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Small Towns in England, 1600–1800

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Problems of definition

To BEGIN WITH, WE MUST DEFINE WHAT WE MEAN by a small town. There is no consensus amongst historians here, and since over these two centuries both the general population and the proportion of it which lived in towns increased substantially, it seems necessary within the period itself to raise the threshold above which 'small' becomes an inappropriate term. Thus five thousand seems too large in 1600, but more appropriate in 1800. For the purposes of this paper, 'small' is defined as less than 2,500 in 1700, and a town is any settlement with a public market. This is of course an arbitrary definition: the market criterion includes some very small and countrified places which had markets, while it excludes some rather larger country places with a good many commercial or industrial occupations and no market. There are examples to be found of settlements which bear every appearance of having been small towns but which mysteriously managed to function without a market. Whittlesey in Cambridgeshire probably had at least 1,500 inhabitants in the sixteenth century and over 2,000 by 1700, and contained tradespeople, as one would expect with such a large concentration of population, yet it did not acquire a market until 1715, and that market soon failed––yet the town continued to grow.[1] Here the presence of Fenland waterways probably provided routes for commercial activity which allowed an urbanised economy without a market. Some settlements on the main routes leading to London seem also to belong in this category— an example might be Chesham in Buckinghamshire, which did not recover its lost medieval market until about 1690 but seems to have resembled a small town long before.[2] The maximum figure of 2,500 assumes that some places which were rather larger than this had a more sophisticated urban character than was actually the case, but in fact the most recent attempt to establish the size of our smaller towns can be used to show that this is a very reasonable limit to set. Of all those settlements with less than 5,000 people in 1700, about 94 per cent had less than 2,500 inhabitants, and there is a

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[1] *VCH Cambridgeshire*, vol. IV (London, 1967), p. 124.
[2] M. Reed, 'Decline and recovery in a provincial urban network: Buckinghamshire towns, 1350–1800' in M. Reed, ed., *English Towns in Decline* (Leicester, 1986), p. 19.

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very marked falling off in frequency at about 1,700 and upwards; it seems that there was a natural mechanism at work which prevented the great majority of small towns from growing above this level, and our definition respects this fact.[3]

These criteria are in fact much easier to defend as definitions of the small town in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries than later, for the expansion of industry in the eighteenth century led to developments which blur the traditional distinction between town and country on which our concept of a specifically *urban* history must rest. The growth of rural industry produced settlements in which the majority of the population relied on non-agricultural occupations, but which possessed few of the other attributes which have been held to be characteristic of towns. A further problem is that some large towns passed through a phase of rapid growth in which they began the century as villages or small towns and ended it as large ones, and it is difficult to include them simply as 'small towns' in any statistical analysis because of this dynamic process of change—one thinks here of the industrial areas of Lancashire, the West Riding or the midlands. A third problem is that some collections of neighbouring small towns and villages became in many ways associated together to form eccentric large towns: here what were really conurbations were developing in the later eighteenth century in the Potteries of northern Staffordshire, in industrial Lancashire and the Black Country in the west midlands.

A 'golden age' for small towns?

It is easy to assume that small towns were relatively important in the more remote past, but slipped steadily into the background as the modern age developed—that the eighteenth century saw the triumph of the big industrial urban centres with the small towns slipping into a quaint, genteel and rural obscurity. But one could claim that the period 1660–1800 saw the small town at the highest point of its development; in recent detailed studies of local groupings of small towns, it has been claimed that the Cumbrian market town reached its climax in the years 1760–1830,[4] and much the same appears to be true of some Nottinghamshire towns.[5] If this were so, then it had come about as the last stage in a period of development which goes back to the sixteenth century. By 1500, a 'stripped down' and relatively stable urban system had developed, neither expanding

[3] P. Clark and J. Hosking, *Population Estimates of English Small Towns, 1550–1851*, rev. edn (Leicester, 1993). These conclusions are based on my own analysis of the data presented here; it is very difficult to come to a reliably accurate estimate of the population of many places at this date, especially when it is uncertain in some cases how large a rural population in the surrounding countryside is included in the figures. Accordingly, one can only deal in orders of magnitude; for what it is worth, the median size of the sample lies between 900 and 1,000, and 85 per cent contained fewer than 1,800 people.

[4] J.D. Marshall, 'The rise and transformation of the Cumbrian market town, 1660–1900', *Northern History*, 19 (1983).

[5] C. Smith, 'Image and reality: two Nottinghamshire market towns in late Georgian England', *Midland History*, 17 (1992), 60–5.

nor contracting very much in either numbers or prosperity. If anything, the smaller towns may well have benefited from the late medieval disappearance of rival rural markets and from the troubles of a number of the largest towns.[6]

During the sixteenth century and onwards up to 1640, the number of towns stayed fairly stable, and their populations grew at a rate roughly commensurate with the increasing population of the country as a whole, but after 1660, in a context of a stagnant or falling national population, the larger towns began to expand. During the eighteenth century the number and size of larger towns continued to grow apace, the number of towns with more than 2,500 people in England and Wales increasing from 68 in 1700 to 188 in 1801; their share of the national population rose from 19 to 31 per cent.[7] The smaller towns were left behind by this remarkable phenomenon, but many of them did grow substantially, while the total number of smaller towns expanded notably, as scores of new markets were founded—a phenomenon not seen since the thirteenth century. Their numbers did not decline significantly until well into the eighteenth century, and their rate of growth lagged not too far behind the big centres; even by 1800 there were still more of them than there had been in 1660.[8] In 1700 they must still have contained well over half of the provincial urban population, and not much less than half in 1750.[9] We have come this far using the assumption that small towns may be treated as a class without qualification, but by the eighteenth century it is becoming clear that small towns are beginning to be affected by basic economic change in their regions. Where industry was in decline, such as cloth-making in East Anglia, then small towns tended to be carried downward by this process; where the local economy was growing, then the process often benefited these settlements, as was true of parts of the midlands or the north-west.[10] As so often in urban history, local and regional trends were as important as broader ones in determining wider movements, so that any simple and sweeping 'national' generalisation is contradicted by the experience of major parts of the country. But what one can assert is that the small town

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[6] A. Dyer, '"Urban Decline" in England, 1377–1525', in T.R. Slater, ed., *Towns in Decline, 100–1600* (Aldershot, 2000), pp. 266–88.

[7] P.J. Corfield, *The Impact of English Towns, 1700–1800* (Oxford, 1982), pp. 8–9.

[8] Rates of growth are covered in P. Clark, 'Small towns in England, 1550–1850: national and regional population trends', in P. Clark, ed., *Small towns in early modern Europe* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 96–100. Small towns are defined in this study as those having less than about 2,500 people in the later seventeenth century and under 5,000 in 1811.

[9] Corfield (*Impact*, p. 8) finds 395,000 people in provincial towns with more than 2,500 people in 1700; one might estimate that there were then up to 700 small towns below this threshold with an average population of 900 (and probably more) to give them a total population of 630,000 (the average of 900 is indicated by the analysis described in note 3). The average size would have had to be about 560—impossibly low—for them to fall below half of the total provincial urban population. In 1750 the larger provincial towns had just over 700,000 people, and the smaller ones would have needed an average population of nearly 1,100 (at 650 places) to match this—but it is very possible that they might have reached this level.

[10] Clark, 'Small towns', pp. 103–18.

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was still playing a vital part in the urban life of much of England at least until the late eighteenth century, and in many places, later still.

There runs through much of urban historiography an assumption that large towns grew by the later eighteenth century at the expense of smaller ones, that the big ones cannibalised the smaller ones like fish in a pond. There may be some truth in this at periods when improved communications allowed the small towns' local monopolies of local trade to be infringed, as was certainly true of the late twentieth century. But for long stretches of past time, big towns could not, beyond a certain point, compete with their smaller neighbours because of the tyranny of distance. In addition, small and big towns existed in a symbiotic relationship: small towns drew part of their economic function from their subsidiary role in the hinterland of big towns, and those large centres needed their small neighbours to complete the economic system from which their superior size was partly derived. Thus both sorts of settlement relied upon the other in complex regional urban systems which researchers have only just begun to recognise, so that the expansion of big towns may well have stimulated the prosperity of their smaller neighbours, and could help to explain why, at least up until the advent of the railways, many small towns continued to prosper at a level which was not too far below that enjoyed by their larger associates. One might allude here to the spread of some kinds of industry from major industrial centres towards their smaller neighbours—this point will emerge again below.

The economic functions of small towns

Small towns existed because they were needed to supply a series of roles, set by the surrounding countryside and by the larger towns in whose ambit they lay. The most important of these functions was agricultural marketing; this was the principal reason why villages acquired urban characteristics in this period, other urban economic and social characteristics usually, but not invariably, following the acquisition of a market. Each agricultural locality needed ready access to facilities for the disposal of surpluses and the acquisition of necessities, ever more urgently in a period which saw the relentless extension and intensification of an agricultural economy which was increasingly commercialised and so market-orientated. This demanded specialisation, and specialisation demanded opportunities to buy-in neglected commodities as well as to sell-off surpluses. There were few opportunities in 1600 to do this except in person, in the open public market. Travel was slow and expensive, so the distances travelled to market could not be too great, especially if heavy or slow-moving commodities had to be taken there—and possibly brought back again too.

In 1673, when we have particularly good evidence on the location and current state of all the markets in England and Wales, the most urbanised county, Hertfordshire, had an average of 37 square miles (96 sq. km) for each market town; most lowland counties

ranged between 50 and 80 square miles (130–210 sq. km) while upland England and Wales ran between 90 and 150 square miles (230–390 sq. km).[11] This implies that few people had further than four or five miles (6–8 km) to walk in the more favoured parts of England, while even in the upland north and west, seven or eight miles (11–13 km) was a quite common maximum. Norden claimed in 1610 that nowhere in Northamptonshire was it necessary to walk more than four miles to reach a market town.[12] This need to cater for large numbers of country people who had to walk to and from market is one of the basic forces which created in England and Wales a relatively dense network of small towns spread with comparative uniformity over the countryside—and since recent work tends to stress the commercialisation of the farming economy in the later middle ages, the basis of this system might be thought of as being fairly well established by 1400, perhaps by 1300. So what we are looking at in 1700 is an essentially very old and well-established urban structure. In this sense the historical maturity of the urban network in lowland England is very different from the callow youth of the more recently established networks of Scotland and Ireland.

This said, there was an important expansion in the prosperity and numbers of market towns in the seventeenth century. The extent of marketing was clearly growing rapidly within the existing urban structure during the later sixteenth century and this becomes very evident during the decades before 1640. Although relatively few foundations of new markets took place, rising prosperity in established market towns is evidenced by such phenomena as the construction in the 1630s of John Abel's ostentatiously designed and expensive half-timbered market halls in the Welsh borders at Leominster, Weobley, Kington and Brecon, and to the granting of new fairs in the same region: Ludlow acquired a third fair in 1596 and a fourth in 1604. But in the years after 1660 there was a notable wave of market foundation which affected most parts of the country and increased the total number of markets in England and Wales from about 644 in 1588 to 721 in 1673 and 783 in 1690—an increase of over twenty per cent.[13] Some of these new foundations collapsed quite quickly, but others prospered, and some further new foundations emerged to set against the failures. The prosperity of markets and the complex commercial system of which they were part led to increasing competition between markets, with the strong growing at the expense of the weak, as shown by those smaller markets eclipsed by nearby successful major market towns, such as Uttoxeter in Staffordshire.[14] One of the most significant features of this phenomenon was the way in which it mirrored the extension of the commercialised agrarian economy, spreading from the south-east in the sixteenth century to make its impact on the north and west a century later; Westmorland and Northumberland doubled their numbers of

[11] R. Blome, *Britannia* (London, 1673).

[12] R.L. Greenall, *A History of Northamptonshire* (Chichester, 1979), p. 49.

[13] A. Dyer, 'Small market towns, 1540–1700' in P. Clark, ed., *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain*, vol. II (Cambridge, 2000).

[14] A. McInnes, 'The golden age of Uttoxeter', in P. Morgan, ed., *Staffordshire Studies* (Keele, 1987), pp. 113–27.

markets during the seventeenth century, and Lancashire was not far behind, while in Wales there was an important growth to match. This aspect of the movement provides the closest parallel to the important extension of the urban presence in Ireland in this period.

The primacy of agricultural marketing in most of these small towns stamped upon them a distinctive character. Many of them must have shown a marked degree of urban atmosphere and bustle on market day alone, reverting to a very rural character for the rest of the week—yet paradoxically, when full of country people their urban character must have been further diluted. Some of the trades created by marketing are difficult to discern because as middlemen without shops they remain invisible in most of the official records, but in Stratford upon Avon we can detect a series of traders dealing in agricultural produce who had emerged by the Elizabethan period—corndealers, wooldrivers, a cattle dealer, a swinedealer, leather merchants and middlemen in the malt trade.[15] A variety of activities closely connected with the agricultural economy would have been prominent in the more formal occupational structure of these places— tanning near pastoral farming, woodworking near forests, leatherworking, cloth- making—while other trades were those which might be expected in many villages by the seventeenth century, such as smiths, tailors, butchers and carpenters. However, in the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, many of these small towns developed a range of shops and businesses which was very impressive, and allowed them to meet the competition of major centres with success. The shop was well devel- oped even in small towns by the eighteenth century, although premises with large dis- play windows and internal arrays of goods to tempt the purchaser were probably not widely distributed until the later part of the century. Many consumer-orientated trades had by then abandoned the open market, leaving it to agricultural dealing and suppliers of perishable foodstuffs, such as meat, fruit and vegetables. In this way the small town became dominated by its shops on every day but market day, and so continued to retain a vital local function which larger towns could not supplant.

As an example of the range of opportunities which the better small towns could supply by the end of our period, we can turn to the town of Ashbourne in Derbyshire—undoubtedly a small one in this period, with rather more than a thousand people in the whole parish in 1563 and about two thousand in the early nineteenth- century censuses, yet the range of shops and services which it made available to residents and the surrounding countryside was remarkable.[16] Its entry jn *Pigot and Company's National Commercial Directory* of 1835 lists over 300 tradesmen and professional people including, beside the usual small shopkeepers, grocers, butchers, tailors, shoemakers and the like, milliners, straw-hat makers, nursery seedsmen, perfumers and hairdressers,

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[15] J. Jones, *Family Life in Shakespeare's England* (Stroud, 1996), pp. 21–6.
[16] Clark & Hosking, *Population Estimates*, p. 27. In 1563 there were 247 households (with about 5 people per household) in the parish of Ashbourne, which was large and contained subsidiary settlements; in 1811 there were 4,202 in the parish but only 2,112 in the town.

ropemakers, a saddler, tobacco- and snuff-makers, six attorneys, two bankers, two booksellers, two china and glass dealers, three chemists, three clockmakers, teachers of French and music, and makers of coaches, umbrellas and nets for game and fish.[17] This multiplicity could have been possible only if most of the adult population were self-employed tradespeople. Ashbourne must have acted as the centre of a large and wealthy hinterland without close and accessible rival urban centres, but its small-scale craft manufactures and choice of shopping opportunities reveal how very impressive was the ability of the more successful small towns to maintain a competitive edge despite their modest size, even at this late date.

Perhaps more typical of the general run of small towns could be Wem, in Shropshire. In this town of about 1,500, the 1835 directory states 'This place has no manufactures, and the trade is chiefly confined to the supplying of its inhabitants, and those of the immediate neighbourhood (which is very respectable) with articles of ordinary consumption'.[18] Evidently such a purely locally-based economy was at this date regarded as necessarily limiting, yet there are references to several tanneries and maltings, and the volume records over 150 traders and shopkeepers, without counting professionals, inns and public houses. In areas remote from large towns, the small town could still at this date return a good variety of shops and services despite a population of well under one thousand people. Weobley in Herefordshire was a parliamentary borough with a modest corporation until the reforms of the 1830s, yet it boasted a mere 739 inhabitants in 1821. It had an endowed grammar school and another school, good inns on a main road, a nail manufacturing industry and maltings. The 45 tradespeople in the 1835 directory include all the basic urban trades—draper, butcher, baker, tailor, shoemaker—but also a few more specialised ones such as watch and clock maker, wheelwright, plumber and cooper.[19]

This state of affairs had not always existed, and seems to have its roots in the seventeenth century. One very significant feature of small-town trade at this point was the way in which businesses which had involved a good deal of dabbling in farming or the pursuit of secondary occupations in the sixteenth century are replaced by the mid-seventeenth century by a concentration on a single urban occupation with little sign of agricultural activity. This development is clearly shown in the evidence provided by probate inventories and must reflect the prosperity which could for the first time be derived from such occupations by the majority of those pursuing them. The trend has been observed, for instance, in Melton Mowbray in Leicestershire, where farming combined with trading, common in the sixteenth century, disappears, to be replaced in the seventeenth by full-time craftsmen and shopkeepers, and an increase in the number of distributive shops.[20]

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[17] Various editions (London, 1835).

[18] *Ibid.*

[19] *Ibid.*

[20] D. Fleming, 'A local market system: Melton Mowbray and the Wreake Valley, 1549–1720' (PhD thesis, University of Leicester, 1980), p. 15.

It is easy to assume that, by the eighteenth century, industry was to be identified with the growing large towns such as Bristol or Manchester. In fact, industrial activities were still located very frequently in small towns; indeed, many new industrial activities set up in, or spread into small towns, attracted perhaps by low labour costs in centres still closely connected to the countryside. Examples can be drawn from many parts— rope in Bridport, straw hats in Luton, needles, nails and guns in Warwickshire towns, Kidderminster carpets, stocking knitting in many places, large-scale gloving in Leominster and Yeovil, pewter making and bell-founding in Wigan, and lace in several Northamptonshire and Bedfordshire towns. Traders based in these small places could still operate over long distances and serve remote markets very adequately: in the mid-eighteenth century, hats made in Burton-on-Trent were taken to London for finishing and marketing,[21] while in 1640 Walsall pewter could be found on sale in Derby, Leicester, Northampton and Oxford;[22] Walsall's other speciality, harness fittings, generated debts in 1542 from Devon, Somerset and Dorset.[23] Such specialist industries often developed by migration from other small towns, so that the success of some small centres was won at the expense of damage to others, with those crafts which were generally distributed on a small scale tending to congregate in smaller numbers of towns which were better placed to serve regional markets—for example, gloving disappeared from Lutterworth in favour of more specialised locations. [24]

One factor which brought extra prosperity to small towns in this period was the fact that many of them necessarily lay on busy roads, and as the scale of road use escalated during the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, so the amount of business to be derived from servicing travellers increased proportionally. The phenomenon was most conspicuously displayed on the main routes to and from London, and especially in the hundred miles or so nearest to the capital. Loughborough, for example, had the striking total of 43 inns in 1770, rising to 50 in 1783, surely the most important single element in its economy. One may appreciate why this was so when one considers that in the earlier eighteenth century, stage coaches covered as little as 25–35 miles (40–56 km) per day, especially in winter, and required mid-day stops for a meal and change of horses, thus providing business for inns at intervals of 10 to 20 miles (16–32 km). An easily overlooked function of the small town lay in long-distance commerce, which one might assume to have been the preserve of the larger centres. But inland ports such as Stratford upon Avon, the terminus of the Avon river navigation, exported corn, and imported foreign goods from Bristol, plus coal and iron; by 1674 an industrial suburb called Bridgetown had a coalyard, a brick-kiln and an iron mill.[25]

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[21] C.C. Owen, '*The Greatest Brewery in the World': A History of Bass, Ratcliff and Gretton* (Derby, 1992), p. 3.
[22] J. Hatcher and T.C. Barker, *A History of British Pewter* (London, 1974), p. 259.
[23] *VCH Staffordshire*, vol. XVII (London, 1976), p. 195.
[24] J. Goodacre, 'Lutterworth in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries' (PhD thesis, University of Leicester, 1977), p. 278.
[25] *VCH Warwickshire*, vol. III (London, 1945), pp. 238–9.

Along the Severn, Welshpool and Bridgnorth were similarly favoured, while on the Trent, Newark flourished and Gainsborough held an important fair patronised by London wholesalers. Fairs were still much used in marketing in the eighteenth century, and although the massive wholesale meetings such as Stourbridge fair were in decline, and fairs in big towns seemed to be following it, perhaps because their sites were often restricted in area, a string of market towns provided instead the sites for much of the dealing in important rural commodities—the Shropshire cheese trade for instance.[26] Professional services such as doctors and lawyers were more commonly found in larger centres, but a vital small-town service was the provision of credit by networks of lawyers, for example in Lincolnshire market towns, before the rise of formal banking.[27]

Another great sphere of growth from the seventeenth century onward lay in the provision of leisure facilities for the landowning élite. Of Nottingham in 1751, Deering observed that its attractiveness to the gentry was unexpected, since 'towns of considerable business and a flourishing trade seldom give gentlemen great encouragement to be fond of settling in them'.[28] Thus the quieter atmosphere of the small towns gave them a natural advantage in attracting the monied and leisured classes, and it is remarkable how some towns could function very adequately in this way without being very large. Ludlow was one of the best-known eighteenth-century towns for retirement or temporary residence—'here the gentry dress fine, live easily, visit much and do things very grand', known as 'one of the best towns for a genteel family of small fortune to retire to'—and all this with a population of about 2,500 in 1700.[29] There were regular assemblies, a theatre, walks in the castle grounds and elsewhere, balls and horse racing, lawyers and doctors, schools, inns and good shops, with the physical fabric of the town rebuilt in elegant brick facades; no doubt the scale of this social and cultural activity was sometimes modest, but it would be difficult to find much going on in the larger centres that did not find an echo here.[30] A similar case can be found on the opposite side of the country in Stamford. Macky on his travels found here in 1722 two sumptuous inns in the George and especially the Bull—'like a palace'—and a social life abounding in good company, with officers at the coffee-house living cheaply on half-pay.[31] From the seventeenth century it was rebuilt in stone, and it developed professional services and quality shops, and craftsmen such as cabinetmakers and clockmakers, while providing horse racing, cockfighting and bowling, a theatre and an assembly room—and all this in a town with a permanent population of little more than

[26] P.R. Edwards, 'The development of dairy farming in the North Shropshire plain in the seventeenth century', *Midland History*, 4 (1977/8), 184–5.
[27] B.A. Holderness, 'Credit in a rural community, 1660–1800', *Midland History*, 3 (1975), 109.
[28] C. Deering, *Nottinghamia Vetus et Nova* (Nottingham, 1751), p. 6.
[29] D. Lloyd, *The Concise History of Ludlow* (Ludlow, 1999), p. 110.
[30] *Ibid.*, pp. 105–29.
[31] J. Macky, *A Journey through England* (London, 1714–22), vol. II, p. 250.

two thousand.[32] Less sophisticated versions of these centres for gentry visiting and residence could be found by the early eighteenth century in localities well away from the south and east, such as Ashbourne in Derbyshire[33] or Welshpool in the Welsh borders, while one would not readily guess that other towns had ever had such an element in their life if one did not spot such tell-tale signs as the presence of an early racecourse beside then-small towns such as Chesterfield, Grantham, Peterborough, Uppingham and Rugby.[34]

Forces for change in the eighteenth century

Most of the aspects explored above represent factors which lay behind the prosperity of market towns in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. But a number of influences were emerging in the eighteenth century that altered the pattern of small towns, weakening some, strengthening others, and these influences continued to lead to the further creation of new towns, though at a slower pace than that which charac-terised the later seventeenth century. A major factor causing change was the quickening pace of improvement in communications, especially of the roads. We can see how limiting was the expense of travel in the earlier part of the seventeenth century, by the example of Northampton: its disastrous fire of September 1675 was rendered more damaging because shopkeepers had just stocked up after several years in which they had been prevented by wet road—and so slow and expensive carriage costs—from getting to their source of wholesale goods, Stourbridge fair at Cambridge. But the dry summer of 1675 had so reduced carriage charges that they had taken the plunge; the drought had cheapened the cost of fuel too.[35] We have seen how much prosperity was brought to small towns on main roads, and road improvement allowed towns to serve more distant markets and generally to enlarge the regions they served, but it also exposed them to competition from more effective centres which had hitherto been too distant to damage them. We can see the effect of this most clearly in localities which had several small towns which lay off main routes and survived only because it had been so difficult for the folk living in their hinterland to reach any other town; with the improve-ment in road conditions of the early eighteenth century, the weak Leicestershire towns of Billesdon and Hallaton were reduced to the village status from which their isolation had originally elevated them.[36] In Hampshire as many as eight of the markets present in the later seventeenth century had disappeared by the 1790s, and the situation in Somerset was similar. The canals of the eighteenth century had a positive effect: Stone

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[32] A. Rogers, *The Book of Stamford* (London, 1983).
[33] A. Henstock, ed., *A Georgian Country Town, 1725–1825*, 2 vols (Ashbourne, 1989, 1991).
[34] P. Borsay, *The English Urban Renaissance* (Oxford, 1989), pp. 355–67.
[35] *The state of Northampton . . . by a country minister* (Northampton, 1675), pp. 15–16.
[36] *VCH Leicestershire*, vol. III (London, 1955), p. 140.

in Staffordshire was transformed by the arrival of the canal in the 1770s,[37] and in Stourport—which grew up at the junction of the Staffordshire and Worcestershire Canal with the River Severn—we have a clear and rapidly growing new town of the later eighteenth century, which soon followed the pattern of the more traditional new towns by acquiring a market.

One way in which the economic changes of the eighteenth century benefited small towns lay in the breaking down of the traditional chain of distribution which linked manufacturer through wholesaler to retailer and consumer. At first this worked to the dismay of small urban shopkeepers: in the 1680s, despite the growing demand from an increasingly prosperous and consumer-orientated public, market towns complained of the threat to their businesses from peddlers, hawkers and village shopkeepers. In the early eighteenth century, London wholesalers still worked through the big provincial fairs; but soon we find that the middlemen located in the major provincial towns were being squeezed out, so that where once 'the principal towns in every county supplied with goods all the little shops of the environs', now (1773) 'instead of buying their goods from the third or fourth hand, the little shopkeepers even of obscure villages have them from the first'.[38] One can see this in the way Manchester textile traders at first worked through wholesalers in a few big towns and London, but by the mid-eighteenth century sent out factors directly to market towns, while West Midlands ironmongery[39] suppliers sold directly to networks of market towns using travelling factors based in the midlands but operating much further afield; much of this was due to improved turnpike roads. The essential result was to allow small trading centres to continue to compete effectively with the larger towns throughout the eighteenth century.

We have already seen that industry was a familiar feature of many of the flourishing small towns of the seventeenth century. During the following century, the growing industrial strength of the major towns could be a help as well as a hindrance to the continuing prosperity of the small towns. Very frequently, the early development of specialised industries in large towns led to the spread of those trades to the small towns of their regions, probably because expansion in the original centre was too expensive. Thus the hosiery trades of Nottingham and Leicester soon extended into several of their subsidiary small towns, such as Hinckley, while later in the eighteenth century, footwear manufacture spread from Northampton to Wellingborough and Kettering; much the same process can be discovered in the textile trades of Lancashire and the West Riding. Nail making left Birmingham for the then-small town of Dudley because

[37] A.F. Denholm, 'The impact of the canal system on three Staffordshire market towns, 1760–1850', *Midland History*, 13 (1988), 59–76.
[38] C. Caraccioli, *An Historical Account of Sturbridge, Bury and the most Famous Fairs in Europe and America* (Cambridge, 1773), p. 38.
[39] M.B. Rowlands, *Masters and Men in the West Midlands metalware trades before the industrial revolution* (Manchester, 1975), pp. 90–9.

labour and other costs were lower.[40] Outside these specialised industrial areas, manu-factures such as metals and textiles often found it difficult to compete, leading to the loss of industry in the small towns of East Anglia or Herefordshire.

The growing industrial towns, however, provided opportunities for other sorts of association with them, such as the market gardening around Evesham which had grown up from the later seventeenth century onwards to supply the food market of the west midland industrial conurbation,[41] in the same way that the London food market had energised the agrarian economy of much of lowland England from the late middle ages onwards. New industry also created new small towns. Much industrial innovation was located in settlements which were neither urban nor rural as the terms had tradi-tionally been understood—one thinks of the mills located along streams in the foothills of the Pennines—but some sorts of industrial growth seem to have led naturally and rapidly to the development of fully-formed traditional urban communities. The best examples lie in the Potteries, where Tunstall developed around its market place of 1816, Burslem had two weekly markets by the 1790s, Hanley a market by the 1770s and Longton its market square laid out in 1789; most of these new towns acquired traditional urban public buildings such as town halls and impressively well organised street plans, unlike many other rather chaotic urbanising industrial settlements of the later eighteenth century.[42]

The creation of new towns

Most medieval new towns, and some in early modern Ireland, conform to a standard pattern in which the whole plan was established before building began, on a grid-iron street pattern, with market place and public buildings such as churches carefully inte-grated into the whole. This presupposed a powerful single authority which could impose such a concept—usually a landowner or the Crown—and relatively rapid development on a greenfield site where there were few restrictions in the shape of pre-existing structures. Very few of the new towns in early modern England and Wales con-formed to these requirements. As will emerge below, single, dominant landlords with the will and the power to impose such structures were uncommon; the Crown had no interest in developing its estates in this fashion, and growth was usually experimental, organic and relatively slow, while most new towns emerged from the nucleus of an old village which donated its street pattern to the emerging town. Only one conspicuous example of a planned new town exists in England—the Cumberland town of Whitehaven.

[40] J.S. Roper, *Dudley in the Seventeenth Century* (Dudley, 1965), p. 19.
[41] R.W. Sidwell, *A short history of commercial horticulture in the Vale of Evesham*, Vale of Evesham Historical Society Research Papers, II (1969).
[42] *VCH Staffordshire*, vol. VIII (London, 1963), pp. 81, 130, 143, and *passim*.

Whitehaven was an agricultural village without even a small market until the 1660s, although investment in the harbour had begun in 1634. The Lowther family was crucial, with entrepreneurial skills to apply to their dominant landholdings in the area around the village, an estate which included rich coal resources, the land beside the village, and the harbour.[43] In the years around 1680 Sir John Lowther laid out the simple grid plan within which the new town was concentrated, although the traditional village structure, with the market place, lay beside it; one block was left for the church, following standard medieval new-town practice.[44] Houses in a hierarchy of qualities, an assembly room, the Lowther mansion, and eventually a hospital, second church and theatre followed. Whitehaven flourished on the shipping of coal to a rapidly expanding Dublin—here, Irish urbanisation stimulated a parallel process in England. It grew explosively. There were over 2,000 inhabitants as early as 1693 and eleven thousand by 1755, so the town rapidly left the rank of small towns altogether, but during this period in the late seventeenth century of new-town creation it was much the best example of successful growth as well as of central planning—indeed, the two were necessarily connected. North-west England saw at least two other similar but paler examples of this phenomenon of landlord-controlled urban creation. Maryport was developed by the Senhouse family in the years after 1748, and Workington by its Curwens at about the same time, both with simple grid plans and specialising in shipping coal, but neither produced the mature urbanism exemplified by Whitehaven.

The process by which the many scores of new towns in England and Wales in this period were created has received surprisingly little study. Unusual only in its excellent documentation must be the process which led to the creation of the market in Westerham in Kent.[45] Located in a surprisingly large patch of country without a market, it had a failed medieval grant and still in the early seventeenth century had an unusual concentration of inns and shopkeepers. In 1620 one of these traders, a grocer (an uncommon shopkeeper for a mere village) called Richard Dawling gathered a group of like-minded village tradesmen to petition for a chartered market; this was eventually granted to the lord of the manor, Sir Thomas Gresham, but he seems to have made little effort to encourage or even participate in the venture, leasing off the ownership of the market buildings to those prepared to invest in them. The market, and the town, flourished, a tribute to the entrepreneurial initiative of this group of small-scale local businessmen. We might be tempted to assume that because Gresham is named in the charter, he dominated the urbanising process, but though most of these new market charters appear to have been granted to lords of the manor, we should beware of attributing to most landowners the sort of presiding genius which the Lowthers showed in the north-west;

[43] J.V. Beckett, *Coal and Tobacco: the Lowthers and the economic development of West Cumberland, 1660–1760* (Cambridge, 1981).

[44] S. Collier with S. Pearson, *Whitehaven, 1600–1800: a new town of the late seventeenth century* (London, 1991).

[45] A. Everitt, 'The marketing of agricultural produce, 1500–1640', in J. Thirsk, ed., *The Agrarian History of England and Wales* (Cambridge, 1967), vol. IV, p. 182.

over most of England, landowners appear to have been sleeping partners in a process directed by others.

The presence of a main road helped some small rural communities to achieve a minimal urban status: Caxton in Cambridgeshire had a market grant of 1248 which was still effective in the mid-fourteenth century but must have failed at an unknown date after then.[46] It lay on one of the main roads between London and the North, mid-way between Royston and Huntingdon, and had inns from an early date, but its market was revived by a new charter to its lord of the manor in 1668. The market continued until well into the nineteenth century, but the size of the place was always very small, with as few as fifty houses at the time of the re-grant and only 336 inhabitants in 1801; the traffic along the road must have been a vital element in the creation and survival of such a very modest market town. For Bisley in Gloucestershire there was no recorded medieval precedent, but it lay in a locality attached to the prosperous rural clothmaking industry centred on the Stroudwater valley.[47] Sir Robert Atkyns, the lord of the manor, acquired a market grant in 1687, but he sold his rights to a local innkeeper in 1706, and they were sold on again in 1710; the market disappeared late in the eighteenth century.

One of the advantages of reviving a failed medieval market was that the street plan of the settlement was likely to be already shaped to the requirements of a market town. The Gloucestershire market town of Moreton-in-Marsh had been created by the Abbot of Westminster in the thirteenth century but had failed by the end of the fifteenth.[48] But its conspicuously broadened High Street was permanently preserved as the ideal setting for a small market catering for livestock, which was re-created by a 1637 grant but had lapsed by 1675; later listings in 1690 and 1792 point to one or more subsequent revivals—such a pattern of repeated failure and revival is not uncommon. A considerable range of shops and services seems to have existed in such places whether the market functioned or not. In some places the market gave rise to shops and tradespeople, in others the market followed the coalescence of a good number of characteristic small town tradesmen. Coleford in Gloucestershire is a good example of this second pattern, for it may have had some informal and small-scale market trading in the sixteenth century, and certainly a good sprinkling of traders are recorded there before seven leading tradesmen banded together to get an official market grant in 1661; a market hall was built in 1679 and a strong little town had developed by the eighteenth century.[49]

The essential argument which has been advanced above is that small towns should not be prematurely consigned to the sidelines of urban history. They were still expanding in size and numbers until about 1700, and in many ways were continuing to grow in competitive strength, and in the range of goods and services which they could

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[46] *VCH Cambridgeshire*, vol. v (London, 1973), pp. 26, 32.
[47] *VCH Gloucestershire*, vol. xi (London, 1976), p. 30.
[48] *VCH Gloucestershire*, vol. vi (London, 1965), p. 244.
[49] *VCH Gloucestershire*, vol. v (London, 1996), p. 130.

provide, for most of the eighteenth century, and beyond. To achieve a truly urban status in settlements of a few hundred must always have been a challenge, but many towns with modest populations of one or two thousand contrived to be vigorously urban, and some even to be positively urbane, within these apparently modest parameters. Innovation, prosperity, civility—these qualities were perhaps generally attainable for the last time within small towns in this period.

Abstracts

JOHN BRADLEY

From Frontier Town to Renaissance City: Kilkenny, 1500–1700

This paper is a study of continuity and change in Kilkenny between 1500 and 1700, when it was transformed from a frontier market town into a city of such centrality that it functioned for a number of years as an alternative Irish capital. The agencies of change were mainly external. By 1700 the civic families who had traditionally controlled the city had been swept away and replaced by a new oligarchy, composed primarily of colonists. In 1500 religion was a factor that united the townspeople; by 1700, it divided them. In 1500 the town's skyline was dominated by the spires of religious houses; by 1700 these buildings functioned as courthouses or military barracks. Although this transformation was dramatic, there were continuities, particularly in the form of urban government, in the way in which power was brokered, and in the continuing importance of a great lord's role in the development of the town. The paper concludes that continuity and change were effectively bedfellows.

ALAN DYER

Small Towns in England, 1600–1800

The argument of this paper is that small towns were still of great importance in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, despite the growth of large cities in this period. Small towns were growing in numbers until the early eighteenth century, and developed a sophisticated range of shopping and leisure facilities for the gentry, as well as vital economic facilities for country people. The public market, around which most of them still centred, retained its important role in the agrarian economy, despite the rise of private dealing. Small towns strengthened their role as centres of specialised manufacturing, and they also serviced the growing traffic along the roads. The small number of the new towns of this period bear comparison with the more familiar urban plantations of the Middle Ages. In fact, small towns were probably more vigorous and better able to compete with large ones at the end of this period than they had been at the beginning of it, and it can be claimed that, considered over its complete history, the market town was at its highest point of development in the years around 1800.

Abbreviations

BL	British Library
Cal. S. P. Ire	*Calendar of State Papers, Ireland*
HC	House of Commons
JCHAS	*Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society*
JRSAI	*Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*
KTCM	Records of the Corporation of Kells, 1685–1787: NLI MS 25446, 8 vols
LPK	C. McNeill, ed., *Liber primus Kilkenniensis* (Dublin, 1931)
NA	National Archives [Dublin]
NHist.	*Northern History*
NLI	National Library Ireland
Parl. Gaz.	*The Parliamentary Gazetteer of Ireland*
PP	Parliamentary Papers
PRIA	*Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*
PRO	Public Record Office
PRONI	Public Record Office of Northern Ireland
RO	Record Office
TCD	Trinity College, Dublin
UH	*Urban History*
UHY	*Urban History Yearbook*
VCH	*Victoria County History*

Figure 0.3. England and Wales: places mentioned.