

CELEBRATING THE DORCHESTER COMPANY

A lecture given to the Dorchester Association for Research into Local History and Archaeology on 25th January 2024

William Whiteway

Most of you will be aware of William Whiteway's diary, which is such an excellent source of information about life in 17th century Dorchester.

William Whiteway was an up-and-coming man in Dorchester. His father was one of the leading merchants in the town and William was already a Freeman and with ambitions – in 1626 he would become MP for Dorchester. But his main claim to fame for us is that he kept a diary which included references to local and national events which struck him as significant. For 15 December 1623 he wrote:-

‘Sir Walter Erle, Governour of the New England plantacion, came hither to advize with the rest of the planters about the ordering of the busynesse. A share is £5 a yeare to be paid yearly for 5 yeares, and then shall be made a distribution of the proffits. I have subscribed to be one Share.’

There is no other entry in his diary to the Dorchester Company, which suggests that his investment in the Company reflects a view that this was a community enterprise that he ought to be part of, rather than one of his personal priorities. He was one of a dozen or so local worthies to acquire a share in this new company.

The New World

So why the local commitment, and why now? What was still referred to as the New World had been known to the Vikings for over 600 years. Columbus ‘discovered’ the Caribbean and South America in 1492, but with a difference now that the Spanish in particular, and followed by the Portuguese, realised that the lands contained wealth which they could exploit. The British were not far behind, with John Cabot sailing to North America in 1497 on behalf of King Henry VII. They were, of course, looking for a route to the eastern shores of Asia, but they were also alert to commercial opportunities near where they first landed. The French and the Dutch also sought a share in the potential financial gains to be made. Ships were soon crossing the Atlantic on a regular basis. Sailors like Francis Drake made money for the English crown by stealing treasure from Spanish ships on their return voyages to Spain, but there were more regular sources of income from the rich fishing grounds off the coast of North America, especially the Grand Banks south of Newfoundland, and also trading opportunities with the local inhabitants, in particular for animal furs, which were highly valued in Northern Europe. Fishermen made an annual summer trip across the Atlantic and some fur traders built homes for themselves as bases for their trading.

Early English Settlements

Sir Walter Raleigh was probably the first Englishman to try to found a permanent settlement on behalf of his home country, namely Roanoke Colony in 1585, but this was only short-lived. More significant was the settlement at Jamestown in Virginia, in 1607, and the names

of both the settlement and the surrounding area clearly show their royal connections, which were to endure for some time. But the English Government made much wider claims for land within which their subjects would have the right to colonise (though without much consultation with the existing inhabitants and often with their claims overlapping with those of other Western European states). It was also made clear that such colonial exploitation was under the overall control of the state. Management was delegated to the Council for New England. What is often overlooked is that the settlement at Plymouth by the group of Separatists (later called the Pilgrim Fathers) was, in fact, a partnership with a group of Merchant Adventurers and the new settlement was obliged to make a profit payable to that group.

A significant change was made in the middle of 1622 when it was ordered that new adventurers might be admitted to the number of suitable persons to lead initiatives to establish colonial settlements in New England 'provided they be persons of honour or gentlemen of blood except six Western Merchants'. News of this order quickly reached the ears of interested individuals in and around Dorchester, who began planning a response and formulating a plan.

Three Key Individuals

There were three key individuals: one a man of business, secondly a man of ideas and thirdly a man with connections. All three were needed to offer any hope of a successful venture.

Richard Bushrod

The man of business was Richard Bushrod. He was based in Dorchester as a haberdasher but he quickly became a man of substance generally, owning properties in various parts of Dorset. He also sat as an MP from time to time. More significantly for our purposes he was a merchant adventurer and was included in the select group of Western Merchants identified by the Council for New England. In particular, he carried on trade in fishing for cod off the North American coast, and he bartered furs from New England which he sold in England and France. He seems to have always been ready to look for new business opportunities; not all of them succeeded, but perhaps this showed the kind of entrepreneurial spirit that was needed for the kind of project now in mind. He also had knowledge, and presumably contacts, in New England, through traders acting on his behalf, as well as through the ships fishing off-shore but presumably putting in to land from time to time. All in all, he was an ideal candidate to play a leading role in any response to the new opportunities that were now opening up.

John White

The man of ideas was someone already well known to Richard Bushrod. He was the Reverend John White, the leading cleric of the town and Bushrod's own minister. It was he, of course, who came to the fore in the town after the disastrous fire of 1613 in which much of the centre of the town was lost. Most of you will be familiar with the story of how he not only rallied the spirits of the townsfolk but also influenced the future life of the town for a generation with his emphasis on the members of the community caring for each other's

welfare to an extent almost unknown in those days, with organised financial support for the needy, new almshouses for the elderly, a ‘hospital’ or school to provide education for children who otherwise would not have proper schooling, and even charitable giving to other communities in need. Under his guidance Dorchester was transformed into a ‘holy town’. In all this he worked with the leading lay citizens to bring the various projects to completion – and with a bit of innovative thinking along the way. A major initiative was the construction of a new, community-owned brewery which met two important objectives, first as a vehicle of investment to produce profits to support the other community projects, and secondly as a justification for closing down the small unregulated brewing enterprises which had been encouraging a high level of drunkenness in the town.

In theology John White was a Puritan, albeit content to remain within the Church of England, but seriously disturbed by the efforts of Archbishop Laud (endorsed by King Charles 1) to require greater uniformity and more ceremonial within the Church. He would have known about the group subsequently known as the Pilgrim Fathers and the emigration to New England in 1620 to establish a permanent colony, although he was out of sympathy with their own rigid views, which carried with them their own intolerance. He must have talked with Richard Bushrod about his own involvement in enterprises across the Atlantic because he evolved a model of his own for the New World. His idea was to link the two separate businesses of fishing and trade with the Native Americans. Currently the fishing boats sailed to North America for the summer season, but taking extra men with them to process the fish on board to bring back to sell in Europe. What if these extra men stayed on in a new settlement on the coast where they could deal with the fish there and also provide a hub for the inland trading activities? Even better, they could have ministers living with them who could care for their spiritual well-being, something totally lacking at the time. The settlers could also support themselves by growing crops. Everything indicates that Richard Bushrod went along with this scheme, even actively supported it.

Sir Walter Erle

John White had the ideas, Richard Bushrod had the core business on which such a project could proceed. And they had the benefit of a man with connections, namely Sir Walter Erle owner of the wealthy Charborough Estate. As a one-time High Sheriff of Dorset he was one of the leading citizens in the county, and he was currently MP for Poole. He was also in Parliament going to become a vigorous opponent of the more restrictive and exploitative policies of King Charles after he succeeded to the throne, on the Puritan wing in his churchmanship and, more pertinently, a friend of John White. He was already an investor in his own right, including opportunities in the North American continent, and both he and his brother were shareholders in the Virginia Company. Ideas for a new settlement further up the coast, in New England, must have been attractive. And here was a man who could be the figure-head, and the political enabler, for the project that John White and Richard Bushrod were putting together.

The Opportunity

Richard Bushrod got the ball rolling with an application to the Council of New England that he ‘and his Associates’ be granted a licence to send a ship ‘for discovery and other employments in New England’. This licence was formally granted on 20 February

1622/1623. By then the Council for New England had already ordered the preparation of a letter effectively inviting the Western Merchants to propose a scheme of settlement in New England; this letter was eventually sanctioned on 8 December 1623 to go out in the name of the King. Almost immediately on a copy of the letter being delivered to Dorchester the meeting referred to in William Whiteway's diary took place and the initial decision was made to proceed, initially with the formation of a new company. A bigger meeting was held in the following March to make detailed progress, including the election of a committee.

So what was in mind here was an ambitious commercial venture but with a strong Puritan ethos. Think more of the great Quaker industrialists of the late 18th and early 19th centuries – such as Cadbury, Rowntree, Fry, Friends Provident Life Assurance, Reckitt & Sons for kitchen chemicals, Clarks shoes – all enlightened employers who provided care and support for their workers as well as making profits from efficiently run businesses. The Dorchester Company was an early form of such a venture, designed to operate commercially but reflecting the kind of society created under John White's inspiration after the great fire of Dorchester in 1613, and even, initially at least, a responsible attitude to the native Americans already living in the New World. The idea of escape from the religious intolerance in England was hardly a factor at all at first and only became significant after Charles I became king in 1625, and as people suffered under the religious diktats of Archbishop Laud aimed at preventing freedom of worship and as the tensions between the King's party and the leading parliamentarians grew until the military conflict the Civil War became inevitable. And when you look at the kind of people who would go on to volunteer to try to settle in this new land, the motivation was, for some, purely the possibility of profit, and for others, the opportunity to escape unemployment at home and to build a new life for themselves.

The first members bought shares in this new company, at £25 per share. But that would not go far in meeting the expected costs, and funds were sought more widely. Before long there were some 120 shareholders, made up of three main groups. First there were the gentry, some fifty from Dorset and a half dozen from Devon – put them in a group led by Sir Walter Erle. Secondly there were the merchants, about thirty of these who were merchants in a reasonably prosperous way, plus a few in a small way of business; these were following the lead set by Richard Bushrod. The third group was made up of clergymen, presumably under the influence of John White's concern that there should be an active Church involvement in the project. There were also four widows, whose husbands had been in business, and a few Londoners.

Where to establish a settlement?

So, where were they looking at for a possible location? John Smith's map of 1616 provided some ideas. We know that the Pilgrim Fathers were aware of this map, and someone like Richard Bushrod may well have had a copy because of his already existing business dealings in the area. John Smith, having started out in the English settlement in Virginia, later turned his attention further north and took time out to carry out a detailed survey of the coast that he described as 'New England', with the specific objective of encouraging the exploitation of the coastal areas for new settlements. People like Richard Bushrod began to set up trading posts, but these were only occupied for a limited time each year. You may be able to make out on the map, about half way down the coast, Cape Ann being identified by

name. A bay here was already being used by some people from the Pilgrim Fathers' settlement at Plymouth, but only for the fishing season. But the map provided a valuable guide for all sailors operating in these waters as well as ideas for potential settlers from England.



What year are we in?

Before we go much further we should perhaps pause to consider what year we are in. It can be confusing dealing with historical dates in the 17th century, and in fact confusion will continue in England until 1752 when Parliament legislated to sort it all out. And there are two separate issues. The first is the change from the Julian Calendar to the Gregorian Calendar. The Julian Calendar worked for the Romans and carried on reasonably well, except that it did not cater sufficiently accurately for the circulation of the earth around the sun – it did not make allowance that it was not exactly 365 days or 366 days. Scholars identified the problem, including that the seasons were slipping a little bit from year to year and they persuaded the Pope in 1582 to introduce a new calendar providing a more accurate mechanism to deal with the 29 February issue. But other countries took their time to follow suit and England did not adopt the New Style dates, the Gregorian Calendar, until 1752,

when a lot of people were up in arms at losing their ‘eleven days’ and demanded them back. So, in the 17th century in dealings with people in other countries you had to make it extra clear which calendar you were following.

The second issue is, in fact, more material to our story here, and that is the answer to the question, ‘When does the year start?’ Some people did refer to 1 January as New Year’s Day but the legal year officially began on Lady Day, that is 25 March, and official records use this form right up until 1752. So we would still be in 2023, for another couple of months. This has often led to confusion about when events actually happened. I am happy to be corrected, but as far as I can understand it, the Dorchester Company was formed in 1623, but the settlement in Massachusetts actually took place in 1624, despite the memorial in America at Cape Ann giving the date as 1623.

The Master Plan

The new company quickly raised some £3,000, which was considered enough to proceed with the venture. The immediate plan was to purchase a suitable ship, find a crew to sail it and fish, mainly for cod, off the Grand Banks south of Newfoundland, and down the coast to Cape Ann, and add an additional number of men to prepare the fish and salt them down to keep them fresh ready for sale either in Spain (a good market) or back in England. But the new feature of this voyage was that these extra men would then be left behind in Cape Ann, to build shelters for themselves and then prepare ground for crops to grow the following year. They would then be ready for the next year’s landing of fish, but would also, hopefully, become fully self-supporting and even supplement their income with trade with the native Americans.

The First Voyage

A ship was acquired, somewhat smaller than would have been ideal, *The Fellowship*, at 50 tons a lot smaller than the 180 tons of *The Mayflower* used by the Pilgrim Fathers, but only costing £300. They fitted it with new sails and generally prepared it for what would be quite a gruelling voyage. But all this took time, and they were running six weeks behind the ideal schedule when the ship finally sailed. As a result they missed the best of that season’s fishing, but at least the project was up and running, and 14 men were left at Cape Ann – you can see where Cape Ann is on the map. The salt cod did not make the hoped-for price that year, but hopes were high that they would do better the following year.

The Second Voyage

The company at home decided to up the investment and acquired a second ship, a Flemish fly-boat of about 140 tons. Somebody had the bright idea of making the ship more suitable for their purposes by adding a second deck, except that this ended up making the ship top heavy and further alterations had to be made before it was safe for the ship to try to cross the Atlantic. So again, the best of the fishing season was lost, with an inevitable impact on profitability, but the settlement was strengthened by more men and extra cattle, food and equipment to help them through the winter. So, still losing money, but perhaps next year things would turn round.



The picture is an aerial view of Cape Ann.

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Further Adversity

More money was invested. An extra ship was added, but luck was very much against them. One of the ships sprang a leak on the initial ocean crossing and had to return home – one of the hazards of sea travel in those times – and even worse, the market for fish in Spain collapsed because of a war that broke out between the two countries. It was another financial disaster, and the prospects were now looking bleak, with no prospect of any kind of profit in the short term.

Acknowledgment of Failure

The plan might just have worked but John White later acknowledged some fundamental weaknesses in the original concept. As he put it bluntly, ‘The very project itself of planting by the help of a fishing voyage can never answer the success it seems to promise.’ Even the location identified was wrong. It was acceptable to the fishermen, but the ground in that area was not good enough for producing decent crops, and the site was very exposed for winter conditions. Then there proved to be a skills issue as well. The settlers had been chosen primarily so that they could process the fish harvest during the summer season. But they were not farmers and they found it difficult to adapt to a life devoted the care of crops and animals. All in all, the Company had been trying to achieve its aim of establishing a settlement ‘on the cheap’. To be successful a settlement had to be made up of all the

elements of a rural community, with fishing just one element among many. That was more than the Company could afford on the basis of the money raised so far. It was decided to wind the Company up.

Not Quite the End of the Story

In one sense that is the end of the story, except that it wasn't. Not everybody currently at Cape Ann wanted to give up and come back to England. Also, their numbers had been augmented by other folk who had not been sent out by the Dorchester Company but who had arrived by other means. Some had started out with the Pilgrim Fathers at Plymouth but who had not settled under their stricter form of puritan life and had either left of their own accord or been told to leave. They knew of the Cape Ann settlement and travelled up the coast to join them. One of these was Roger Conant who quickly settled in to the community and contributed so much

that he effectively became their leader. John White welcomed the news when he heard of Roger Conant's arrival, since he already knew Roger's brother John and knew of Roger's reputation as 'a religious, sober and prudent gentleman'. John White had continued to be in communication with Cape Ann and he endorsed the idea of committing to Roger 'the charge of all their affairs, as well fishing as planting'. Another arrival at Cape Ann was the Rev. John Lydford, who was invited to become their minister, although in due time he left them to move south to Virginia.



The Community Struggles On

So the community struggled on, with continued support in the form of further supplies from the home country organised by a small group from the Dorchester Company, including Richard Bushrod and a few other Dorchester merchants, John White (of course) and now John Conant, keen to support his brother. However, Roger Conant had serious reservations about building a future at the Cape Ann location and he persuaded most of the group that they would have a much better future further along the coast, at a place which the local Native Americans called Naumkeag, but which in due course would be renamed Salem. The new site was on a neck of land with reasonable anchorage for ships, but the greatest difference was in the quality of the land nearby, which in contrast to the rocky ground at Cape Ann had good enough soil to grow crops and pasture the cattle, with woods for timber and where pigs could forage when they were not eating clams from the shore.

It is hardly surprising that the current celebrations in Cape Ann focus primarily on Roger Conant. He is even more famous in Salem, where he lived with his wife and family for many years more, but his achievements were built on the foundations laid by the Dorchester Company. That is worth celebrating in itself, but let us not forget that the Dorchester folk did not give up their project, but went on, as part of a much greater enterprise, to found a second, and much bigger, settlement in New England, which they named Dorchester as a link with the home country.

Dorchester MA 1630 – 2030

Shortly folk here in our Dorchester should be starting to plan for a much greater celebration in only six years time. But here I have to acknowledge that I will not be able to lead it – even if I am still alive then I will not be up to the job. So I am looking for someone else to take on the task of ensuring that the fourth centenary of the founding of a new Dorchester in Massachusetts is properly marked. If someone, or possibly more than one, can come forward now, then I can pass on my papers and help, as long as I am able. But now I will bow out, I hope gracefully.

David Cuckson – January 2024