"I, Edmund": A Microhistory of an Immigrant Churchwarden in Fifteenth-Century Colchester
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Introduction

On the north side of Hythe Hill, in the area of Colchester known as Hythe, stands the church of St Leonard. The now-redundant place of worship is best known for its role in the English Civil War: during the Siege of Colchester (1648), Royalist soldiers took refuge in the building, making holes in the church door that are still visible today. The present study does not relate to this seventeenth-century past, but to an earlier, and lesser known, part of the church’s history. It draws on a series of accounts that are part of the Stonor and Cely Papers at The National Archives in Kew. The documents date from the second half of the fifteenth century and record the activities of St Leonard’s churchwarden, the layperson responsible for the maintenance of the church fabric and various other duties in the parish. More than seventy-five of such churchwarden accounts have been preserved in England for the period from 1449 to 1500. What makes St Leonard’s accounts more extraordinary, is that they were produced by an immigrant or alien, that is, someone resident in England but born abroad. The man in question, Edmund Hermanson, came from Brabant, in the Low Countries, and moved to Colchester in the 1460s, earning his living as a beer brewer.

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1 I am grateful to Clive Burgess, Gwilym Dodd, Jonathan Mackman, Ad Putter, Joshua Ravenhill and Laura Wright for their help and advice.
3 C 47/37/18/35-47.
Long considered a subject of only limited importance, the experiences of immigrants in later medieval England have received vast historical interest more recently, largely thanks to Mark Ormrod’s ‘England’s Immigrants’ research project. The project, which I was fortunate to be part of, showed that, during the fifteenth century, aliens constituted up to two percent of the total English population, with concentrations of over ten percent in specific cities and towns. They came from other parts of the British Isles and most regions of Europe and made essential contributions to the English economy as craftspeople, servants or agricultural labourers. Immigrants in fifteenth-century England were welcomed by most of the local population but could encounter hostility from particular groups at moments of political or economic tension. Ormrod and his team also demonstrated that this period was crucial for the regulation of alien presence, with the English crown developing policies based on the criterion of nationality but, at the same time, introducing mechanisms to overcome these discriminations.5

Most of this work, however, was based on sources created by English royal or, to a lesser extent, civic authorities. Even if these have allowed us to study immigrants’ lives in remarkable detail, they mainly provide us with a top-down perspective. The exceptions are immigrant wills, petitions and court depositions, which have been the subject of particular scrutiny, but, being formulaic and produced by legal professionals, have their own limitations when it comes to reflecting aliens’ personal experiences.6 Edmund Hermanson’s

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5 For an overview, see Ormrod, Lambert and Mackman, Immigrant England.
6 These sources are discussed in Ravenhill, ‘Experiences of Aliens’.
churchwarden accounts are different in that respect, as they show us an immigrant individual, reporting on his own day-to-day business. This is not to say that these documents are without problems: Clive Burgess in particular has highlighted the challenges of analysing churchwarden accounts in isolation and taking their information at face value. Yet, by a fortunate coincidence, Hermanson’s activities were recorded in many other sources as well. These complimentary documents allow us to overcome some of the churchwarden accounts’ shortcomings and add further detail to Hermanson’s life story. Inspired by the genre of microhistory, the aim of this study is to mine this unusually rich body of evidence and to see what a singular story of an alien beer brewer can tell us about immigrant experiences in later medieval England that government records, wills and petitions alone cannot.

A Brabantine Beer Brewer in Fifteenth-Century Colchester

The earliest known reference to Edmund Hermanson in Colchester dates from 1466. According to the town’s borough court roll of that year, the civic authorities fined him for grazing his pigs on the borough common. Further in the same roll, Hermanson was listed together with others who were amerced for brewing and selling ale or beer against the assize. In effect, these payments constituted a tax on brewing. The desire to use the borough’s common resources and to engage in brewing activities without inhibitions may have inspired Hermanson to acquire the freedom of the town: also in 1466, he paid a fee to become a burgess of Colchester, which entitled him to purchase and sell both wholesale and retail without paying tolls and to freely graze his animals on the commons.

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7 Burgess, ‘Pre-Reformation Churchwardens’ Accounts’.
8 For the microhistorical approach, see Levi, ‘On Microhistory’.
9 ERO, D/B, Cr. 73, m. 1d.
10 ERO, D/B 5, Cr. 73, m. 2.
There are reasons to believe, however, that Hermanson already roamed the town’s streets before 1466. In 1460, a certain Edmund Beerbrewer was assessed to pay the alien subsidy in the county of Essex.\(^\text{12}\) Introduced in 1440 and collected until 1487, this royal tax was imposed on all residents older than twelve and born outside the kingdom. Ideally, the returns of the alien subsidies provide information about immigrants’ place of residence, place of origin and occupation, but in Edmund Beerbrewer’s case, there are no details allowing further identification.\(^\text{13}\) Also in 1460, a man of the same name was fined for obstructing the main road in Hythe, the port settlement outside Colchester’s walls.\(^\text{14}\) Two years later, the same person was reprimanded for using the common meadows and assaulting a certain John Bardfeld with a stick.\(^\text{15}\) In 1465, the year when we first encountered Edmund Hermanson, the name Edmund Beerbrewer disappears from the records. It is, therefore, likely that both names refer to the same man. There are many other examples in fifteenth-century England of immigrants recorded under their original surname in one case and under a generic surname derived from their occupation or nationality in another.\(^\text{16}\)

The place where Hermanson tried to make a name for himself was one which, in the 1460s, had passed its peak in many respects. During the fourteenth century and early decades of the fifteenth century, Colchester was known as a major cloth production centre, exporting textiles to markets across Europe. The success of its cloth industry allowed it to thrive in a period when other towns in England decayed. After the 1440s, however, the activities of Colchester merchants in Gascony and Prussia severely declined following political and military setbacks. These losses were temporarily compensated by an increased presence of

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\(^\text{12}\) E 179/108/124, m. 1.
\(^\text{14}\) ERO, D/B 5, Cr.71, mm. 11, 16d.
\(^\text{15}\) ERO, D/B 5, Cr. 72, mm. 1d, 12d.
\(^\text{16}\) For another example, see Ormrod, Lambert and Mackman, *Immigrant England*, pp. 82-3.
Hanseatic traders in the town. Yet when Anglo-Hanseatic relations broke down, in 1468, international trade through Hythe completely collapsed. To make matters worse, Colchester was struck by a brutal outbreak of the plague in the early 1460s. Economic contraction and disease took their toll: while the evidence suggests that Colchester had about 8,000 inhabitants at the end of the fourteenth century, this fell to just over 5,000 at the beginning of the sixteenth century.\footnote{Britnell, \textit{Growth and Decline}, pp. 163-264.}

In the second half of the fourteenth century, Colchester’s expansion as a textile centre was boosted by the immigration of highly-skilled cloth workers from Flanders and Brabant. Many of these people were exiled from their home regions because of their participation in urban revolts.\footnote{Lambert and Pajic, ‘Drapery in Exile’}. In the fifteenth century, however, this influx ran dry: only one immigrant weaver was recorded in Colchester’s alien subsidy returns between 1440 and 1487.\footnote{E 179/108/113, m. 6.} This was not just caused by the decline of the town’s own cloth production, but also by developments in these immigrants’ homelands. In the course of the later Middle Ages, the large-scale urban textile industries in the Low Countries suffered from increasing competition from the countryside and from other parts of Europe. As a result, workers in many cities switched from the manufacture of cloth to the production of high-value consumer goods.\footnote{Van der Wee, ‘Structural Changes’, pp. 212-15.}

The alien subsidy returns demonstrate that these people, too, came to Colchester during the second half of the fifteenth century. Occupations were listed only haphazardly in these documents, but immigrants in the town were recorded as tailors, skinners and woaders. If occupational surnames can be considered indicative of people’s professions, Colchester’s aliens also worked as shoemakers, chair makers and patten or wooden clog manufacturers. While some of these immigrants came from Ireland, Scotland, Brittany and Normandy, most
were said to be ‘Dutch’, the designation given in England to aliens from the Low Countries.\(^{21}\) The highest number of aliens recorded in Colchester in the alien subsidies is 57, in 1484.\(^{22}\) These were nearly all male and included no immigrant wives. If we assume that one in four of these alien men were married to immigrant women and that each of these alien couples had, on average, one child before migrating to England, then Colchester could have had about 85 permanent immigrant residents in 1484.\(^{23}\) The town would also have attracted more transient aliens, including, until 1468, some Hanseatic merchants, who were not recorded in the alien subsidies and whose number is impossible to determine.\(^{24}\) It is difficult to say how these figures compare to those of Colchester’s alien cloth workers in the fourteenth century, when we lack similar sources. The numbers of newly enrolled burgesses went down spectacularly in the course of the fifteenth century, but they are only an indirect indicator in this respect: they mostly refer to English newcomers and do not include the immigrants who lived in the town without obtaining the freedom.\(^{25}\)

Why would Edmund Hermanson have migrated to Colchester in the early 1460s? On the surface, the contracting, plague-hit town offered few opportunities for ‘Dutch’ craftsmen like him. Could he have been driven to Essex by specific push factors in his homeland? Edmund’s enrolment as a burgess in 1466 states that he came from Brabant, a principality which had been part of the territories of the Burgundian dukes since 1430.\(^{26}\) The Low Countries were constantly struck by political unrest which, as explained above, had driven craftspeople to Colchester before. Yet both in Brabant and the wider Burgundian territories,

\(^{21}\) E 179/108/113, m. 6; 108/114, m. 2; 108/124, m. 1; 108/130, mm. 2-3; 235/61, m. 1; 236/133, m. 2; 270/31, m. 50.
\(^{22}\) E 179/108/130, mm. 2-3.
\(^{23}\) Immigrants’ children born in England were, in principle, not considered as aliens: Ormrod and Mackman, ‘Resident Aliens’, p. 5.
\(^{24}\) No-one was ever recorded as being a Hansard in the alien subsidies in Colchester.
\(^{25}\) Britnell, *Growth and Decline*, pp. 203-5.
the early 1460s were a relatively uneventful time, with few civic rebellions or other causes of instability.²⁷

An advantage of having a well-documented case like Hermanson’s is that we can move beyond the common factors driving large numbers of people abroad and reconstruct individual reasons for migration. Relevant in this respect is Edmund’s line of work. From the earliest references in the English sources, Hermanson was identified as a beer brewer. He also continued to be recorded in Colchester’s borough court as brewing beer against the assize from 1465 to 1485, the last year during his lifetime for which court rolls are available.²⁸

Originally imported from the Low Countries and then brewed by ‘Dutch’ immigrants in England for their own consumption, hop-based beer also became popular with English consumers during this period, starting to compete with wheats-based ale.²⁹ Conditions for ‘Dutch’ beer brewers may have been particularly favourable in early 1460s Colchester. The plague of those years appears to have killed off, or driven away, many brewers of both ale and beer, possibly one third of the number engaged in these activities in the late 1450s.³⁰ In 1466-1467, Hermanson only had one competitor in the beer brewing business in town, in subsequent years never more than six.³¹ For the purposes of comparison, Great Yarmouth, a town with an estimated population of about 3,000 people in the late fourteenth century, and 3,700 people in the early sixteenth century, had at least eight alien master beer brewers around the middle of the fifteenth century.³²

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²⁷ It is unlikely that Hermanson was affected by the Burgundian court intrigues and the conflicts with France, the most serious problems in the Low Countries during this period. Vaughan, Philip the Good, pp. 334-72.
²⁸ ERO, D/5, Cr. 73-81.
²⁹ Milan Pajic, ‘Ale for an Englishman’.
³¹ ERO, D/5, Cr. 73, m. 2.
While English ale brewing typically involved many women, beer brewing, which was more capital-intensive, was a male-dominated business. Yet in Colchester, the beer brewers recorded in the borough court rolls were mostly female too. It seems that they provided their households with a supplementary income while their husbands were engaged in other occupations, as many English alewives did. The ‘Dutchman’ William Vangilesburgh, for example, had his main business in patten making, while his wife brewed and sold beer. Hermanson, by contrast, was consistently fined for brewing himself and was never recorded as having any other occupation, which suggests that brewing was his main business and his household’s most important source of income.

It is likely that Hermanson had the means to operate on a larger scale than Colchester’s female beer brewers. Unfortunately, he no longer appears in the alien subsidy returns in the 1480s, when immigrant keepers of brewhouses were assessed in a separate tax category and had the organisation of their businesses described very precisely. It is not clear why this was the case: he may have purchased letters of denization, documents that entitled the immigrant recipients to privileges usually reserved for English-born people, including the right to pay taxes as natives. Hermanson does not appear among the recipients of denization in the chancery’s patent rolls, where these letters were usually recorded. This is no guarantee that he did not receive such documents though: some immigrants are known to have obtained denization but never had their grant enrolled. It is also possible that Edmund evaded payment of the tax. The three immigrants who were assessed as brewhouse keepers in the

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33 Bennett, *Ale, Beer and Brewsters*, pp. 77-97.
34 ERO, D/B 5, mm. 13d, 21d.
35 We have no evidence on the professional activities of Hermanson’s first wife. She may have assisted her husband in his business, as the wives of ‘Dutch’ beer brewers in London did. Ravenhill, ‘Experiences of Aliens’, p. 121.
alien subsidy returns for Colchester in the 1480s included two men who, like Hermanson, were fined in the borough court for brewing beer themselves and none of the town’s female brewers. The alien subsidy records suggest that all three ran considerable enterprises. Edmund Rumbold, for example, employed no fewer than five alien servants, possibly apprentices training on the job.  

In Colchester, Edmund Hermanson thus found a place with a permanent ‘Dutch’ community and a number of transient aliens in need of hopped beer, a native population with a growing taste for the drink and few large-scale competitors. The proximity of large international ports like London and Ipswich would also have allowed for an easy import of hops and other commodities needed for beer brewing. Hermanson was never recorded in the surviving customs accounts for London and Ipswich but may have bought raw materials directly from Colcestrians who do figure in these accounts, like his fellow-immigrant Ambrosius Mynster.

Churchwarden of St Leonard-at-the-Hythe

The churchwarden accounts of St Leonard’s leave little doubt as to who was responsible for the creation of these documents. Nine of the thirteen membranes start off with the first-person form ‘I Edmund Hermanson’ or ‘I Edmund’. When they were produced is less clear, as none of the documents is dated. The first membrane, however, refers to a dispute with a William Andrewe that is also recorded in the Colchester borough court rolls of 1481-1482. It is

37 E 179/108/130, mm. 2-3.
38 Mynster, sometimes recorded as Mynsterbery, was taxed when importing hops through Ipswich in 1465-1467: E 122/52/48, fol. 6. His wife was amerced for brewing or selling beer against the assize in Colchester between 1466-1467 and 1473-1474: ERO, D/B 5, Cr. 73, m. 27d; 27d; 74, mm. 2, 14, 23d; 75, mm. 2d, 10d, 19d.
39 C 47/37/18/35-7, 40-4, 47.
40 C 47/37/18/35; ERO, D/B 5, Cr. 79, mm. 24, 25, 28, 30.
therefore likely that the accounts were created in the same year or shortly afterwards.

Churchwardens were laypeople elected by the parish community to manage part of the parish’s revenues and expenses. They kept accounts, which were audited at least once a year. Hermanson was not the only alien in England during this period to be elected churchwarden: Judy Ann Ford identified two alien churchwardens in early Tudor Sandwich, none of whom, unfortunately, left any accounts.41

Figure 2: Detail of the membrane in the churchwarden accounts that deals with disputes over the church’s real property (C 47/37/18/35)

According to Ford, two factors were essential for immigrants to be eligible as churchwardens. The first was economic status: the aliens elected in Sandwich were both among the most affluent members of their parish community.42 This criterion certainly applied to Hermanson. The fact that he had no fewer than three cows and seventeen pigs grazing on the town’s commons in 1463-1464, when he was still recorded as Edmund Beerbrewer, suggests he may already have been quite well-to-do when he arrived in England.43 His brewing activities must have benefited him greatly in subsequent years: Colchester’s records show him and his first wife regularly acquiring real property in the town.44 By the time he made his will, in 1502, he was able to leave no fewer than five tenements, a brewhouse, a limekiln and land and make considerable cash bequests.45

42 Ibid., pp. 207-10.
43 ERO, D/B 5, Cr. 72, m. 1d.
45 PROB 11/13/226.
Ford’s second criterion is political status: in Sandwich, both aliens had held civic office before being elected as churchwardens.\textsuperscript{46} The only sign of Hermanson being involved in civic matters was his testimony, as one of the long-term burgesses in the town, that a recently slandered man was a good yeoman, in 1493.\textsuperscript{47} As far as is known, he never held civic office. It is not that immigrants in fifteenth century-English towns were excluded from political activities: aliens are known to have held civic office and to have engaged with civic governance in quite a few urban centres in the country during this period.\textsuperscript{48} It appears that Hermanson was interested in the public recognition of being elected churchwarden, but not in the commotion that often came with political involvement.

The nature of Hermanson’s churchwarden accounts is pretty heterogeneous and the relationship between the membranes is difficult to establish. It is clear that the documentation contains both drafts and tidied copies of the same accounts.\textsuperscript{49} Marginal notes on one membrane suggest that it could have been used for auditing.\textsuperscript{50} On the dorse of another membrane, someone wrote ‘this is of the cherche to’.\textsuperscript{51} Did Hermanson need to make notes to keep these documents separate from his private book keeping? Without assuming that they cover all his responsibilities, the accounts give some idea of Edmund’s activities as churchwarden. Most of his revenue came from collections held among the parishioners on holy days and from particular donations by the more generous members of the parish community.\textsuperscript{52} He also collected the annual payments of quitrent owed by parishioners for use of church-owned gardens, stalls and other real property.\textsuperscript{53} Conflicting claims on this property

\textsuperscript{46} Ford, ‘Marginality and the Assimilation’, pp. 207-10.  
\textsuperscript{48} Lambert, ‘Citizenry and Nationality’.  
\textsuperscript{49} C 47/37/18/38, for example, is clearly a draft version of C 47/37/18/39.  
\textsuperscript{50} C 47/37/18/45d.  
\textsuperscript{51} C 47/37/18/39d.  
\textsuperscript{52} C 47/37/18/42, 47.  
\textsuperscript{53} C 47/37/18/46, 47d.
sometimes resulted in disputes, described in a separate membrane. One of these disputes, with the aforementioned William Andrewe, led to a lawsuit in Colchester’s borough court.\textsuperscript{54} For the collection of rents, dues and donations, Hermanson could rely on two assistants. Remarkably they included John Bardfeld, the man he had attacked with a stick some twenty years earlier. Another membrane specifies the money Hermanson lent to others, an activity also recorded in other churchwarden accounts. Unlike the churchwardens studied by Burgess, Hermanson claimed to make these loans himself.\textsuperscript{55} The debtors included prominent parishioners and the town clerk, but also Elizabeth, ‘daughter of our lord of Norfolk’. It is not clear whether interest was charged and the loans were supposed to make a profit. In between these debts, Hermanson also recorded arrears for deliveries of beer.\textsuperscript{56} Many parishes in later medieval England organised church ales, events where ale was sold in order to raise funds.\textsuperscript{57} Did the immigrant churchwarden appropriate this venerable English tradition and turn these occasions into ‘church beers’ to serve his private business interests?

Hermanson also recorded expenses made for the church’s maintenance. He paid people for deliveries of candle wax, frankincense and the materials to produce a mass book, as well as for ringing the church bells and cleaning the church.\textsuperscript{58} Most of Hermanson’s costs, however, were made for repairs and alterations to both the church and, in one membrane, a parish-owned house.\textsuperscript{59} The churchwarden was responsible for the supplies of building materials needed for these works. The accounts list endless payments for timber, laths nails, lime and sand, as well as for carrying these materials. Hermanson’s orders of brick deserve special attention. The large-scale use of this material had been introduced from continental

\textsuperscript{54} C 47/37/18/35; ERO, D/B 5, Cr. 79, mm. 24, 25, 28, 30.
\textsuperscript{55} Burgess, ‘Pre-Reformation Churchwardens’ Accounts’, pp. 323-4.
\textsuperscript{56} C 47/37/18/40.
\textsuperscript{57} French, ‘Parochial Fund-Raising’, p. 131
\textsuperscript{58} C 47/37/18/41.
\textsuperscript{59} C 47/37/18/36-9, 45.
Europe, in particular from the Low Countries, at the start of the fifteenth century. Until the 1480s, both the production of, and construction with, brick in England remained dominated by ‘Dutch’ immigrants.\textsuperscript{60} Hermanson’s use of brick for St Leonard’s church seems to have been rather limited and may have involved only small-scale repairs.\textsuperscript{61} Yet he also paid 18s. 8d., one of the highest sums in the accounts, for 7,000 bricks for the parish-owned house. This amount can only have served for a substantial alteration or extension of the building. References to the use of brick on such a scale are fairly exceptional in churchwarden accounts before the sixteenth century.\textsuperscript{62} It seems, then, that beer was not the only distinctively ‘Dutch’ product promoted by the churchwarden from the Low Countries. Hermanson’s accounts also record payments for work on the church and parish property carried out by tilers, glaziers and other craftspeople. Because of the brevity of the entries, it is difficult to establish the exact purpose of these activities, let alone to connect them to the church’s material remains. Yet it may be no coincidence that, on the one hand, Hermanson made numerous payments for alterations to the roof, and on the other hand, that the ceiling of the church’s south porch has been dated art-historically to the late fifteenth century.\textsuperscript{63}

Some of the people Edmund relied on when buying supplies and hiring craftsmen return frequently throughout the accounts. Carpentry, for example, was usually carried out by the aptly named Edmund Carpenter or by Robert Freeman.\textsuperscript{64} Several of these men belonged to known Colchester families, such as the Snellings and the Lallefords.\textsuperscript{65} What is remarkable is that of the many suppliers and craftspeople mentioned by name in the accounts, none could be

\textsuperscript{60} Moore, ‘Brick’, pp. 212-14.
\textsuperscript{61} C 47/37/36, 39, 39d. The current church bears traces of brick masonry, though nothing dated specifically to the late fifteenth century. An Inventory, pp. 32-46.
\textsuperscript{62} The only other fifteenth-century churchwarden accounts where references to brick were found are Church Records of St Andrew Hubbard, ed. Burgess, pp. 16, 54, 55, 61, 68. The amounts of brick recorded here are much smaller than those ordered by Hermanson.
\textsuperscript{63} An Inventory, pp. 32-46.
\textsuperscript{64} C 47/37/18/36, 39.
\textsuperscript{65} C 47/37/18/36, 38, 39, 39d, 41d, 42d.
positively identified as a fellow-immigrant. While Hermanson may have spent money on building materials still considered as typically ‘Dutch’ at this time, none of the masons he worked with can be linked to immigrants in the alien subsidy returns or has a distinctively ‘Dutch’ name.66 The same applies to the other suppliers and craftsmen he hired. Unfortunately, the occupational information in the alien subsidy returns of the 1480s is too fragmentary to determine whether the town’s aliens actually were engaged in the specialised trades that Hermanson would have needed.67 Lambert Polwycke, a Gelderlander assessed as a merchant in 1484, was recorded as trading stones in the London customs accounts of 1480-3, but perhaps not the kind the churchwarden could have used.68 It is doubtful, however, that none of the forty-one immigrants described as ‘servants’ in the alien subsidy returns during these years would have been capable of carrying out the many unskilled tasks recorded in the churchwarden accounts.69 Of the people said to have borrowed money, paid rent and made a donation to the parish, only one can be identified as an alien: Thomas Brown, who had received a loan from the churchwarden, and may have been the Scotsman of the same name who lived in Colchester and received royal letters of protection in 1480.70 It is not that St Leonard’s parish did not have immigrant residents: it was part of the Hythe, the town’s harbour settlement and a hotspot of alien presence.71 It may be that Edmund chose to use his office to actively promote his relations with St Leonard’s native parishioners, rather than with

66 The masons in the accounts are named Cranvyn, Whythead and Thomas Ellmet. C 47/37/18/36, 36d, 39, 39d.
67 In 1441, John Mynte was assessed as a sawyer: E 179/270/31, m. 50. In 1456, the town’s alien taxpayers included Richard Brickmaker, whose surname suggests that he worked in brick masonry: E 179/236/133, m. 2. Yet neither Mynte nor Brickmaker were still recorded in the alien subsidies in the 1480s.
68 E 179/108/130, m. 3; E 122/52/58, m. 10d.
69 ‘Servant’, as used in the alien subsidies, could refer to domestic servants, but also to day labourers, apprentices and agricultural workers: Ormrod, Lambert and Mackman, Immigrant England, p. 164.
70 C 47/37/18/40; CPR 1476-85, p. 200.
71 Britnell, Growth and Decline, pp. 196-7.
his fellow-immigrants. Yet it is also possible that the other aliens of the parish were unwilling
or unable to become more fully involved in its parish life, and that it was beyond
Hermanson’s capacities to change this situation.\footnote{One entry in the accounts suggests that Hermanson was not entirely free to decide who to hire – he paid ‘William Gylys’s wife, for the gathering of labour’: C 47/37/18/38, 39.}

An important advantage of having documents produced by immigrants as opposed to
close authorities is that they can give us a glimpse into aliens’ use of language.\footnote{The analysis of the accounts’ language and handwriting in this paragraph is greatly indebted to Laura Wright and Ad Putter.} The
accounts of St Leonard’s were written in supralocal southern English, that is, the kind of
English found all over the southern half of the country at this date, before Standard English
had developed.\footnote{On supralocalisation, see Merja Stenroos, ‘Regional Variation’, pp. 95-128.} As such, it is absolutely competent. Forms like ‘these be’, ‘dellyth’, ‘hath
given’ and ‘bare’ (past tense of bear), used throughout the accounts, are unremarkable
examples of southern English during this period. The <ey>, <ay> and <oy> digraphs in words
like ‘teyllynge’ (for ‘tiling’) or ‘boysschell’ (for ‘bushel’) were not particularly common, but
spelling variation was still usual at this date. There is very little that allows to localise the
language in Colchester. One of the few examples of regional vocabulary used is ‘Iopy pece’, a
word recorded only in Cambridge and East Anglia meaning ‘jaw-piece’.\footnote{‘jowpy/jopy, n.’} Significantly, there
is hardly any evidence of interference from Middle Dutch either. ‘Firkin’ (a small cask) and
‘bondell’ (bundle) probably come from Middle Dutch but were also used frequently
elsewhere in England during this period.\footnote{‘firkin, n.’; ‘bundle, n.’}

\footnote{72 One entry in the accounts suggests that Hermanson was not entirely free to decide who to hire – he paid ‘William Gylys’s wife, for the gathering of labour’: C 47/37/18/38, 39.}
\footnote{73 The analysis of the accounts’ language and handwriting in this paragraph is greatly indebted to Laura Wright and Ad Putter.}
\footnote{74 On supralocalisation, see Merja Stenroos, ‘Regional Variation’, pp. 95-128.}
\footnote{75 ‘jowpy/jopy, n.’.}
\footnote{76 ‘firkin, n.’; ‘bundle, n.’.}
accounts of Boxford, north of Colchester, of 1535 and 1559, but is not known in writings elsewhere.\textsuperscript{77} In terms of spelling, the English in Hermanson’s accounts is far more competent than that of Theodoric Werken, a ‘Dutch’ scribe active in England in the second half of the fifteenth century whose English contains oddities that can only be explained by the influence of Middle Dutch.\textsuperscript{78} An analysis of the handwriting in the churchwarden accounts supports the idea of Hermanson having adapted to English conventions. The accounts are all written in the English cursive style or Anglicana, used only in England and not on the Continent. Especially the ‘r’, ‘s’ and ‘e’ are very different from those of a continental hand.

We should, of course, consider that a document in perfectly idiomatic supralocal southern English and displaying English handwriting could have been produced by a native scribe. Concluding that a churchwarden would have written his accounts based solely on the use of the first person form, as Julia Carnwath did for the 1440s accounts of John Manyturn in Thame (Oxfordshire), would be to underestimate the complexity of the accounting process.\textsuperscript{79} The fifteenth-century churchwarden accounts of All Saints’ in Bristol, for example, have entries in the first person plural, but also record payments to clerks for keeping the books.\textsuperscript{80} Katherine French has shown that rendering churchwarden accounts often involved both written and oral practices.\textsuperscript{81} Within this context, churchwardens could have dictated their accounts to professional scribes. This is also possible for the accounts of St Leonard’s, though the form of the draft membranes, which look very much like working documents and were frequently corrected and updated in the same hand as the main text, suggests otherwise.\textsuperscript{82} It is also unlikely that a scribe produced the tidied copies based on Hermanson’s drafts, as both the

\textsuperscript{77} ‘kneppel, n.’; \textit{Boxford Churchwardens’ Accounts}, ed. Northeast, pp. 17, 70.
\textsuperscript{78} Putter et al., ‘Manuscripts’, forthcoming.
\textsuperscript{79} Carnwath, ‘Churchwardens’ Accounts’, p. 183.
\textsuperscript{80} See, for example, \textit{Pre-Reformation Records}, ed. Burgess, pp. 54-5.
\textsuperscript{81} French, \textit{People of the Parish}, pp. 57-62.
\textsuperscript{82} References to loans were struck out, for example, probably after they had been paid back: C 47/37/18/40.
 language and handwriting in all of these documents are consistent. While many other churchwarden accounts record salaries paid to professional writers, Hermanson’s accounts, or at least what has been preserved of them, do not. Edmund did make two payments to Colchester’s town clerk, but these were for producing an official letter and an obligation, documents that required additional authentication, and not for the churchwarden accounts.

The most important reason why churchwardens would have relied on others to keep their accounts was that they were illiterate. This seems not to have applied to Hermanson. Between 1460 and 1502, he was involved in many real property transactions, which would have required at least a basic understanding of written deeds. In 1484, Hermanson was sued before the court of common pleas by a yeoman called Simon Gerard. In one of the hearings, Gerard presented a written bond (scriptum suum obligatorium) in which Edmund would have admitted that he owed his opponent money. It was a fairly common practice before this court to deny responsibility for a bond by claiming that one was illiterate and, therefore, not aware of its clauses. Hermanson did not do so and simply stated that he had not produced the document. We should also bear in mind that Hermanson originated from a region where, by the fifteenth century, it was considered normal for a master artisan to be able to read, write and count. While literacy was also widespread among craftspeople in fifteenth-century London, the situation in a provincial town like Colchester may have been different: even at the end of the fifteenth century, apprentices from the provinces were sent home by their

83 For payments to scribes, see Church-Wardens’ Accounts, ed. Hobhouse, pp. 115, 172; Halesowen, Churchwardens’ Accounts, ed. Somers, p. 13.
84 C 47/37/18/41d.
85 French, People of the Parish, p. 57.
86 See the references in footnote 50.
87 CP 40/888, rots 131, 1029d; 889, rot. 1309d; 890, rot. 565; 891, rot. 1134; 892, rot. 4.
88 See, for example, CP 40/657, rot. 361d; 670, rot. 101; 737, rot. 109; 743, rot. 544.
London masters because they were illiterate. In this respect, it is possible that Edmund’s background as an immigrant from a region where literacy was more developed was an additional reason for his fellow-parishioners to elect him as churchwarden.

If we accept that Hermanson wrote the churchwarden accounts of St Leonard’s, then his case provides us with very valuable information. Our knowledge about immigrants’ language acquisition in later medieval England is troubled by a lack of conclusive evidence. Many of the sources that do tell us about this issue suggest that aliens’ use of English was very pragmatic, characterised by a strong hybridity and an extensive use of loan words, and that it was easily distinguishable from natives’ English. Yet, most of these examples focus on short-term residents in the country or come from authors who had an interest in highlighting the differences between aliens and natives. It is doubtful that this would have applied to the many immigrants who settled in England for longer periods of time. The Hermanson case gives us a rare insight into these more established aliens’ command of English suggesting that it was perfectly possible for them to master the language and, if they were literate, to write it competently.

Well-Integrated Parishioner or ‘Flemish’ Bandleader?

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90 Already in the early fifteenth century, access to an apprenticeship in many London crafts was dependent on the ability to read and write. Barron: ‘Expansion of Education’, pp. 452-3. For apprentices being told to leave because they were illiterate, see Thrupp, *Merchant Class*, p. 158.
91 For hybrid speech, see the ‘Dutch’ hatmakers’ English in the satirical poem London Lickpenny: ‘London Lickpenny’, pp. 222-5. For language as a marker of distinction, see the ‘cheese and bread’ shibboleth in the Peasants’ Revolt: Spindler, ‘Flemings in the Peasants’ Revolt’.
92 For an immigrant claiming to improve his English, see Ormrod, ‘French Residents’, pp. 200-1.
Burgess has argued that churchwarden accounts, in particular their formal copies, could have been intended as documents for commemoration, celebrating the churchwarden’s contributions to the parish.\(^93\) The constant use of the ‘I, Edmund’ form throughout the accounts of St Leonard’s certainly suggests that Edmund Hermanson was preoccupied with the way in which his work was perceived. The document would have been very effective in conveying an image of him as a successful, perfectly integrated parishioner, who enjoyed enough confidence among his fellow-parishioners to be entrusted with a key position in parish life, entertained relationships with everyone who mattered in St Leonard’s and worked for the benefit of the parish in a way that seemed indistinguishable from the way in which English churchwardens did their job. A similar impression emerges from Hermanson’s will, a source type which has also been associated with commemorative purposes and has even been considered by some as a form of biographical writing. Wills, the argument goes, allowed testators to create an image of themselves that reflected how they wanted to be perceived by later generations, albeit that this self-fashioning potential was subject to particular constraints due to the formulaic nature of these documents and their role as legal instruments.\(^94\)

One element reflecting on Hermanson’s position in Colchester that is documented by his will, proved in 1502, is his marriage connections. From 1481-1482, at the latest, Edmund had been married to Mathilda or Maud Berwick, a member of a local office-holding family.\(^95\) Either she must have died or their marriage was disbanded, because the will mentions a certain Elizabeth as his wife.\(^96\) It is not known what family Elizabeth belonged to, but the fact


\(^94\) Salter, Cultural Creativity, pp. 14-8. In what follows, we will overcome these constraints by focusing on the differences between Hermanson’s will and those of other testators in Colchester.

\(^95\) ERO, D/B 5, Cr. 79, m. 24, 30. Edmund was last recorded as married to Mathilda in 1485-1486: Oath Book, ed. Benham, p. 136. Peter Berwick was a councillor in Colchester in 1460-1461: ERO, D/B 5, Cr. 71, m. 1.

\(^96\) PROB 11/13/226.
that she had Henry Marney, a knight and privy councillor of Henry VII, and John Marney, probably Henry’s son and esquire of the body to the king, among her executors and that she founded a fellowship at Cambridge University in her own will, proved in 1506, suggests that beer brewer Hermanson had married up.\textsuperscript{97} Edmund appears to have had no children, at least no legitimate ones. In his will, he left real property to four unmarried women, each of whom bore a different surname. One was the daughter of Henry Barker, an executor of Hermanson’s will and possibly also his friend. She received a significantly larger bequest than the others.\textsuperscript{98} Nothing in the will allows the identification of the other three women. They may have been daughters of other friends, poor girls of the parish, former employees or Hermanson’s godchildren. Another option, though one which fits in slightly less with the idea of commemoration, is that they were the former churchwarden’s daughters from extramarital affairs, adopted by other men.

The other bequests in the 1502 will confirm the impression of Hermanson having particular concerns about being remembered in a positive light. Edmund left nothing to civic causes in Colchester.\textsuperscript{99} This ties in with the earlier view of him steering clear of civic matters, but was by no means uncommon: only 7\% of testators in the town made civic bequests between 1500 and 1509.\textsuperscript{100} Most of Hermanson’s property, in fact, was reserved for Colchester’s religious institutions. This, too, was not unusual: between 1500 and 1509, 48\% of testators in the town left something to a parish church or religious house. More extraordinary is the number of Hermanson’s religious bequests. He left money to nine of Colchester’s parish churches, including the often neglected one of St Mary Magdalen, to St

\textsuperscript{97} PROB 11/15/10. For Henry Marney, see Carley, ‘Marney, Henry’. For John Marney, see Dale, ‘Marney, Sir John’.
\textsuperscript{98} PROB 11/13/226.
\textsuperscript{99} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{100} The figures of testamentary practice in Colchester in this paragraph come from Higgs, \textit{Godliness and Governance}, p. 89.
Botolph’s priory and to the mendicant houses of the Grey and Crutched Friars. Hermanson also wanted to leave a legacy beyond Colchester: he bequeathed money to three parish churches in the nearby villages of Mile End, Wivenhoe and Greenstead, to the priory of St Osyth near the Essex coast and to St Paul’s cathedral in London. His connections with religious institutions in Essex were probably a consequence of his work as churchwarden. The link with London is more remarkable and may have resulted from his marriage to Elizabeth, who made several bequests in the capital in her own will. Most of Hermanson’s donations to religious institutions in and outside Colchester had to be spent on repairs, perpetuating the work he had done as a churchwarden, and on remembrance services for himself, his wife and his friends.

Figure 3: Map of Colchester c. 1500, indicating the locations mentioned in Hermanson’s will. Own illustration of the author.

In addition to their other bequests, Edmund and Elizabeth Hermanson each founded a perpetual chantry at St Leonard’s, where they chose to be buried. This was quite an exceptional move: only ten of these permanent foundations are known to have existed in pre-Reformation Colchester. Edmund’s chantry was endowed with a tenement close to the parish church, his townhouse, his brewhouse, his limekiln and two plots of land. In return for the revenues from these properties, a priest had to sing remembrance services for Hermanson and pray for his soul in perpetuity. Unfortunately, Edmund’s investment provided only

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101 St Mary Magdalen is only known to have received six bequests, Hermanson’s included. Crossan, ‘Excavations’, p. 92.
102 PROB 11/15/10. The Hermansons’ townhouse in Colchester was also called ‘Little London’. PROB 11/13/226.
103 PROB 11/13/226.
104 Morant, History and Antiquities, pp. 113-14.
105 PROB 11/13/226.
limited return. Hermanson probably died shortly before 1 June 1502, when his will was proved. Thirty-two years later, parliament passed the First Act of Supremacy, making Henry VIII head of the English Church. In tandem with the dissolution of religious institutions that followed, chantries and other religious foundations were abolished. Hermanson’s chantry was dissolved and its endowment given to Thomas Audley, lord chancellor of England, some time before 1544. It was last mentioned in 1550, when part of the former chantry properties were passed on to two Essex landowners.

If Hermanson’s churchwarden accounts and his will portray him as a beneficent and accomplished parishioner, then to what extent was his immigrant background part of this image? We have already seen that there are hardly any interferences from Middle Dutch in the language of the churchwarden accounts. The accounts also indicated that Hermanson may have promoted the use of typically ‘Dutch’ products such as beer and brick, but they did not show that he employed fellow-alien workers. Elements that could be associated with Edmund’s alien background are also few and far between in his will. Adrian Johnson, another of Hermanson’s executors, may have been the immigrant of the same name who paid the Tudor subsidy in St Leonard’s, Colchester in 1523. The document records no bequests to institutions in Edmund’s homeland, something that does appear in some other alien wills in later medieval and early Tudor England. Hermanson did leave money to mendicant friaries, institutions which sometimes had large numbers of alien friars and were popular with immigrants. The Crutched Friars are even said to have had particular links with the Low Countries. No such connections are known in Colchester, where both the Grey and

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106 Higgs, *Godliness and Governance*, p. 147.
107 *CPR, 1549-51*, p. 219.
108 E 179/108/162, m. 2.
Crutched Friars also received many bequests from natives.\textsuperscript{111} The only individual member of a religious institution that Hermanson left money to was a canon at St Osyth’s called Cornelyis. This name was particularly common in the Low Countries around this time, which may indicate that Edmund and the man knew each other as a result of shared ‘Dutch’ origins.\textsuperscript{112} Other than that, there are no references to the Low Countries in the will. It seems safe to say, then, that if Hermanson’s will and churchwarden accounts meant to serve self-fashioning purposes, they did everything but define him by his immigrant background.

How much do sources produced by others confirm the image of Hermanson shaped by the will and the churchwarden accounts? At least one document paints a very different picture of him. In a petition to the king, a William Smyth of Colchester claimed that Edmund Hermanson had carried off timber and stone from his property. When Smyth attempted to obtain recovery of the materials, Hermanson gathered a band of ‘as well Flemyngs as other indisposed [hostile] persons’ and threatened to murder him. As a result of the intimidation, the petitioner no longer dared to remain in the country and asked royal protection against his adversary.\textsuperscript{113} The petition is undated, but the incident may be connected to Hermanson’s time as a churchwarden: according to his churchwarden accounts, he regularly bought timber from a shoemaker named William Smyth.\textsuperscript{114} Rather than as a perfectly integrated parishioner who entertained better relationships with his English neighbours than with his fellow-alien residents, the petition thus frames him as someone who engaged in criminal activities against native Colcestrians and actively drew on his ‘Dutch’ networks to serve these questionable interests. Yet here, too, it is important to factor in the quirks of the document. We should be aware that petitions were written to convince authorities and that elements in Smyth’s

\textsuperscript{111} Higgs, Godliness and Governance, pp. 60-2.
\textsuperscript{112} ‘Cornelius’. One of the canons who received a pension after the dissolution of St Osyth’s in 1539 was called Cornelius Williamson: Watney, Some Account, p. 24.
\textsuperscript{113} SC 8/182/9096.
\textsuperscript{114} C 47/37/18/36, 39.
narrative may have been exaggerated or added for dramatic effect.\textsuperscript{115} The term ‘Fleming’, for example, carried more negative connotations during this period than its more neutral alternative ‘Dutchman’.\textsuperscript{116} Placing Flemings on an equal footing with ‘other indisposed persons’, Smyth or the professional who drew up his petition was well aware of these preconceptions and deliberately exploited them in order to persuade the reader of his opponent’s malicious intentions. Petitioners also crafted narratives that were purposely designed to counteract their adversary’s strengths. In this respect, Smyth may have stressed Edmund’s otherness and his use of outsiders so emphatically in his petition exactly because Hermanson was well-established and connected in his community in real life. Would the petitioner genuinely have been forced to leave the town, let alone the country, if his opponent only had the support of some Flemings and ‘indisposed people’? 

Arguably the most unbiased source allowing us a view on Hermanson’ position and connections, in the sense that it had no direct interest in portraying him in a particularly positive or negative light, is Colchester’s borough court rolls. They show Edmund regularly acting as a pledge for his English co-residents, but also for fellow-immigrants from the Low Countries.\textsuperscript{117} In 1481-1482, twelve men, consisting of English as well as ‘Dutch’ inhabitants of the town, swore that Hermanson was innocent in a dispute with another Colcestrian.\textsuperscript{118} Apparently Edmund maintained privileged relationships with both natives and other aliens. Yet even the image provided by the borough court rolls, preserved only until 1485 and not available for the last seventeen years of Hermanson’s life, could be skewed. If there is one lesson to be learned from the exceptionally well-documented case of Edmund Hermanson

\textsuperscript{115} Dodd, \textit{Justice and Grace}, pp. 296-301.
\textsuperscript{116} ‘Fleming’ also denoted someone from the proper county of Flanders, but given Hermanson’s Brabantine origins, it is more likely it was used here in its broader sense, referring to immigrants from the wider Low Countries. For the term’s connotations, see Ravenhill, ‘Experiences of Aliens’, pp. 155-6.
\textsuperscript{117} ERO, D/B 5, Cr. 73, mm. 3d, 9; 76, m. 29; 79, mm. 19d, 24, 25.
\textsuperscript{118} ERO, D/B 5, Cr. 79, m. 37d.
about the integration of immigrant residents in late medieval English communities, then it should probably be that our views are very much dependent on the source material we use. The negotiation of in- and exclusion between newcomers and social groups in pre-modern societies was highly complex and hardly ever linear or comprehensive. If even a combination of very different sources reflecting both the perspective of authorities and the agency of the immigrant may not provide us with a fully representative picture, we should ask ourselves to what extent one set of documents in isolation can.

Conclusion

A distinguishing feature of microhistory is its ambition to reflect on ‘the general’ by unravelling ‘the particular’. Edmund Hermanson’s microhistory could be said to add to the general narratives of immigration in later medieval England in several ways. His case provides us with new insights into the possibilities and limitations of alien-born residents in English localities. It shows that it was possible for a beer brewer from the Low Countries to acquire substantial wealth and become part of the economic elite in an English provincial town. It also demonstrates that economically successful immigrants could be accepted into the highest echelons of an English parish community, running its day-to-day business and entertaining close relationships with its most prominent members. One may argue that Hermanson was a particularly privileged immigrant and that his story was not representative of the agency of England’s other aliens. But was his privilege not, at least in part, of his own making? Admittedly, it looks like he already had some means when he came to Colchester.

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119 In this respect, see the studies on the so-called ‘belonging’ of newcomers. Brockmeyer and Harders, ‘Questions of Belonging’, pp. 1-7.
Yet while many more will have had enough resources to keep livestock upon their arrival in the country, far fewer will have owned eight properties and acres of land forty years later.

Hermanson’s microhistory also sheds new light on the acquisition of the English language by later medieval immigrants, an otherwise elusive aspect of the alien experience. The accounts documenting his activities as churchwarden of St Leonard’s were written in competent supralocal southern English, with very few interferences from Middle Dutch. Even though the option of a native scribe cannot be excluded completely, there are strong arguments to believe that the Brabantine immigrant, who had been living in Colchester for over twenty years, produced the churchwarden accounts himself. Hermanson’s case may thus indicate that the English language skills of at least some of the long-term alien inhabitants of the country were very different from the pragmatic and deficient English attributed to immigrants in other, predominantly narrative, sources during this period. While the latter accounts present language almost exclusively as a marker of distinction between native and alien residents, Edmund’s case suggests that successful language acquisition may also have functioned as a powerful facilitator of immigrants’ integration and assimilation.

Whereas most sources show how immigrants in later medieval England were perceived by others, Hermanson’s documents allow us a glimpse into his own thoughts and ideas. Most notably, they reveal how Edmund wanted to be seen and remembered by others. His churchwarden accounts and will suggest that Hermanson was preoccupied with being remembered as an accomplished, well-connected and well-integrated Colcestrian, who cared deeply about his parish. It is remarkable that these sources did very little to fashion him explicitly as an immigrant, though they may have been meant to deliberately counter others’ attempts to define him by his alien origins. Edmund’s many efforts to be remembered almost came to nothing when the Reformation reached England, abolishing his chantry and devaluing the concept of good works he had invested in so lavishly. Ironically, it was his
typically ‘Dutch’ surname, one remnant of his immigrant background that could not be erased, that made the present author look more closely into his case, saving him from oblivion after all.
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