

ANTONIO GUIDOTTI.

By ALWYN A. RUDDOCK, Ph.D., University College, Southampton.

A VIVID glimpse of life in Southampton in the reign of Henry VIII appears in the story of Antonio Guidotti, one of the most colourful local personalities of Tudor times. During the course of his chequered career he was in turn alien merchant, prosperous Southampton burgess, bankrupt exile fleeing from his creditors, would-be promoter of a foreign silk industry in Southampton, prisoner in the Fleet, and skilful diplomatic agent whose subtlety won for him a knighthood and high pecuniary reward from the King of his adopted country.

Antonio Guidotti was a Florentine by birth, and assuming his age to be correctly stated on his monument in Florence, we can fix the date of his birth fairly certainly as June 1492. Nothing definite is known concerning his parentage, but his name suggests that he was a member of the Florentine Guidotti who, in connection with the Medici, lent Edward IV large sums of money in his bid for the crown during the Wars of the Roses. But by the time Antonio appears in England the Guidotti and the Medici had sunk to a minor position in Italian banking circles, and the declining fortunes of his family in Italy may have been responsible for the young Antonio's decision to carve out a career in an alien country.

Little is known of his early days, but his first appearance in Southampton seems to have been in 1517, when he is found trading there with a certain Piero Francesco Guidotti, who had been active there for some years, and was probably well qualified to instruct Antonio in the ways of English trading and fit him for a long career in this country.¹ But the young man did not remain for long under tutelage, for by 1523 the elder man had disappeared from the town records and Antonio was making rapid steps to connect himself with the highest English merchants in Southampton.

The bulk of Antonio's trading activities were concerned with the Mediterranean, especially Italy, which was the most important branch of Southampton's commerce in the later Middle Ages. The great merchant galleys of Venice which anchored close to the grey walls of the town and discharged upon the West Quay innumerable bales of spices and fruits, damask, velvets, sarcenet, Eastern carpets, tapestries, jewels, finely-wrought Italian armour and many other similar luxury articles carried Antonio's goods also in their holds. These included ginger, crystal goblets and other

1. Southampton Municipal Archives, Book of Fines for 1517 and port books for the early years of Henry VIII.

vessels, and writing paper; and in their place the young merchant loaded bales of Hampshire cloth for the return journey to Venice. He traded too with France and the Channel Islands, and first attracted the attention of the great Cardinal Wolsey by sending him secret information concerning conditions in France which had been transmitted to him through his agent in Guernsey.²

In this attempt to establish himself in Southampton, Antonio was greatly helped by the close connection which he struck up with the Huttoft family, one of the most important in the town. The heads of this family, the brothers Henry and Thomas Huttoft, figure prominently in the records of the town, Henry being in quick succession senior bailiff (1520), sheriff (1521), and twice mayor (1525 and 1534), while Thomas was junior bailiff (1522), senior bailiff (1523) and sheriff (1527). Both had rendered good service to Henry VIII during the wars with France. In 1522 Thomas lent his ship, the *Mary James*, to take Henry VIII's ambassadors to Spain, and Henry, after being engaged to victual and fit out ships of the Navy at Portsmouth, was recommended to Wolsey for the post of collector of the royal customs at Southampton, being described as 'a man of gravity and substance and one of the best in the town.'³

It was to these rising fortunes that Antonio allied himself when, at some uncertain date in the 1520's, he married Henry Huttoft's daughter, Dorothy, and through her acquired a very fine house in the High Street, described as a 'capital tenement or mansion house . . . with cellars, shoppes, warehouses and gardens adjoining,' which had been bequeathed to her by a certain Thomas Maynarde, and which the Tudor topographer, Leland, greatly admired on his visit to the town.⁴ Antonio must have possessed obvious ability and promise thus to have impressed the careful Huttoft, and in the prosperous years which followed this alliance the elder man must have often congratulated himself on his choice of this foreign son-in-law, for profiting by Guidotti's experience, he extended his ventures in the Mediterranean, and became one of the chief importers of sweet wines in Southampton. After Wolsey's fall he attached himself to Thomas Cromwell, and by his agency gained the long-desired post of Customer of Hampton in 1534, and the office of Secretary to the Queen, Anne of Cleves, for his son John in 1540.⁵ Guidotti likewise flourished. He was admitted to the town court in 1527, was naturalized in 1533, and was made a burgess of

2. Southampton port book, 1519-20; *Letters and Papers of Henry VIII*, iv, no. 1255.

3. *Book of Remembrance of Southampton*, ed. Gidden, i, 80-2; *Letters and Papers of Henry VIII*, iii, no. 2591; *ibid.*, iv, nos. 214, 2472.

4. Public Record Office, Early Chancery Proceedings, bdle. 1223, no. 46; Leland's *Itinerary*, ed. L. Toulmin Smith, i, 278. The remains of this house, incorporated into a modern building, were destroyed during the bombing of Southampton, November, 1940.

5. Southampton port books, temp. Henry VIII; *Letters and Papers of Henry VIII*, vii, no. 419 (12); *ibid.*, xvi, no. 503 (13).

Southampton the following year.⁶ About this time he was joined by his brother, Giovanni Baptista Guidotti, and together they multiplied their trading activities. They imported a great variety of merchandize from the Mediterranean, including malmsey and muscadel wines, raw silk, carpets, chamlet cloth and fruits, with hops and linen from the Netherlands, and sent abroad a great quantity of Cotswold wool, Hampshire cloth, tin and pewter vessels. They supplied lead shot to the town gunner for the defence of the city during the French wars, and the butt of malmsey wine, which by ancient custom the men of Southampton gave to the Bishop of Winchester at the Pavilion Court each year on St. Giles' Day, in 1526.⁷ It was probably from Antonio's agents in Italy that Henry Huttoft obtained the two musk cats, three little monkeys, marmoset, chest of Indian nuts and shirt of fine cambric which he sent as a gift to the King when thanking him for the appointment of surveyor of customs in 1534.⁸ To store this merchandize the two brothers hired some of the largest lofts and cellars in the town, including the long loft over the Wool House, a fine old building still standing at the bottom of Bugle Street, the loft over the Weigh House (destroyed by enemy action in the autumn of 1940), and a barn outside the Godshouse tower, which has long since disappeared.⁹

But the brothers who had enjoyed such prosperity were to suffer grave reverses. In 1536 Antonio, suddenly faced by an overwhelming burden of debt and angry creditors, absconded and fled abroad to escape imprisonment. His wife Dorothy was left in Southampton, and seems to have been reduced to poverty; she was twice fined for harbouring strangers to the town, perhaps indicating that her house became a lodging for numerous questionable foreigners.¹⁰ Giovanni Baptista, or John Baptist, as he appears in the town records, was also involved in Antonio's downfall, dying 'poorly in great debt' in 1538.¹¹

Henry Huttoft was also involved in his son-in-law's disgrace. He had stood surety for a number of Antonio's commercial ventures, and was faced by an immense load of debt on his flight. In his distress he penned the following letter to Thomas Cromwell, his patron and benefactor at Court:—

'An urgent cause of adversity constrains me to desire your favour. I am left in an unhappy case by my son-in-law, so taken in an unfavourable hour to me and mine. I had trusted in his truth and honesty, making believe that his payments

6. Book of Debts, 1527; *Letters and Papers of Henry VIII*, vi, no. 196 (17); Book of Oaths, 1534.

7. Southampton port books, 1527-8; K.R. Customs E122-209-5; Stewards book 1526.

8. *Letters and Papers of Henry VIII*, vi, no. 1074.

9. Steward's books, 1526, 1531, 1534.

10. Book of Fines, 1541.

11. *Letters and Papers of Henry VIII*, xvii, no. 274.

now due were all well. For accomplishing the same he has left me but a letter, wherein he promised more joy and pleasure to be at his coming again than discomfort for his departing, whereas his abode here might have been imprisonment to his body, with no help but so to fall in desperate poverty. . . . For this unhappy Guidotti I have so entangled myself that unless you help me (I am undone).'

'I have made little waste,' he protests, 'except in building my poor house,' referring to the fine building now called Tudor House, still standing intact opposite St. Michael's Church, which he had recently erected, and ends his letter on a mournful note: 'Whatever becomes of me, be good to my son.'¹² His resources were insufficient to pay off Guidotti's debts, and right up to his death he was constantly appealing to Cromwell for help to stave off his more importunate creditors. In 1537 his son, John, was beseeching Cromwell to show 'your continual goodness towards my father,' and in 1539 Huttoft himself sent 'a simple and rude letter' by the hands of one whom he describes as 'my poor wife' declaring therein his sorrowful state. He sought an interview with Henry VIII at Kingston-on-Thames, and enlarged on the villainy of Guidotti. That his debts had troubled the worthy townsman far more than they had disturbed the King is amusingly evident from Huttoft's account of the interview. He was amazed to find that the King knew nothing at all of the matter, and treated it lightly, cheerfully promising that, if Guidotti did not find a way to pay himself, 'his body should be punished.'¹³

Antonio, for his part, seems to have made a genuine effort to repair his fortunes and win back the favour of the King and Cromwell. Arriving at Messina he saw the prosperity of the town, then a great centre of the Italian silk weaving industry, and began to scheme how the fading glories of Hampton might be revived by the same trade. In March 1537 he addressed the following letter to Thomas Cromwell:—

'To my most honorable lorde.

'Knowing myself unhabil to satisfie to the obligacons and debtes which I owe unto the kinges Maiestie, our souveraigne lorde, dayly labouring in mynde and contynually thinking, in what maner I may in any parte schewe my dewtie toward(es) his Highenes, and being fewe daye passed at Messina, I tooke fantasie to speke with certaine weyvers of silken cloth and maisters of that crafte. . . . For the which considering the towne of Hampton for lacke of exercise of werkemen to be almoste destroyde, and also, howe good it wolde be to have

12. *Letters and Papers of Henry VIII*, viii, no. 878.

13. *Letters and Papers of Henry VIII*, xii (ii), no. 546; *ibid.*, xiv (i), no. 795; *ibid.*, xv, no. 385.

such a crafte in the said place. . . . I resolved with myself, secretly to have communication with one of the best maistres of the said crafte in the said cite of Messina, also a Florentyne. Nevertheles making hym large offer and to such effecte, that in the name of god the 24th day of February last with 24 persones man and woomen practised in the said craft he shipped hymself upon a schip of Raughey for Hamptun; among the which their wyves and chylthern and all necessaries, that may pertaigne to their said crafft, the which, I assure yo, hath not ben don with lytell daunger of my lyfe and without grete expensis to conveye them a waye with all their necessaries for their said crafte. And all thinges with my labour I schall thinke well bestowed, when I may perceive, that your good lordeship shall take it for well! And I have good confidence, when ye schall see the-saide crafte in Hamptun, and that the kinges Grace the qualities of the men brought thither, ye wilbe intercessor to the same to give me sum helpe and courage to amplifie the said crafte, the which I doubt not but in a fewe yeris shalbe as well practised by thinglysh nacion as any others.¹⁴

Apparently he had some doubts concerning the reception his craftsmen would receive at Southampton, in spite of the fact that he had written to Huttoft at length concerning the matter, for he begged Cromwell to write half a dozen words to the Mayor of the town ordering him 'to well intreate the 24 persones which I have sent thither.' But no information concerning their arrival has been found in either local or central records. Probably Henry Huttoft declined to have anything to do with the matter. The project came to nothing, and Antonio, returning to England, met with a cold reception from his English kinsfolk.

Huttoft's health was failing. He was replaced in the surveyorship by John Milles in 1540, and died in 1542, still owing the King £800 on behalf of Guidotti. This removed Antonio's surety, and he was thrown into the Fleet for debt, and kept in prison until four Italians, Domingo Erice, a Venetian gentleman, and Bartholomeo Compeigne, Bartholomeo Fortigni and Maredito Neretto, Florentine merchants, agreed to sign bonds as sureties for the repayment of the debts. These were enormous, £6320 still being unpaid in April 1542. The King agreed to make him a loan and give him a safe conduct to secure him from further arrest and enable him to make a fresh start, provided that the Duke and City of Florence would agree to hold themselves responsible for the repayment of this new debt. A bond to this effect was received

¹⁴. Guidotti's original letter, written in Italian, is in the British Museum (Cotton MSS., Vitellius B., xiv), together with a contemporary English translation (Cotton MSS., Titus B., vi) from which the above extracts are taken. Both are printed in G. Schanz, *Englische Handelspolitik Gegen ende des Mittelalters*, ii, pp. 663-7.

from Italy, Guidotti dispatched twelve geldings to the Duke, probably as a token of gratitude, and commenced his trading ventures once again.¹⁵

Nevertheless, Antonio had to contend with the enmity of his sister-in-law, Ursula, and her husband, Edmund Cockerell. Little is known of the latter, except that he was a Guernsey merchant who subsequently settled in London, and carried on a flourishing trade with the Breton ports. During his frequent business trips to Southampton he probably came to know Huttoft well, and became a familiar figure in his house, marrying Ursula, his other daughter, at some uncertain date prior to 20th August, 1537, when we find John Huttoft enclosing greetings from 'my brother Cockerell' in a letter to Wriothlesley.¹⁶ Edmund seems to have carried his animosity towards Antonio to lawless extremes, for Antonio lodged a petition in Chancery alleging that on 20th September, 1538, Cockerell broke into his house in High Street in the parish of Holy Rood, and stole 'dyuerse Bookes of accomptes and Reknynges of many greate and notable somes of money depending betwene marchauntes as well straungers as Englishemen,' which books, he said, were 'fast locked in the studye or compting house there,' while Antonio was 'in parties of Italye beyond the sees trauailing for his lyving.'¹⁷

Nor was the robbery the only cause of ill-feeling, for shortly after Antonio's return to England, Cockerell had brought an action of debt against him in the Guildhall in London, and caused him to be imprisoned for some time in 'the Counter of the Powltrei.' After Huttoft's death Ursula claimed to be executrix of his will, and demanded 'potts pans pewter vessels bedding napery buttys of malvesey anchors cables masts ordnance horses cows kyne shepe' and other things in payment of a debt which, Edmund alleged, Huttoft owed him on Guidotti's behalf. Apparently they were not satisfied, for later they began another suit for possession of a ship and some malmsey wine which had formerly belonged to Guidotti.¹⁸ The outcome of this suit is not known.

In spite of all these handicaps Guidotti seems to have made a genuine attempt to repair his fallen fortunes. He had been deleted from the roll of burgesses after his flight in 1536, but so far succeeded in winning back the respect of his fellow townsmen that he was restored to the franchise in 1543 'by the assente of the mayre and

15. *Letters and Papers of Henry VIII*, xvi, no. 379 (27); *ibid.*, xvii, nos. 142, 144, 274; *ibid.*, xviii (i), nos. 208, 346 (7); *ibid.*, xxi (i), no. 148 (76).

16. *Letters and Papers of Henry VIII*, xii (i), no. 718; *ibid.*, xi, no. 1301; *ibid.*, xii (ii), no. 546; Early Chancery Proceedings, bdle. 1223, no. 46; bdle. 806, no. 32; K.R. Customs, 143-8.

17. E.C.P., bdle. 806, no. 32.

18. E.C.P., bdle. 806, no. 32; bdle. 1176, no. 54; bdle. 1345, no. 45.

burgesses.¹⁹ But the trade of Southampton with the Mediterranean was already declining rapidly, following the discovery of the passage to India round the Cape and the subsequent efforts of the Portuguese to wrest the spice trade out of Italian hands. Realizing the implications of this, Guidotti increased his trading connections with France, and it was when he was in Paris on commercial business that he saw an opportunity of participating in diplomacy and matters of state which he found particularly suited to his subtle and enterprising Italian mind.

Henry VIII had died, leaving his young son, Edward VI, under the guardianship of his uncle, who assumed the title of Protector of the realm. The Protector was eager to end the French war which was then being waged in a desultory manner by English troops in Northern France and stop the endless drain on the national finances occasioned by the keeping of Boulogne, our one conquest on the French coast. But to propose that this conquest should be restored to the French would have been highly unpopular in England; to wait till it was wrested from his hands still greater folly. The Protector required a secret agent to make the first move in suggesting the peace, so that the proposal for the return of the town might come from the French, and not offend the English national pride. Guidotti seized the opportunity, and offered himself as 'an instrument of communication.' Under cover of his commercial affairs he passed between London and Paris, insinuated himself into the household of the Constable of France, and set on foot the negotiations for the peace, the French offering to buy back Boulogne for an adequate sum of money. The young King has left an account in his daily Journal of Guidotti's part, and in return for his skill and influence he reaped a handsome reward.²⁰

On April 10th, 1550, he was dubbed knight, £48 being paid by the order of the Privy Council to buy a 'flaggon chaine' which was bestowed upon him on this occasion. He also received a gift of 1000 crowns, a grant of arms with the motto 'Pax optime rerum' and pensions of £250 and £37. 10s. 0d. for life for himself and his son John.²¹ He continued to be a member of the English embassy in Paris, and among other things he is found negotiating a projected marriage for the Princess Elizabeth with either the son of the Duke of Florence or the Duke of Ferrara, which must have been one of the earliest of the many marriage projects woven around the figure of the future Queen Elizabeth.²²

19. Book of Oaths and Ordinances, 1543.

20. J. A. Froude, *History of England*, iv, p. 498; P. F. Tytler, *England under the Reigns of Edward VI and Mary*, i, pp. 256, 287; A. F. Pollard, *History of England, 1547-1603*, p. 47, n. 1.

21. W. A. Shaw, *Knights of England*, ii, p. 65; *Acts of the Privy Council*, ed. Nicholas, 1547-50, p. 422; Rymer, *Foedera*, xv, pp. 227-8; Bodleian MS., Rawlinson B., cii.

22. *State Papers Foreign, 1547-53*, p. 164.

In September 1551 he sent home a long memorandum, half in French, half in Italian, entitled 'Notes of Occurrents out of the French Court,' which proves him to have had keen powers of observation and the eye for detail essential to success in the diplomatic game.²³ But he was growing old, probably prematurely aged by his many activities, and after 1551 withdrew from diplomacy and spent more and more time in Italy during his last years. Shortly before his death in 1555 he was honoured by Cosimo de Medici, who made him a member of the Council of Forty of Florence. His tomb in the Church of San Marco in Florence is marked by a marble slab with the following inscription :—

'D. O. M.

'Antonio Guidotto ob pacem inter Anglorum et Francorum reges confectam, ab Eduardo VI. equestrem gradum ab utrisque insignia munera consequuto, in Patria ab Optimo Duce Cosmo in XLVIII virorum numerum cooptato, Volaterris demum praetura et vita functo, gentiles ejus absentibus filius p.—Obiit iiij Kal. Decembr. MDLV. Vix An. LXIII mens. VI.'²⁴

His wife continued to live in Southampton for over a year after Antonio's death, hiring the Long Barn by Godshouse and the loft over the wool house in 1557.²⁵ Our last glimpse of her is found in the parish register of the Church of Stratford-le-Bow, London, where a short entry records her re-marriage thus :—

'John Harman, esquier, one of the gentlemen hushers of the chambre of our Sovereyne Lady the Quene, and the excellent Lady Dame Dorothee Gwydott, widow, late of Southampton, married Dec. 21, 1557.'²⁶

Little is known of their son, John, except that in Queen Mary's reign he was forced to buy a pardon for a homicide committed in a tavern brawl in Andover.²⁷ His son, William, established the family at Lymington, where there is a small brass to the memory of Joan, wife of Francis Guidott, his son, in the Church of St. Thomas of Canterbury.²⁸ Thomas Guidott, Francis' son, was born there in 1638, and enjoyed considerable notoriety in the later years of the seventeenth century both in London and Bath, where he practised as a fashionable doctor, and became celebrated for his 'imprudence, lampooning and libelling.' He is described as 'a person of good parts, well vers'd in Greek and Latin learning, and

23. *Ibid.*, pp. 175-6.

24. *Notes and Queries*, 2nd Series, iv., p. 328.

25. *Stewards Book and Book of Debts of Southampton*, 1557.

26. D. Lysons, *Environs of London*, iii, p. 499.

27. *Cal. Pat. Rolls*, 1555-57, p. 525.

28. *Victoria County History of Hants*, iv., p. 648.

intelligent in his profession ; but so much overwhelm'd he is with self conceit and pride, that he is in a manner sometimes crazed, especially when his blood is heated by too much bibbing.²⁹

His son, Antony, was a member of Lincoln's Inn, and acquired the manors of Horwoods (1670) and Lasham (1705), both in Hampshire. On his death they passed to one William Guidott, possibly his brother, who added to these the manors of Slackstead and North Oakley in 1711, and the estates of Preston Candover in 1739 by his marriage with Patience Soper, his third wife. He was M.P. for Andover and Recorder of Basingstoke, and built Preston House and added an aisle to Preston Candover old church before his death in 1745.³⁰ On the death of Patience, in 1749, all these estates passed to William Woodroffe, their kinsman, who took the name of Guidott, and whose descendants are still living in Winchester at the present time.³¹

29. Antony & Wood, *Atheneas Oxon.*, iv, p. 734.

30. *Victoria County History of Hants*, iii, pp. 373-4 ; iv, pp. 83, 258, 444 ; *Hants Notes and Queries*, vii, p. 123.

31. *Victoria County History of Hants*, iii, p. 373 ; *Hants Notes and Queries*, vii, p. 128.