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# Book Review

## Market Towns: Roles, Challenges and Prospects

*Edited by Neil Powe, Trevor Hart and Tim Shaw Routledge, London, 2007, ISBN: 9780415389624, 183pp, £55.00, Hardback*

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Drawing on the vast experience of rural planning research undertaken at Newcastle University, Powe *et al.* provide an intriguing insight into one of the most prevalent factors within the rural environment, the market town. Although it is contended that no clear definition of market towns exist, they are ‘perceived to act as a focal point for trade and services in their hinterland’, and thus have a major influence on the current and future developments to their surrounding hinterlands. Our rural areas are experiencing trends of ‘counter urbanisation’ resulting in vast increases in rural populations. This increase needs to accommodate a growing rural density through various means, most notably via housing and employment. There is thus an inter-linkage of factors that impact on the overall functioning of market towns. However, what are their characteristics, how do they function, and how do they fit in to national and regional policy?

*Market Towns* aims to address this by clarifying what a market town is, and what the current and future implications are in England. This is achieved by drawing on a range of fascinating research methods, including large-scale surveys and in-depth case studies to depict critical factors structured around three key themes:

1. Characteristics, roles and policy
2. Issues and challenges
3. Prospects for market towns

Section 1 explores the meaning of market towns, their characteristics, and most importantly, what this means in terms of policy. This is achieved through two key methodologies, the first is a residents’ survey attempting to depict a more holistic definition and understanding of market towns through perception analysis. Secondly, descriptive analyses study of 202 towns followed by regression and cluster analysis. This comprehensive approach fully captures the scope and content of *Market Towns*, as the book explores the subject in a thorough, yet captivating manner to achieve the desired goal of explaining the meaning of the ‘market town’. The section goes on to explore the contemporary functional roles of market towns in order to establish common trends. This is achieved through the use of 11 case study examples, evidencing alternative yet



complementary scenarios to generate common features that can be used to seek best practice mechanisms. A critical discussion of the policies of market towns is provided, specifically focusing on issues arising from rural settlement policy and the implications from initiatives in place regarding the regeneration of market towns. In essence this first section provides the foundations and framework for the remainder of the book, as the fundamental attributes of the characteristics and policy decisions form the basis for critically evaluating the issues and challenges that face market towns.

The second section builds on the key findings from part one, providing in-depth critique of the socio-economic issues and challenges facing market towns. It is evident that sustainability is a recurring issue here, specifically surrounding the urgency for a more interconnected framework that integrates socio-economic issues that impact upon market towns. First, critique regarding the key factors of transport in and around market towns is provided. The demographic challenges within market towns are then considered, as the authors discuss the significance of an aging rural population, followed by an intriguing assessment on the social implications of housing need and the impacts of social inclusion. Finally, the section draws on the issues and challenges facing employment, providing insight into the retail futures of market towns, discussing the dichotomy surrounding the provision of rural service centres for retail and leisure and/or visitor attractions focussed around heritage and culture.

Split into two chapters, the final section draws to the overall conclusions, discussing what the prospects are for market towns. Reflecting on the case study research undertaken consideration is given to what the main challenges are, and what the future holds in terms of strategy and policy development. Finally, an overall conclusion is drawn with a speculative outlook on the future of market towns, continuing a 'fluctuating pattern of success and failure in economic activity', contending that much reliance of future development depends on external factors.

The authors clearly illustrate substantial depth in research to provide prevalent and necessary analysis on the current and potential challenges faced within the rural environment. *Market Towns* evidences a clear and professional format throughout, supported with excellent illustrations of research findings and case study analysis. Maintaining a logical structure that addresses the initial research objectives, delivered through a methodological process, *Market Towns* is an integral source for both practitioners and students interested within the fields of planning, built environment and geography.

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