

WHY SHOULD WE STUDY SMALL TOWNS ?

By Christopher Dyer

Introduction

Small towns are found throughout medieval Europe. They are as integral and typical a feature of the period between 1100 and 1500 as villages, castles and monasteries.

Their significance can be glimpsed just by noticing how often names appear in the pages of conventional political and religious histories : churchmen carried the memory of their place of origin in their names, like Francis of Assisi ; monasteries were associated with small towns such as St Denis; battles were fought near to them, often because they were strategically sited on main roads and river crossings : for example, at Crecy, Evesham and Tewkesbury.

Small towns contained about a half of the total urban population of Europe, and they accounted for the great majority of urban centres. In all there must have been well in excess of 10,000 of them in western and central Europe by the fifteenth century, when we have the most reliable statistics.(1) Their distribution was naturally uneven, with only 40 in the large area covered by Sweden and Finland, reflecting the sparse population and underdeveloped commercial economy of that part of Scandinavia. A similar number is found in the much smaller but densely settled and commercially active Holland, and 32 have been listed in the even smaller territory of the county of Flanders. In the larger kingdoms in the more developed parts of Europe the numbers are very impressive, with more than 600 in England, 2000 in France and 3000 in the Holy Roman Empire. Of course to some extent the numbers vary according to the criteria used in different countries to define a town. While there seems to be general agreement in regarding an urban centre as 'small' if its population fell below 2,000, in some circles the historical tradition persists of defining a town by the grant of legal privileges, while in others the status accorded to a place as a *burgus* (and the various vernacular equivalents) matters much less than a concentration of

people, a diversity of occupations, and a lack of dependence on agriculture for a high proportion of the population.

The small towns of Europe have some essential similarities, which convinces us of their urban character. Most of them had one, two or three hundred households, the majority of which made their living by small scale trade and manufacture. They practised a sufficient range of crafts and trades to satisfy the everyday needs of their neighbours and the surrounding countryside, providing foodstuffs, clothing, leather and metal goods, building skills, and basic services such as inn keeping. Many households held some land and kept animals, and some of the townspeople depended wholly on farming, but the critical mass of traders and artisans gave the town a much busier commercial life than even a large village which often had no more than a few sellers of drink, a blacksmith and a wheelwright. Throughout Europe, when we can estimate the size of the district within which the town was most influential, and from which it drew most of its trade, a radius of about 10 kilometres is the most frequently found.

Towns across Europe varied in their appearance, depending on local architectural traditions and building materials. But certain plan types are found in widely separated regions, above all the single main street, wide enough to accommodate a market, but appearing narrow to visitors because the houses were closely packed along both sides, and often high enough to exclude the light and views of the surrounding countryside. Most towns contained either a public building – a hall or structure used by the guild, bailiff or mayor- or an ecclesiastical building that was out of the ordinary, such as an impressive church or chapel, or at least an almshouse or hospital. Townspeople lived at a more sophisticated cultural level than their rural neighbours. The town often had a school, the inhabitants were more likely than peasants to have a smattering of literacy. They heard professional musicians more often, and were more likely to be drawn into processions or dramatic presentations.

These then were the main characteristics of the small towns which were an essential feature of the civilization and economy of late medieval Europe. I have emphasized those features of the small towns which were shared with larger urban centres. Small towns were on a lesser scale than other towns, but they shared essential qualities. They did not occupy some grey middle ground between 'real' towns and the countryside. Although we can see many essential similarities between small towns across Europe, each country and region had its own pattern of urbanism, and the purpose of this paper is to examine British towns in order to demonstrate the general historical lessons that can be learned from them. (2)

If we survey English towns in the period 1250-1525 we are immediately aware of the very wide variations in the distribution of small towns and their general character. They were especially numerous in the western part of the country, with large numbers in counties such as Devon, and the density of towns was quite high in some south-eastern counties, such as Kent, but small towns are notably scarce in the east midland counties, such as Leicestershire and Nottinghamshire. (3) One of the values of the study of small towns is that they help us to understand the nature of different regions.

A regional example : Staffordshire

If we take as an example from western England, the urban pattern in the county of Staffordshire has a distinctive character.(4) The county has some good corn growing land in the Trent valley in the south east, but sections of the countryside were not cultivated very intensively, and large areas were given over to woodland, moorland and pasture. Some nucleated villages are found in the south and east of the county, but the majority of the rural population lived in scattered farms and hamlets. The inhabitants were thinly spread. Although it was a large county, it was one of the least populous in England. The county had a number of powerful and wealthy landlords, notably the bishops of Coventry and Lichfield, and the Benedictine abbey at Burton-on-Trent, and among the laity the earldom of Derby, which absorbed into the earldom and later duchy of Lancaster, the lords of Stafford, and the barons based at Dudley all

had landed resources and considerable social and political influence. Much land, however, was held by small monastic houses of relatively late foundation, and by more than a hundred knightly and gentry families. The monarchy had considerable influence on local society, because of the amount of land that belonged to the royal demesne at some point, and because a great deal of the countryside – not just woodland – lay within royal forests. The nature of the land, and the predominance of small lay landlords meant that a majority of peasants were free, and even those who were classified in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries as villein or servile owed few labour services. They paid cash rents which were not very high, and the more powerful lords used their seigniorial authority to collect as much money as possible in the form of tallage, death duties (heriots) and profits of justice.(5)

Staffordshire has a total of 24 places which have some claim to be regarded as towns in the middle ages, all but one of them (the episcopal town of Lichfield) falling into the ‘small town’ category. Most of them were founded in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries by lords (mostly lay magnates and the bishops) who obtained market privileges from the crown, and granted their inhabitants the privileges of burgage tenure, which gave them free tenure with fixed cash rents, the ability to sell and buy the land, and the right to trade without paying tolls. Some of these places either developed as centres of trade and manufacture very briefly, or their founders’ aim to create a town achieved no success at all. This still leaves 16 places which can be regarded as urban, 15 of them in the small town category. This is a remarkably large number, and suggests that this thinly populated and rather backward county was actually more urbanized than nearby counties such as Leicestershire which had only 10 towns. Leicestershire was a much richer agricultural county, and supported a larger population than Staffordshire, but even if we calculate the proportion of town dwellers in the two counties, at the time of the poll taxes in 1377-81 for example, Staffordshire had 22 per cent of its people living in towns, compared with 14 per cent in Leicestershire. (6)

Fragments of evidence in the form of tax lists, borough court records, the proceedings of the royal courts, and archaeological excavations, reveal the essentially urban character of Staffordshire towns, even those such as Brewood which had only a few hundred inhabitants. The market places of a number of these towns were packed with shops, stalls and other points of sale, which generated high profits judging from the rents that traders were prepared to pay. A stall or even a 'window' (where a board would jut out into the street) near the centre of the market amounting to no more than a few square metres, would command as high a rent as a hectare of agricultural land. These intense concentrations of commercial activity attracted dozens of resident traders, who were identified in the official records as practising 20 or more occupations. In reality many individuals and households had more than one source of income – a tailor, for example, might own some animals, and he might deal on a small scale in grain. His wife would brew and sell ale. A range of commonplace trades provided for the mundane needs of the townspeople and the local peasantry – bakers, brewers, butchers, fishmongers, cooks, innkeepers, weavers, fullers, tailors, tanners, shoemakers, glovers, smiths, wheelwrights, coopers, carpenters, thatchers, carters, clerks, barbers and mercers. Occasionally a trader in more valuable commodities, such as a goldsmith, or a dealer in quantities of goods, such as a draper, appears in the records. A minority of towns developed some specialization, which could enable them to break out of their trading area restricted within a 10 km radius, and grow to a larger size because their products were bought throughout the country or even overseas. In the case of Staffordshire the religious statues carved from alabaster in Burton-on-Trent were in wide demand throughout England and in western Europe, while Walsall produced lime for use in building in the west midland region, and its horse bits were sold all over England.

Written sources do not reveal the full range of urban activities – archaeological research at Brewood shows that on the edge of that town, near a stream, not only was leather being tanned, which does appear in the documents, but also hemp was being processed, which is otherwise not recorded. In a number of

Staffordshire towns sizeable groups of men and women dealt in food and drink – a dozen brewers and sellers of ale, characteristically female activities, are often listed. These activities were directed towards local consumption, but a number of places sited on or near main roads can be described as ‘thoroughfare towns’, and provided a cluster of inns for the accommodation and refreshment of travellers and their horses. Staffordshire traders were in touch with larger towns, as is shown for example from records of debts. The small towns obtained their fish from Chester, wine from Bristol, dyestuffs and spices from London and a wide range of imported and manufactured goods from Coventry. In government and society we can detect in the small towns of Staffordshire some characteristics shared with larger urban centres, such as a tendency to oligarchical rule, attempts to control and regulate anti-social and immoral behaviour, and rather turbulent, quarrelsome and even violent interactions among the townspeople.

In short, the detailed evidence for the economic and social life of the small towns of Staffordshire reveals that although they had only a few hundred inhabitants, they had active urban economies, and resemble larger towns in their varied occupations and lively social life. How then can we explain such a strong urban presence, and in particular so many small towns, in a rather poor and thinly populated rural environment? Five reasons for the proliferation of towns in this region can be suggested.

Firstly, rural tenants’ rendering of rents in money has already been mentioned. Even at the beginning of the twelfth century money rent played an important part in the economy of the estate of Burton Abbey, and from the thirteenth century the lords of the county derived most of their revenues from their peasants in the form of cash. The estates were not provided with large arable demesnes where labour services could have been put to productive use. Secondly, as the economy grew in the thirteenth century Staffordshire lords were prevented by the nature of the land and communications from developing their estates for large scale arable production, as their counterparts could in the south and east of England. They had to

search for alternative sources of income, hence their exploitation of their woods, mines and other assets. Founding a borough on their estate, or obtaining a market charter, represented one way of adding a few pounds to their income without great investment. A number of these ventures failed, but the chance of profit from such enterprises justified the risk. Thirdly, lords and peasants alike were exploiting the woodland and pastoral resources of the county, which required market outlets. The small towns of the county handled quantities of fuel and timber, woodland products such as ropes and potash, as well as the cattle, cheese and bacon which represented the surplus products of a wood-pasture landscape. Pastoralists and the dwellers in the woods needed markets : unlike peasants who cultivated holdings of arable, they did not grow much grain for their own consumption, and their produce was mainly for the market. Fourthly, marginal areas such as Staffordshire were the homes of industries, including coal and iron mining, iron working, potting, glass-making, quarrying, cloth making, rope making, and the manufacture of numerous varieties of wooden vessels and implements. One Staffordshire specialism, for example, was the manufacture of bows and arrows. Although much of this work was located in the countryside, the urban traders supplied capital and raw materials, marketed the products, and supplied the artisans with foodstuffs and manufactured goods that they could not make for themselves. And fifthly, in Staffordshire more than other wood and pasture districts, the combination of rural materials and urban skill and commercial connections enabled the production of specialist products such as alabaster sculpture and horse bits for distant markets. (7)

Other regions

Staffordshire's small towns can be compared with those of regions dominated by nucleated villages and open fields, such as the 'champion' parts of Leicestershire, Northamptonshire, southern Warwickshire and eastern Gloucestershire.. Here much corn was grown, often in combination with sheep grazing. Lords, who included a number of Benedictine monasteries, had some power over their tenants, many of whom were of servile status in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and their rents

and services could be burdensome. The density of small towns was somewhat lower than in Staffordshire. The peasants were better able to provide their food needs from their own resources, so not so many of them needed to buy grain for consumption. Some of the more active market towns stood on the edge of the champion landscape, where they could act as gateways for the exchange of produce. As an example, Stratford-upon-Avon in Warwickshire had an important role in the trade in timber and fuel, which was scarce in the champion district to the south and east of the town, but plentiful to the north and west.⁽⁸⁾ Other woodland products traded through the 'gateway' markets included tiles, pottery, iron goods, cheese and cattle. In return, the 'champion' peasants brought grain, especially wheat and barley, to market, some of which was exported to be consumed in the wood-pasture regions. Country people did not visit their local market towns solely for commercial purposes. In both the champion and the more pastoral regions small towns could often have a formal role in administration, and some peasants at least came to pay rents and church dues, or to attend courts. Towns served as meeting places, for example for settling property transfers, where deeds would be written and witnessed. They were also centres of entertainment and social gatherings. Music, bull baiting, processions and religious drama all happened in small towns.

Rural economy and society

Following from the analysis of the urban presence in different and varying regions, a major justification for the study of small towns is that they shed light on the nature of the late medieval countryside. If we rely too heavily on information from documents compiled for the lords, we gain the impression that in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries the main source of marketable produce was the lords' demesnes. It is true that demesnes were large enough to send 20 quarters of grain or two or three sacks of wool to market in a single consignment, but the cumulative total of peasant sales was much greater. Around 1300 it can be conservatively estimated that the better-off peasants' grain sales exceeded annually a million quarters, and that they were producing at least 8 million fleeces per annum for sale.⁽⁹⁾ Lords would often

negotiate sales, especially of wool, directly with a merchant, or they could organize the transport of produce to a large town. Peasants were much more likely to take their cartloads or pack-horse loads of produce to a nearby market town. Almost everyone lived within 10 kilometres of a town. Many peasants, such as women with baskets of garden or dairy produce, could walk to market, and those many peasant households which by the thirteenth century had acquired a horse and cart could have a choice to carry produce to a number of towns.(10)

When they had made their sales, the peasants did not pay all of the money in rents and taxes to their lords and the state. They had at least a small surplus for purchases of foodstuffs, clothing, implements and furnishings, and a good deal of the small town economy lived on these modest purchases. Many families could afford to spend a few shilling on these goods, but as each small towns' hinterland contained between 600 and 2,000 households, their combined expenditure provided the basis for the towns' economy. Direct evidence for the peasants' purchase of goods from small towns comes from litigation over debt in the borough courts, and from archaeological finds on village sites of metal objects likely to have been made and sold in towns, such as knives, buckles and items of cheap jewellery. The importance of the peasants as customers in the towns is underlined by the records of aristocratic purchasing from household accounts and debt pleas. Lesser lords might visit small towns regularly to buy fish and meat in particular, but went further afield to make major purchases of manufactured or imported goods such as cloth and spices. The wealthiest aristocrats only occasionally bought from small towns, when their itinerant households were passing through, or when they were temporarily living in a castle or manor house near a small town.(11) Even monasteries made only limited use of the small towns which they had founded at their gates.(12)

Towns, and particularly the close network of small towns, therefore enabled peasants to acquire cash to pay their rents – a few pence in the tenth century, a shilling or two in the twelfth century, and often 10s or more for a holding of 6 hectares by 1250 or 1300. Peasants could also in increasing quantities make

purchases of goods that they could not produce on their own holding. The leavening of cash and credit fuelled the land market and the rural building industry in the thirteenth century. Lords and peasants alike made production decisions in the light of market opportunities. The managers of lords' demesnes adapted their strategies in the London area to serve the needs of that great city. By c. 1300 demesnes in one area would increase their acreage of rye, in another oats, in a third wheat, depending on local soils and climate, but also the transport costs and price advantage in the London market.⁽¹³⁾ Peasants were doing something similar. Tithe records show peasants growing a high proportion of a particular crop, such as drage, a mixture of barley and oats much used for brewing, far beyond their own needs, presumably because of the demand from towns, large and small, for malting corn for brewing. Demesnes did not often specialize in poultry or fruit and vegetables, and their pig numbers were often limited, and this gap in the market was filled by peasants, whose small-scale intensive methods, using the labour of the whole family, were ideally suited for these products. All of these contacts between small towns and the countryside relegated into the realms of mythology the notion that peasants were self-sufficient.⁽¹⁴⁾

Small towns influenced and moulded the countryside in many ways, and one could say much about such matters as styles of architecture and dress, but a major interaction between small towns and their surrounding villages and hamlets came from the movement of people. It is well known that small towns recruited inhabitants, mainly from within a 20 km radius, but we should attempt to analyse the differences between patterns of movement.⁽¹⁵⁾ The migrants about whom we know most are the people who appear among the householders and tax payers of the period 1200-1340 bearing the name of a nearby village, who are likely to have been peasants of some substance, or their sons, who were moving to better themselves and often succeeded in doing so. Less fully documented were the poorer people, many of them female and youthful, who went to small towns to find employment as servants. And finally there were the vagrants and indigents, who were not very welcome newcomers in towns, who hoped to find a living on the fringes of the urban economy.

Finally, there was an important but little studied migration from towns back into the country, and from one town to another. The latter was often a lateral movement from one market town to another, or even a 'downward' mobility from a large to a small town. Names such as 'de London' or 'de Bristol' can be found in small towns near those great centres.

Urban economy and society

The study of small towns also influences the way in which we view medieval towns in general. Urban historians who study large cities exclusively are in danger of omitting an important dimension of their subject. At the most practical level, the large towns could not have existed without the commercial support that came from the small towns. Through the small towns the goods handled by the great merchants were distributed to their customers. The existence of low grade taverns in towns such as Market Harborough in Leicestershire in 1422 were good for the importing business of the vintners of towns such as Coventry or Boston.⁽¹⁶⁾ In the reverse direction, the larger towns were fed with food and raw materials from the produce brought to local market towns, so London would have starved but for the grain that came through Ware, Faversham and Henley-on-Thames. There were many other ways in which small and large towns were connected, though these have yet to be fully explored. One is the pattern of migration, whereby large towns often recruited from the small towns, but also people took their experience and capital in the other direction. Another is in the little studied area of cultural influences, such as the foundation and growth of fraternities, and the design of civic and religious buildings. The essential point is that towns were located within hierarchies, and the base of the hierarchy was essential for the existence of the whole edifice.

Small towns and feudalism

Most small towns were founded by lords in the period c.1080-1280. The foundations, and their subsequent development informs our assessment of the relationship between the feudal aristocracy and urban society. We no longer need to regard lords and towns as antagonistic, or to visualise the urban economy as in some sense

subversive of the feudal order.(17) The enthusiasm with which lords founded towns is one powerful indication that they felt comfortable with communities of traders and artisans on their estates. However, the history of small towns demonstrates the limitations on lords' ability to exercise social controls. Firstly, many of their ventures failed. They provided incomers with a site, and promised them privileges, but could not compel settlers to take up the new plots. If the town was not favourably located in relation to transport, or if it was too near to a successful rival, the migrants would either leave quickly, or would not come at all. Those towns that survived the initial risky phase would often be left to their own devices. A lord would sometimes extend patronage to the town, for example by obtaining charters to hold fairs, but was content for the leading townspeople to run their own affairs, as long as rents were paid and the officials respected his ultimate authority. In the later middle ages the townspeople often devised their own system of self-government by establishing and endowing a fraternity with a wide range of functions. And they would form alliances with the local gentry who were not the lords of the town, so they became the aristocrats with the most influence over the place.(18) The management of towns by lords demonstrates very well the tendency for lords to manipulate their subordinates, and seek to profit from activities such as trade, but not to command and control the currents that flowed around them.

Change in small towns, 1000-1525

Finally, small towns help us to assess the changes that affected the medieval economy. In the early phases of urbanization the network of towns was very incomplete. When Domesday Book gives us our first indication of the distribution of towns, they seem quite plentiful in the south-west, but in some midland counties there were only one or two. This gives rise to the belief that markets, fairs and other impermanent venues gave country people opportunities to trade. If we compare the number of towns in 1086 – just over 100 – with at least 600 by 1300, the remarkable urbanization of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries is readily apparent. Many more than 600 had been ventured, but a number failed to take off, or only survived for a

short time before their rivals triumphed. In some sense the small towns provide an excellent barometer of the expansion of exchange and production in the high middle ages. Not only was a much larger proportion of produce being exchanged, but the agricultural system was sufficiently developed to support an urban sector which represented about 20 per cent of the population.

In the same way our barometer reflects the crisis of the early fourteenth century, because the creation of new towns, indicated by new references to boroughs, virtually ceased by 1330. A few small and insecurely established boroughs lost their urban character in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, but the fortunes of small towns do not suggest a 'de-urbanization' of the kind which the gloomier advocates of urban decline might suggest. The rural markets which had been founded in such numbers in the thirteenth century in most cases ceased to function, but that was to the benefit of the small towns which became the main focus for exchange in the countryside. The small towns often shrank in size, but this reflected the general reduction of the population. The small towns survived the recessions of the later middle ages remarkably well, and in many regions the urban network of the 1520s was essentially the same as that of the early fourteenth century. A remarkable indication of the elements of economic vitality in this period was the expansion of some small towns, and the emergence of some entirely new communities, often in the areas of expanding rural industry in Suffolk, Essex and the western counties. (19)

Conclusion

Small towns repay study because they are the key for a deeper understanding of many dimensions of medieval society. They tell us about regional variety, the commercial penetration of the countryside, the development of the urban hierarchy, the nature of medieval lordship, and changes in the commercial economy, which clearly surged forward in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, but then adapted and survived through the crises and contractions at the end of the middle ages.

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