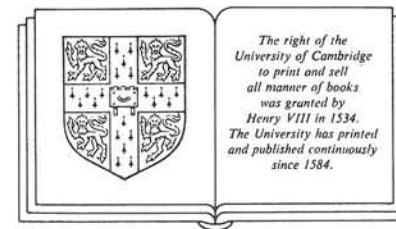


ENGLAND AND THE
GERMAN HANSE, 1157-1611

A study of their trade and commercial diplomacy

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Elbing did not gain a complete monopoly of returns to England. Its location and port facilities were not of the best and some merchants preferred to buy Polish goods elsewhere. From 1582 Elbing was recorded as the departure point for most home-coming English ships, but each year a fair sprinkling left Danzig and Königsberg. If it were possible to take account of the repatriation of English-owned goods in foreign vessels then the continuing role of the alternative ports would be seen to be greater. Danzig remained the outlet for Polish grain and in years of dearth in western Europe it was the destination of the additional English ships which sped to the Baltic. However, it was Elbing which provided Englishmen with the privileges which they had sought, and been denied, for a century and a half. They enjoyed these until the town was ruined by Swedish invasions during the Thirty Years War. From Elbing the Englishmen no doubt contemplated with satisfaction the discomfiture of their old Hanse rivals, but there still remained the Dutch. That is another story, however.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁹ For Eastland trade in the seventeenth century see R. W. K. Hinton, *The Eastland Trade and the Common Weal in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge 1959). J. K. Fedorowicz, *England's Baltic Trade in the Early Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge, 1980). B. E. Supple, *Commercial Crisis and Change in England, 1600-1642* (Cambridge, 1964).

Conclusion

The last Hanse diet, at which only nine towns were represented, was held in 1669. In reality the organisation had ceased to function long before that. Some small sense of purpose survived into the second decade of the seventeenth century, but the events of the Thirty Years War, above all the domination of northern Europe (including much of Germany) by Sweden, finally proved that the Hanse had no place in the modern world. What needs to be explained, however, is not why it finally succumbed now but why it had lasted so long. The Hanse was essentially an institution of the middle ages and its demise was heralded when the Muscovites closed the Novgorod *Kontor* in 1494. This *Kontor* was reopened in 1514, but it was never the same again. Novgorod had lost much of its importance by 1494, so to that extent its closure was more of a symbol than a critical blow. Nevertheless, it is generally accepted that the decline of the Hanse dates from the late fifteenth century. One possible cause which has been identified is the reorganisation and expansion of trade routes which began about that time. On the one hand, the geographical discoveries resulted ultimately in a world-wide trade centred on the Atlantic ports. On the other hand, aggressive firms of merchants based in south-German cities such as Augsburg, Nuremberg and Ulm began to divert trade in their direction. The first development is sometimes alleged to have turned the Baltic into a backwater and thereby weakened the Hanse. There is little or no foundation for this conclusion, since for the most part the new commerce was not competitive with the traditional trade of the Hanse. One of the earliest results of the discoveries was to turn Antwerp into the entrepôt of the Portuguese spice trade. This was detrimental to the Italian spice trade which came via the Levant, but did no harm to the Hanse. The only obvious development which may have been detrimental to Hanse interests was the opening up of the

Newfoundland cod fishery. This provided an alternative to Lübeck's Bergen trade and Hamburg's more recent stake in the Iceland fishery. Overall, the expansion which resulted from the discoveries did nothing to diminish the real size of Baltic trade, even though it meant that the latter was now a proportionally smaller part of total European trade. In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries the trade of some Hanse sea-ports was larger than in the heyday of the organisation. The second development mentioned above is a different proposition. The south-German cities prospered from their intermediate position between north-west Europe and Italy and to that extent they did no harm to the Hanse. But they also provided alternative (land) access to and from central and eastern Europe and therefore detracted from Hanseatic sea-borne trade. For a time the Fuggers even posed a serious threat to Hanse firms in the Baltic itself.

South-German merchants were not the first outsiders to threaten Hanse trade and the seeds of decline were in place long before the end of the fifteenth century. They were scattered at the very time that the Hanse of merchants was giving way to the Hanse of towns. What is meant by decline is not simply a reduction of trade but the weakening of the Hanse as an institution. But before reviewing the decline let us recall the strength and uniqueness of the Hanse. The economic development of the Baltic region in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries is fundamentally important. At that time German merchants enjoyed a near monopoly of the trade between north-eastern and western Europe and that fact has often been seen as a sufficient explanation for the further development of their association. The theory is that because of their usefulness they were welcomed by their hosts, who recognised their fellowship and gave them valuable privileges which underpinned the Hanse. There must have been rather more to it than that. At the same time as the Germans provided a link between the Baltic and the west, Italians were performing a similar function between the west and the Mediterranean. But the latter developed in a very different manner from the former. Far from organising themselves into a single commercial entity, Italians did not even favour such unions for individual city stakes. Nor did they acquire commercial privileges as the Hanse did. It may be that the precocity of Italian business techniques hindered collective action beyond a certain point. At an early date merchants learnt how to pool their resources to finance societies or companies which traded throughout Europe. Drawing

strength from their own size the companies may have eschewed close cooperation even with fellow citizens lest this led to the disclosure of secrets. But even if this explains why the Italians did not progress in a certain way it does not account for the German success. Unfortunately, barring nebulous and unprovable assertions such as 'national characteristics' no succinct explanation can be provided here.

By the middle of the fourteenth century the generosity widely extended to Hanse merchants in earlier times was disappearing. There were a number of reasons for this. In some quarters a growing sense of national identity cannot entirely be ruled out, but on the whole sentiments were more practically based. Princes reliant upon taxes were reluctant to allow Hansards to pay less than others, as were their subjects, of course. Some western communities were no longer satisfied to rely upon the Hanse as intermediaries with the Baltic, but had merchants of their own anxious to assume the role. Naturally, the latter expected to be allowed favours similar to those enjoyed by Hanse merchants in their countries. If these were refused they tended to side with internal interests agitating for the cancellation of Hanse privileges. In these circumstances the Hanse of merchants gave way to the Hanse of towns. It may be that autonomous merchant communities based abroad were regarded as inadequate even to defend the privileges enjoyed in their host countries. It is more obvious that they could not take it upon themselves to promise reciprocal rights in Hanse towns. The latter was entirely within the remit of the towns themselves, so it was inevitable that these should become more directly involved in the organisation. The new version of the Hanse was essentially defensive. It was unable to eliminate competition in trade, but it may have contained it within smaller limits than would otherwise have been the case. It also succeeded in preserving Hanse privileges abroad. Nevertheless, there was an internal contradiction within the Hanse, which was already a source of weakness. Now as before, the organisation existed solely to protect the commercial interests of its members. But they did not all share the same interests. Indeed, the interests of some actually conflicted with those of others. The three main power blocs of Cologne and the Rhine towns, Lübeck and the north-western maritime towns, and the Prussian towns frequently had a divergence of interests, particularly when it came to relations with outside agents. One of the functions of the diet was to try to

smooth over such difficulties, but it was not always successful. In the end conflict of interest played a large part in the break-up of the Hanse.

Throughout its history, trade with England was of great importance to the Hanse. Trade was not conducted in a vacuum. A political dialogue, now in a low key, now in a higher, ensured that the wheels of commerce remained in motion, sometimes smoothly, sometimes erratically. At first negotiations were widely spread out, and between times merchants went routinely about their business. Later the dialogue was almost continuous and it was advisable for men to keep themselves informed about the current state of play, so that if necessary they could conclude their business quickly and depart without loss. Of course, some were so deeply committed that a quick withdrawal was impossible. These provided the backbone of Hanse trade in England and ensured that it survived many hard blows. Previous chapters have tried to describe and explain in some detail both the trade itself and the political dialogue. Now, in a résumé of the most important points an attempt will be made to show how the Hanse experience in England was typical (or untypical) of its general history.

Imperial, German-speaking merchants were visiting England long before the beginnings of the Hanse. They enjoyed limited privileges and may even have been loosely organised, but it cannot be shown that they left any legacy to their successors. They came from two slightly separated regions. The staple trade of those from the valley of the Meuse was the import of metal goods, which were manufactured in their home district. This region, part of the 'middle kingdom' which emerged from the ruins of Charlemagne's Empire, was peripheral to the later German Empire and its towns never became members of the Hanse. Dinant was an anomaly, since in England, but only there, its merchants were allowed to avail themselves of Hanse privileges. Further east another centre of activity was the ancient city of Cologne. This also supplied high-class metal goods to England, but made from steel rather than copper, brass and laton, which were the specialities of the Meuse towns. These metals and artefacts formed part of the stock of Hanse merchants for as long as they continued to trade with England. The Rhine merchants also imported wine. It is unlikely that Rhenish wine ever enjoyed a major share of the English market, since early on it had to compete with a home-grown product and wine from

Normandy. Later, all these vintages gave way to a flood of Gascon wine, but a trickle continued to come to England from the Rhine valley.

By the second half of the twelfth century Cologne merchants visiting England were well organised and beginning to acquire the privileges which later were regarded as an important part of the inheritance of the Hanse. Their headquarters, the London Gildhall, developed into the Steelyard, one of the four great medieval *Kontore*. The Cologne organisation, however, even with the addition of other Westphalian towns was not the German Hanse, and it is doubtful that left to its own devices it would have acquired such a large stake in English trade as the wider community eventually did. Reinforcements came in the early thirteenth century from towns on the North Sea and Baltic coasts. Notwithstanding the view that an inter-town organisation of these merchants operating in the Baltic was the core of the Hanse, it is difficult to see exactly how that body fits into the English scene in the first half of the thirteenth century. A group, which is never defined more closely than 'merchants of Gotland', possessed valuable privileges before the 1220s. But citizens of the key towns of Lübeck and Hamburg do not seem to have shared these, at least not automatically. The latter were still obtaining their first privileges and looking for English recognition of their hanses at a considerably later date. It is possible that individual Lübeck and Hamburg merchants who also traded with Gotland were able to lay claim to the earlier privileges, while their fellow citizens generally could not. This would explain the need for Lübeck and Hamburg to press their suits independently, though it draws attention to the limited membership of the Gotland community. The latter point need not be stressed too strongly, since it is generally accepted that the fully developed Hanse did not come from a single organisation or event. It resulted from an amalgamation of interests which had formerly been separate.

Events in England in the early years of Edward I's reign were of major importance in the history of the Hanse, though what was happening in Flanders at roughly the same time was equally significant. These countries were the real melting-pot of Hanseatic interests, and developments here carry more weight than those at Bergen or Novgorod. The geographical position of England and Flanders accounts for this; the northern and eastern outposts did not attract merchants from so many different towns and regions as the

its advice was not heeded it was always ready to consider independent action. The city was involved in the first attempts to reach a settlement in the 1430s, but was not represented in the embassy of 1436 which finally worked out a treaty. It actually sent a delegation of its own to England, which was believed to be undermining the position of the Hanse. Its merchants disregarded the diet's ban on the export of cloth (though they were not alone in this) and, if the efforts of the official Hanse envoys had not been successful, it is possible that the events of 1468–74 would have been anticipated. Cologne cannot be absolved from sharing the blame for this later crisis with Denmark and England. Its merchants immediately dissociated themselves from the innocent victims of English anger and their action was endorsed by their home city. This must have encouraged the government to persist in its immoderate action, in defiance of counsel from other quarters which urged restraint. Nor is there any evidence that Cologne ever attempted to mediate between England and the rest of the Hanse during the struggle which followed. Cologne merchants were lucky perhaps to be readmitted to the Hanse community in England in 1478. Ironically, in the sixteenth century they were the prime cause of disharmony between England and the Hanse, since they were the most active rivals of the Merchant Adventurers in Antwerp.

The main concerns of the maritime towns of north-western Germany were the preservation of the franchises and the safety of their shipping against any form of interference by England. Their business was more diversified than that of Cologne and the Prussian towns and more representative of the Hanse as a whole. After the early fifteenth century they were not in themselves of great interest to the English until the collapse of Antwerp. The Merchant Adventurers then looked around for an alternative cloth staple. Their attempts to woo Hamburg and Stade were divisive of the Hanse, but by then it was already so decayed that the additional strain may have made little difference. The last point which needs to be made about the divisions within the Hanse takes the form of a question. Was the conflict of interests which stands out in a study of Anglo-Hanse relations merely a symptom of the general weakness of the organisation or was it a cause, indeed a deep-seated cause, of that weakness? No certain answer can be given. Conflict of interests also existed in other areas of Hanse trade, though they may have been less serious than here. Cologne's recklessness in defending its trade

with England must have been one of the severest blows to the Hanse, since it was struck at a time when there was still some vitality in the organisation. The relative importance of the other stresses caused by the English connection is less easy to assess.

It is something of a paradox that the treaty of 1437 which has been discussed above as a cause of division within the Hanse was described in an earlier chapter as a considerable achievement. The merchants gained several useful concessions, above all freedom from tunnage and poundage which they had been claiming for the previous ninety years. Admittedly, Englishmen gained a tax concession in return, but only the Prussians were concerned about that and they could never be forced to implement it. After some shilly-shallying about lack of reciprocity the English government stoically accepted immunity from tunnage and poundage as part of the traditional franchises. It was allowed without a murmur when all the other privileges were restored in the treaty of Utrecht. Had England emerged victorious from the tussle of 1468–74 the whole panoply of Hanse privileges would have disappeared without trace, the first such clean sweep in Europe. England did not win, but neither did it lose; it compromised with the Hanse because the war had become an embarrassment. There is nothing surprising about the restoration of the franchises as part of the compromise. They were medieval, but they were not yet a relic of medievalism, since England's trade was still medieval. Moreover, there was no major commercial opposition to the Hanseatics at that particular time. English trade in the Baltic was for the moment defunct, and although the Merchant Adventurers had earlier expressed concern about Hanse activities in the Low Countries their opposition was not yet intense. On the other hand, it is surprising that the franchises remained almost intact until the middle of the sixteenth century. There was some whittling away of the edges in the reign of Henry VII – for example, the ban on the export of unfinished cloth and the imposition of poundage on lead, but not much else. In 1521 Thomas More bluntly told Hanse envoys that the king could drive their merchants from his country any day that he chose. Cardinal Wolsey had both the power and the will. In all probability it was only the making of an alliance with the Emperor which saved the Hansards in 1522. By the time the alliance was terminated in 1525 Wolsey seems to have lost interest in the matter. Even so, the franchises were undoubtedly now an anachronism. England's trade was burgeoning and hardly stood in need of

former. In England, Cologne and the northern merchants seem to have realised that it was better to unite to defend or extend their trade rather than continue their separate ways, competing not only with Englishmen and other aliens but even between themselves. Obviously, similar political considerations prevailed in other countries visited by Hanse merchants. England is somewhat different in that the political marriage of interests does not seem to have led to as great a pressure for the concentration of trade as there was elsewhere. Concentrations of trade in overseas countries were greatest at Bergen and Novgorod, but the northern merchants also wanted to make Bruges into a staple for Baltic goods coming to the Low Countries and for cloth exported from that region. They were only partly successful in this, not least because a number of Dutch towns were themselves members of the Hanse. Additionally, from the early fifteenth century Antwerp attracted Cologne merchants; the draw of the Brabant city was resisted by other groups, but in the following century it replaced Bruges as the seat of the *Kontor*. In England the London *Kontor* was clearly the leader of the Hanse community before the end of the thirteenth century, but its authority to tax the provincial *Kontore* was disputed for a very long time to come. Trade at Boston was greater than that at London until the late fourteenth century and only thereafter did the latter gradually acquire a virtual monopoly of trade. Even in the sixteenth century it was possible for there to be a substantial, albeit temporary, revival of trade at Hull. Trade at the provincial ports had a distinctly regional bias – Lübeck at Boston, Prussians at Hull, Bremen at Lynn, Hamburg at Yarmouth, Cologne at Ipswich. London trade tended to be more mixed, though dominated by Rhinelanders except in its last years. There is no evidence of any deliberate attempt to discourage trade in the provinces. The decline there was the result partly of commercial forces and partly of accidents of one sort or another. Dishonesty was at the bottom of the Hamburg men's withdrawal from Yarmouth, but their being found out may be classed as accidental. The decline of the Boston *Kontor* was more complex. The bitterness of the quarrel between Lübeck and England was obviously of importance, but it was not necessarily the decisive factor. Some weight must be allowed to the decline of the Bergen staple, which was the mainstay of the Boston trade. Consideration should also be given to Boston's own decline in the fifteenth century, though care must be taken not to confuse cause and effect.

The German merchants in England had organised themselves into a single community by the 1280s. More importantly, their organisation was then formally recognised by the government of the host nation and became the focus for commercial privileges. The significance and the timing of this cannot be overstressed. A century later English merchants trying to establish themselves in Prussia sought recognition of their fellowship from the government of that country. This was long refused and the denial caused the English a great deal of trouble. Had the Germans in England not acted when they did, they might not have done so at all and the omission could have been fatal. Edward I was ready to assist all alien merchants (at a price) and in 1303 issued the *Carta Mercatoria*. This may have lulled the merchants into a false sense of security, and the Hansards even neglected to renew their own charters when Edward II confirmed the *Carta Mercatoria*. Had aliens generally basked in such royal favour two or three decades before, then the pressure upon the Germans to sink their regional differences might have been less. Fortunately, the Hansards belatedly secured the confirmation of their individual charters, so they were protected when the lords ordainer cancelled the *Carta Mercatoria* in 1311. In succeeding years they were even able to obtain an extension of their privileges, for the king himself was not hostile to them, and anyway they paid him handsomely. Again the Hanse had a good sense of timing, for by the 1320s the tide was moving against them. The accession of Edward III put an end to the critical inspection of their franchises which was taking place at that time and they obtained a renewal of their charters. Never again did they neglect to do this at the beginning of each reign, though sometimes they were forced to wait several years for a formal confirmation. Each act of renewal added another layer of authority and while parliament was ready to tear up the charters unless Englishmen gained something in return the crown was more circumspect. Parliament began to interest itself in the matter of alien trade in the reign of Edward III. Its earliest statutes favoured aliens, reinforcing rights enjoyed previously only by virtue of the king's prerogative. But from the 1370s almost every intervention of the commons was hostile. By now the rights promised to alien merchants in the *Carta Mercatoria* were totally disregarded and there is no doubt that without their own charters the Hansards would have been no better off than the others.

Despite recognition of the Hanse community in England before

the end of the thirteenth century it seems to have been many decades before the crown looked beyond this group. Indeed, if one depended solely on English sources there would be no evidence until after the middle of the fourteenth century that the *Englndfahrer* were part of a larger organisation. The community enjoyed a great degree of autonomy and may have exaggerated this to their hosts. The English were concerned lest the franchises be enjoyed by too many Germans, so it would not be sensible to let them know just how big or integrated the Hanse actually was. As late as the 1350s, during the Curtys affair, the London Gildhall categorically denied that its members had any connection with the Bruges *Kontor*. It is difficult to accept this statement at its face value and the English may only have feigned to believe it as a way out of a dilemma. In the 1370s the crown and the Hanse diet came face to face, apparently for the first time. The diet seems to have brought itself to the attention of the king; though no doubt it had been presented with letters which he had earlier sent separately to a number of towns. After this the English realised that there was little point in entering into serious negotiations unless these were sanctioned by the diet. Agreements which concerned the Hanse as a whole were discussed and ratified in a diet, but could only be enforced in individual towns after further ratification by their councils. England neither knew nor cared whether every single town ratified treaties, since the vast majority had no direct contact with England or Englishmen. Obviously, this indifference did not extend to all. In 1447 the Hanse franchises were suspended on the grounds that Prussia had not yet ratified and implemented the treaty made ten years earlier. Common sense might suggest that all that was necessary in such a situation was for England unilaterally to deny privileges to the merchants of any town or region which wilfully disregarded a treaty. In 1449 English envoys offered to restore the franchises, subject to the exclusion of Prussians until they ratified the 1437 treaty. Lübeck argued against this on the grounds that the Hanse's constitution did not allow privileges belonging to the organisation as a whole to be denied to any individual members. Nevertheless, England imposed its own solution in the 1450s and perhaps in later times. At the end of the fifteenth century Riga claimed that its merchants were excluded from the franchises because it had never ratified the treaty of Utrecht (1474). This may be true, though it seems just as likely that they found themselves in that situation by simple neglect of active trade. Other

members of the Hanse argued that ratification of the treaty even at this late date should be enough to solve Riga's problem.

What was earlier described as an internal contradiction within the Hanse – the conflict of interests between members – is particularly relevant to its relationship with England. Not all clashes of interest were permanent, but there were certain well-established tendencies. For example, Prussia was frequently ready to support organised boycotts of English-made cloth, indeed it was often in the forefront of such proposals. On the other hand it was reluctant to observe prohibitions on the export of goods to England, except when this happened to suit its own immediate interest. After the early fifteenth century Prussia almost alone was the target of English ambitions in the Baltic. It bitterly resented the 'sell-out' of 1437 and the pressure from other towns, even as late as 1474, for it to accept that treaty. No doubt the others were motivated by self-interest, but they cannot have been uninfluenced by the fact that Prussia itself had a poor record of Hanse solidarity – resulting partly from what appears to have been a trait of headstrongness. Prussia's isolated dispute with England in the 1380s was the result of a precipitate response to an act of piracy. During the more general crisis in the early fifteenth century Prussia undertook not to make a separate peace, but then went back on its word. This led to a prolonged coolness which had hardly disappeared before the renewed troubles of the 1430s. Again the Grand Master first promised to respect collective decisions of the Hanse, but then gave binding orders to his envoy and ruled that he alone could speak for Prussia. In 1451 Prussian delegates to the Anglo-Hanse conference at Utrecht were supplied with secret instructions authorising them to make a separate peace if there was no general settlement. On the other hand, in 1453 Danzig (soon to break away from the Teutonic Order) vetoed a letter addressed to Henry VI in which the Grand Master dissociated his subjects from the rest of the Hanse.

Of all the towns those of the Rhineland were least willing to quarrel with England. They escaped lightly from the activities of privateers and had no objections to English trade in the Baltic. Their main concern was the retention of the franchises, but they opposed trade boycotts because of the damage these did to their own business. In the 1390s Dortmund recommended the payment of compensation for English losses at the hands of the *Vitalienbruder*. Thereafter, Cologne was the chief advocate of the policy of appeasement, and if

the Hansards, so why allow them to pay lower customs duties than Englishmen and undercut the Merchant Adventurers in Antwerp? The revival of English activity in the Baltic complicated the situation and the decision in 1538 to give other alien merchants customs parity with denizens may have obfuscated the position of the Hansards. But when the tax concession to aliens was ended in 1545 the Hanseatic anomaly must have become glaringly obvious, particularly since their cloth exports soared to levels higher than ever before. Anxieties about the future of the Antwerp market led to the mid-century crisis, involving the suspension by Edward VI of the franchises and a lengthy, self-imposed Hanse boycott of trade with England. The government of Mary saw fit to restore the franchises in their entirety, partly because the Merchant Adventurers were temporarily in disfavour and partly, no doubt, because a quarrel with the Hanse was an unnecessary complication on top of other problems. The respite was brief. Before long severe restrictions were placed on Hanse trade, though its fiscal advantage was retained almost until the very end of the reign. The latter was then partially demolished when there was a general increase in cloth duties and Hansards were made liable to pay the full alien rate. A permanent solution was not worked out until Elizabeth was firmly established on the throne. This left the Hanse considerably better off than they would have been but for the premature death of Edward VI. At that time they were treated simply as aliens and were likely to remain that way. Now they enjoyed customs parity with Englishmen in trade with their own regions (including cloth exports). In trade between England and third parties they paid higher duties than natives, but enjoyed a slight advantage over other aliens. This compromise lasted until 1578, when it was destroyed by an act of short-sighted folly on the part of the Hanse. At this date the remnants of the Hanse privileges were not seriously disputed by any group of English merchants. Competition against the Merchant Adventurers had largely been eliminated by tight quotas on the export of unfinished cloth. English merchants were well-entrenched in the Baltic and no longer needed the threat of abolition of Hanse privileges to maintain themselves there. As far as England was concerned, the privileges were now merely a bargaining pawn in the dispute about the staple at Hamburg. Rational diplomacy by the Hanse would have saved the privileges and even provided them with an increase in the cloth quota. Instead they threw everything away in a vain attempt to keep

the Merchant Adventurers out of the continent. This was a battle they could not win, but the stand cost them the privileges and this resulted inevitably in the loss of their remaining trade with England.

The final battleground fought over by Englishmen and Hansards was a new one, but over the centuries scenes of conflict had shifted many times. The one venue in which there was a continuous engagement was England itself. Here the issue was whether Hansards should be subject to the conditions which Englishmen sought to impose upon all visiting alien merchants – length of stay, hosting regulations, terms upon which goods might be bought or sold, the specification of natives with whom trade was actually permitted, personal taxation – as well as the taxation of trade itself and the prohibition of certain imports and exports. As we have seen, the Hansards acquired charters which theoretically gave them immunity against parliamentary statutes, which in the course of time reinforced the prescriptive claims of English towns and cities. These did not prevent a guerrilla battle on this front from start to finish. One signal English success was the exclusion of Hansards, together with other aliens, from the wool trade. This was achieved not so much by discriminatory taxation (though that may have helped), but by the creation of a staple, not in England itself but still on English territory. The first foreign field of conflict may have been Norway, though inability to maintain grain exports may already have been causing an English withdrawal from that country when the Hanseatics began to dominate its economy in the late thirteenth century. The Hanse's stranglehold on Norway's overseas trade embraced that with England, and Englishmen seem to have made only fitful attempts to recover this in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Among the factors which bore upon this lack of resolution was the establishment of the Iceland fishery, which itself became a minor area of Anglo-Hanse conflict towards the end of the fifteenth century.

Until shortly after the middle of the fourteenth century trade between England and the Baltic remained largely or entirely in the hands of Hanse merchants. Then Englishmen rapidly established a business which exceeded that of their rivals. The initial attraction may have been the Skania fairs which served as a distribution centre for western cloth and where return cargoes of herrings could be bought with a minimum of trouble. Englishmen were drawn also to the Hanse towns of the west Baltic, but soon the lure of the east was

stronger. Danzig, at the mouth of the river Vistula, was the gateway to much of central and eastern Europe. The English even had ambitions to extend their trade to Livonia, but made little or no headway there. The greater attraction of the eastern over the western region lay in the fact that besides providing a good market for cloth it gave more direct access to goods (other than herrings) which supplied return cargoes. Also, the natives of the eastern towns, despite a large investment in shipping, seem to have been less dedicated to overseas trade than those of the west. This allowed Englishmen (and other aliens) to establish themselves in the import and export trade. Native tolerance of the strangers did not extend to conceding them a stake in Prussia's internal trade nor the use of the country as a base for a wider penetration of eastern Europe. On the other hand Englishmen claimed these rights as a corollary of the privileges enjoyed by the Hanse in England. This gave rise to disputes between hosts and visitors throughout the period of English trade in Prussia. The English acquired legal rights by the treaties of 1388 and 1409, but these could not always be exercised, particularly in Danzig. The treaty of 1437 confirmed existing rights and even appeared to provide immunity from taxation, but it was never ratified by Prussia. After that the conditions in which Englishmen traded in Prussia were less favourable than in the best of earlier times.

English trade with the Baltic peaked in the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century and declined thereafter. By the 1460s it was at a very low ebb. To that extent it is a mistake to say that the Anglo-Hanse war of 1468–74 destroyed the trade. What it did was to ensure that Englishmen did not make another concerted effort to recover the lost ground after the expedition of 1468 was frustrated by the Danes. It is also incorrect to say that in the treaty of Utrecht the English abandoned their claim to reciprocal rights and that this accounts for their absence from the Baltic in the late fifteenth century. As far as legal-political relations with the Hanse are concerned, it was no more difficult, but no easier, to trade with Prussia or other Hanse towns after 1474 than before 1468. It is true that English trade with the Baltic remained at a very low level, but the constraining factor was the hostility of Denmark. It may be presumed that Hanse merchants now gained the edge over their rivals in this region. The size of the traffic cannot be established but it was probably smaller than it had been in earlier times. English

merchants did not disappear totally from the Baltic and a few stalwarts provided the basis for a recovery, which began soon after 1500 and can be remarked strongly by the 1530s. Thereafter, there were occasionally short periods in which trade was temporarily suspended, but no real setbacks. The foundation of the Eastland Company finally put Englishmen in possession of the privileged position to which their predecessors had aspired in vain – ironically at the very time that the Hanseatics lost the last vestiges of their privileges in England.

As English interest in the Baltic waned in the late fifteenth century tension began to grow between the Merchant Adventurers and the Hanseatics in the Low Countries. But, contrary to what has often been stated, there was little or no direct connection between these two developments. The origins of the Merchant Adventurers and the staple trade in the provinces of Zeeland and Brabant date back to the early fifteenth century. About the same time Cologne merchants began to realise the potential of this region for their trade in general and their English trade in particular. There is evidence of rivalry between the two groups by the 1460s, but it became intense only towards the end of the century and later, with the great increase in cloth exports to the Low Countries. The Elizabethan settlement left the Englishmen in command of the Antwerp market, but the fruits of victory soon withered on the vine, as Antwerp lost its role as an international mart and cloth-finishing centre. This meant that the Merchant Adventurers had to turn their attentions elsewhere. Some, appreciating the importance of south Germany and central Europe as a market for cloth and a source of imports, wanted to open up direct trade with the interior. But official company policy adhered to the traditional concept of a staple mart, and its leaders directed their energies to finding an alternative to Antwerp. Emden and Middelburg were tried, but did not really fit the bill. The Adventurers turned therefore to the estuary of the Elbe, the gateway to much of Germany and middle Europe. Thus it was that the very heartland of the German Hanse became the final battleground of the two rivals. The Adventurers gained a foothold in Hamburg and held it until long after the demise of the Hanse.