchase for his own proper use'.[22] One is inclined to believe these and other charges of sharp practice, though they clearly did not harm Richard's position as one of the rising notables of Hull.

As Hull's two chamberlains from 1321 to 1324, Richard and William had exceptional opportunities to attract the king's eye and to ingratiate themselves with important royal officials.[23] Their account records that when in the middle of October 1322 Edward II briefly took refuge from pursuit by the Scots at his royal manor of Burstwick, the town of Hull sent him twelve oars and other equipment worth £4. 18s. While they were acting as the city's chamberlains, the town gave to the treasurer Walter Norwich, Edward's keeper of the privy seal and future chancellor, Ralph Baldock, the chief justice Sir Geoffrey Scrope and other notables, wine worth £52. 5s., while gifts to various magnates, tax collectors, escheators and other notables who visited Hull amounted to £6. 12s. 11d.[24]

The personal relations established with the members of the king's entourage while he was at Burstwick might conceivably have initiated the two brothers' subsequent closer contacts with the royal government. During the next two months we find them involved in two separate transactions with the exchequer which was then residing at York.[25] On 9 November 1322 they gave a recognizance to the exchequer for 12 sacks of wool and 65 cartloads of lead purchased from the royal custodians of the confiscated properties of Thomas, earl of

[20] E. Miller, *War in the North* (Hull, 1960), p. 9.

[21] N. S. B. Gras, *The Early English Customs System* (Cambridge, Mass., 1918), p. 211: 'feu et est, un des meillours ports de'Engleterre'.

[22] Hull Corporation Bench Book II, 140, in A. S. Harvey, *The de la Pole Family of Kingston upon Hull* (Hull, 1957), p. 6.

[23] Their account as chamberlains of Hull is the earliest survivor of a very fragmentary series. *Cf.* R. Horrox (ed.), *Selected Rentals and Accounts of Medieval Hull, 1293–1528, Yorkshire Archaeological Society, Record Ser.*, 141 (for 1981, publ. 1983), pp. 22–4. The account is edited on pp. 54–60. For the king's presence at Byland see p. 56. For Edward's flight to Burstwick, north of Hull, see N. Fryde, *The Tyranny and Fall of Edward II, 1321–26* (Cambridge, 1979), p. 131.

[24] Horrox, *ed. cit.* (1983), pp. 56–7.

[25] For the presence of the exchequer at York between April 1322 and July 1323 see D. Broome, 'Exchequer migrations to York in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries', *Essays on Mediaeval History presented to Thomas Frederick Tout* (Manchester, 1925), p. 292.

Lancaster, in Derbyshire, valued at £227.[26] The wool would presumably be intended for export and the lead probably likewise, as Hull was an important harbour for shipments of lead to north-western Europe.[27] The brothers repaid one half of this debt by offsetting it against purchases of wine that they had supplied to the king. Further purchases of wine on behalf of the king's chief butler are revealed by a wardrobe debenture for £200 given to the two brothers at York on 2 December. This sum was due to them for 60 tuns of Gascon wine. They were able to secure full repayment from the exchequer by 26 December.[28] The later flare ups of the war with Scotland in 1327, and again after 1332, was to involve William in much vaster dealings with the crown.

As their subsequent activities amply show, one of the main objectives of both Richard and William was to acquire extensive properties and to found solidly established landed families. During the reign of Edward II their acquisitions were apparently still quite modest. Almost all the known properties of William outside Hull were procured only after 1330. In 1317 the two brothers 'acquired a house in Hull from John Rottenherring for the sizeable rent of £4 per year'. A later exchange of property with King Edward III confirmed that since 1325 William had held half the manor of Linby (Notts.) which he had acquired from Sibyl, the widow of John de Metham.[29] Though the two brothers had purchased wool and lead from the confiscated estates of Earl Thomas of Lancaster, there is no evidence that they joined in the land grabbing of the Despensers and their henchmen who had ruled the country since 1322. The records of the leases of the confiscated properties of the Contrariants dispossessed by Edward II in 1321–22 do not contain any mention of the de la Poles.[30] This prudence may have saved them from future disaster at the time of the downfall of Edward II.

From 18 January 1321 to 14 July 1327 Richard acted as a collector of customs at Hull.[31] One can trace during that period a steady increase in the exports of wool by the de la Poles, mostly recorded under the name of William. 20 sacks 10 st. were shipped by him from Hull between 29 July and 16 September 1321, 28 sacks 12 st. on 27–9 September 1322,

[26] P.R.O., L. T. R. Misc. accts., E. 358/15, m. 16; K. R. Mem. r., E. 159/96, m. 47$^{v}$; wardrobe book of Roger Waltham, Brit. Libr., Stowe ms. 553, p. 9.$^{r}$

[27] Allison, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

[28] Waltham's wardrobe book (*cit. supra*), Stowe ms. 553, p. 8,$^{v}$ and wardrobe debenture, P.R.O., Warrants for Issues, Exch. of Receipt, E. 404/482, no. 354.

[29] Horrox, *op. cit.*, pp. 3, 11.

[30] P.R.O., K. R. Extents, E. 142/31 (compiled after Michaelmas 1325); Duchy of Lancaster, D.L. 41/10, no. 15 (lands of Thomas, earl of Lancaster and Robert Holland).

[31] Baker, *op. cit.*, p. 61.