Social History in Perspective

General Editor: Jeremy Black

Social History in Perspective is a new series of in-depth studies of the many topics in social, cultural and religious history for students. They will also give the student clear surveys of the subject and also present the most recent research in an accessible way.

PUBLISHED

John Belchem *Popular Radicalism in Nineteenth-Century Britain*

Sybil M. Jack *Towns in Tudor and Stuart Britain*

Hugh McLeod *Religion and Society in England, 1850-1914*

N. L. Tranter *British Population in the Twentieth Century*

FORTHCOMING

Eric Acheson *Late Medieval Economy and Society*

Ian Archer *Rebellion and Riot in England, 1360-1660*

Jonathan Barry *Religion and Society in England, 1603-1760*

A. L. Beier *Early Modern London*

Sue Bruley *Women's Century of Change*

Andrew Charlesworth *Popular Protest in Britain and Ireland, 1650-1870*

Richard Connors *The Growth of Welfare in Hanoverian England, 1723-1793*

Geoffrey Crossick *A History of London from 1800-1939*

Alistair Davies *Culture and Society, 1900-1995*

Simon Dentith *Culture and Society in Nineteenth-Century England*

Martin Durham *The Permissive Society*

Peter Fleming *Medieval Family and Household in England*

David Fowler *Youth Culture in the Twentieth Century*

Malcolm Gaskill *Witchcraft in England, 1560-1760*

Peter Gosden *Education in the Twentieth Century*

Harry Goulbourne *British Race Relations in Historical Perspective*

S. J. D. Green *Religion and the Decline of Christianity in Modern Britain, 1880-1980*

Paul Griffiths *English Social Structure and the Social Order, 1500-1750*

Anne Hardy *Health and Medicine since 1860*

Steve Hindle *The Poorer Sort of People in Seventeenth-Century England*

David Hirst *Welfare and Society, 1832-1939*

Tim Hitchcock *Sexuality in Britain, 1690-1800*

Helen Jewell *Education in Early Modern Britain*

Anne Kettle *Social Structure in the Middle Ages*

Alan Kidd *The State and the Poor, 1834-1914*

Peter Kirdy and S. A. King *British Living Standards, 1700-1870*

Arthur J. McIvor *Working in Britain 1880-1950*

Christopher Marsh *Popular Religion in the Sixteenth Century*

Anthony Milton *Church and Religion in England, 1603-1642*

Michael Mullett *Early Modern British Catholics, 1559-1829*

Titles continued overleaf

List continued from previous page

- Christine Peters *Women in Early Modern Britain, 1690–1800*
Barry Reay *Rural Workers, 1830–1930*
Richard Rex *Heresy and Dissent in England, 1360–1560*
John Rule *Labour and the State, 1700–1875*
Pamela Sharpe *British Population in the Long Eighteenth
Century, 1680–1820*
Malcolm Smuts *Culture and Power in England*
John Spurr *English Puritanism, 1603–1689*
W. B. Stephens *Education in Industrial Society: Britain 1780–1902*
Heather Swanson *Medieval British Towns*
David Taylor *Crime, Policing and Punishment*
Benjamin Thompson *Feudalism or Lordship and Politics in Medieval England*
R. E. Tyson *Population in Pre-Industrial Britain, 1500–1750*
Garthine Walker *Crime, Law and Society in Early Modern England*
Ian Whyte *Scotland's Society and Economy, 1500–1760*
Andy Wood *The Crowd and Popular Politics in Early Modern England*

Please note that a sister series, *British History in Perspective*, is available
which covers all the key topics in British political history.

Towns in Tudor and Stuart Britain

Sybil M. Jack

© Sybil M. Jack 1996

All rights reserved. No reproduction, copy or transmission of this publication may be made without written permission.

No paragraph of this publication may be reproduced, copied or transmitted save with written permission or in accordance with the provisions of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988, or under the terms of any licence permitting limited copying issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency, 90 Tottenham Court Road, London W1P 9HE.

Any person who does any unauthorised act in relation to this publication may be liable to criminal prosecution and civil claims for damages.

First published 1996 by
MACMILLAN PRESS LTD
Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS
and London
Companies and representatives
throughout the world

ISBN 978-0-333-61083-1 ISBN 978-1-349-24956-5 (eBook)
DOI 10.1007/978-1-349-24956-5

A catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library.

10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1
05	04	03	02	01	00	99	98	97	96

CONTENTS

<i>List of Maps and Tables</i>	vii
<i>Introduction</i>	xi
1 Place, Space and Time – The Built Environment	1
2 Social Structure and Social Experience in the Town	19
3 Towns and Religious Change	34
4 Urban Wealth, Townsmen's Wealth	46
5 Controlling Towns; Town Self-Government	70
6 The Capitals	91
7 The Place of the Town in the Kingdom	119
8 The Town in its Region	139
9 Towns and Urbanisation	159
10 Network and Hierarchy	185
11 Conclusions	199
<i>Notes</i>	204
<i>Further Reading</i>	220
<i>Index</i>	223

MAPS AND TABLES

Map 1	Cities and Towns mentioned in text	ix
Map 2	City population in 1500	189
Map 3	City population in 1700	189
Table 9.1	The effects of differing assumptions on estimates of London's population in the seventeenth century	172
Table 9.2	Varying calculations from similar data	173
Table 9.3	Irish town sizes in the seventeenth century	175
Table 9.4	Urban population growth 1300–1750	177
Table 9.5	Urban population percentages by nation 1300–1700	177
Table 9.6	Percentage of population living in British towns of over 10 000	179

INTRODUCTION

Geographers in Afric maps
With savage pictures filled their gaps
And o'er uninhabitable downs
Placed elephants for want of towns.

Jonathan Swift

Why should one study urban history? Were towns the precipitating element for change in the human way of life? Historians of different persuasions have argued bitterly about the function of towns in the shifts of human ways of life and behaviour. Certainly, the town has always been a central focus of human history. A wide variety of social, political and economic needs were met where large numbers of people congregated together on a permanent basis. Perhaps for this reason, it has been described as 'one of the most exciting aspects of the adventure of humanity'.¹ Some see it as a measure of civilisation, others equally attack it as destructive of natural man. Some see it as a critical independent variable in social and economic development, others as merely an arena for developments caused by other factors. People have wondered whether different civilisations have different urban forms. In Greece and Rome the citizen was political; in the USA, mercantile. It has been suggested that 'in a great civilisation home, house, city and landscape are in perfect harmony'.² Scholars have argued about whether town life favoured or discouraged innovation.

The relationship between the city and society, politics and economy, is still unresolved. Some assume that towns have a central role in economic life; others see them as parasites. The relationship between town and state in the development of coercive state power has been seen either as crucial or irrelevant. Their wider role in world history is frequently seen as vital, particularly as cities and states appear at roughly the same moment. Their physical appearance is seen as embodying the contemporary political and social structure.

Is there indeed a common set of characteristics which make 'the town' a entity about which there can be useful generalisations? Does 'the town' exist or are there simply towns, places where a considerable number of people live in close proximity but which have no other common features? Is density of population an adequate description of a town or would one add other characteristics such as a specialised function or a distinctive physical appearance. What distinguishes a town from a city, is it simply size or the possession of a cathedral, making the town the centre of a religious diocese? The self-definition of a town in the early modern period was of a community living within established limits, whose circuit was jealously guarded. The annual 'riding' of those boundaries was both serious business and a festivity designed to promote the embodiment of a sense of identity. Detailed studies of individual towns often imply that the microcosm reflects the macrocosm but some historians would argue fiercely that a wider theory is necessary to make coherent sense; others that no such coherent theory has ever been produced. They have attempted to demolish the idea that certain activities presuppose permanent urban settlement.

Meeting places, after all, do not have to be towns. There can be places in the open fields such as Anglo-Saxon gathering places. The administrative centres of Scottish regalities were not necessarily towns. The centres of Gaelic lordships in Ireland and Wales were not usually towns. Even ports do not necessarily have towns around them. In nineteenth-century Australia some ports were only a jetty, pier or quay with a common storehouse attached. Towns, moreover, are not necessarily permanent. They can be created almost instantaneously by a

company to provide for workers in a particular area and be dismantled and removed at the end of the work. Settlements may for a time have all the basic characteristics of a town but then, as the reason for them vanishes, they may disappear leaving only the relics which human scavengers have found too much trouble to remove.

What cannot be disputed is that the number of people who live in towns has soared since the Middle Ages. From a time when most people were rural dwellers, there has been a transition to a situation in which most live in urban or suburban conglomerates. This has profoundly altered human experience. The process is called urbanisation and there is ongoing investigation of what precipitated it, what caused it and what made it possible. The very variety of the town's potential functions makes it a difficult concept to pin down. Its historical significance in any specific period can vary and is frequently elusive. The factors which led to town growth have been variously seen, from Lewis Mumford's idea that it resulted from the balance between power and production³ to those who see cities defined simply as large and significant towns, as organisational forces in their own right.⁴

What we are concerned with is the increasing tendency of humanity to live in large settled communities which meet certain religious, social and economic needs from the most basic need for protection against enemies and climate through to politics and colonisation. There is a danger of anthropomorphism, however, in approaching the town as if it was a distinct entity with a life of its own. It is essential to bear in mind that in the last analysis a town is a group of individual people clustered together and that from moment to moment, year to year and generation to generation, that cluster is constantly changing. As people are born and die, decide for their own reasons to come or go, to work at one task or another, the town becomes different. Towns are human artefacts – they do not move of themselves. They are a venue for human activity to which residents have a greater or lesser commitment according to their circumstances and endowing them with a persona is only convenient shorthand. The creation of a place with which individuals identify, sometimes

passionately, is the result of implementing culturally specific architectural/philosophical concepts of space, place and time, spaciousness and crowding.⁵

At the same time not all historians see urban history as a separate subject. Some ask whether there is anything which is specific to urban history. Is the town a dependent or an independent variable? Can it in fact be separated from wider cultural movements? Does it have a history of its own? Other authors of overarching studies of the long run of urban history have stressed both the early arrival of towns, the relative stability of urban sites and, more contentiously, networks, and claim that from the start there was a relatively high percentage of the population who were town dwellers.⁶ This underpins claims that the history of towns is critical to our understanding of the past, indeed, that towns have heralded most of the decisive changes in our history.

Taking this approach, towns have been divided in accordance with function and considerable importance has been attached to the development of links between towns. There is a stress on the idea of hierarchy and network. Briefly, a hierarchy involves a ranking of towns in order of size in which specialist goods flow down while raw materials, food and more standard goods flow up. Networks would see goods flowing from one town with a specialised function to another perhaps on the same level which had a different specialisation, in a more complicated connection of levels both in domestic and in international trade. The development of an integrated network has been seen as an essential prerequisite for the economic advances of the later industrialisation of Europe.

Towns in 1500 were much smaller than those of today, with a correspondingly smaller population. A town of 5000 was considered large and towns between 2500 and 5000 still sizeable. Most towns, including a number of county towns, were under 2500 but were still an important part of the social and economic fabric. By 1700 a number of towns were approaching 20 000 and the capitals had swelled to many times that size. Interpreting this change and its implications for the people who lived in them has become the main focus of recent historical work.

The History of Urban Historical Writing

The questions we shall be asking are different from those that preoccupied earlier urban historians. Historians write to make sense of the past for their contemporaries and a change of focus is a measure of ongoing change. Earlier accounts are generally associated with the creation of a sense of identity, be it individual, family, religious, or national and state identity. A brief account of earlier preoccupations may set the present study in context.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Italian cities, most far larger than English towns, produced sophisticated histories modelled on classical authors such as Livy to express their grandeur. Early urban recording of events in Britain had the more limited aim of recording what was deemed useful. Early chronicles written in Reading and Lincoln, the King's Lynn 'Calendar' which recorded its practices, and Bristol's customs recorded at the end of the fifteenth century in a book of remembrance by its town clerk, Robert Ricard, show a consciousness of identity, but uniformly lacked sophistication. The monarch's sources were so limited that Henry VIII offered inducements to Leland to survey the state of the realm and his 'Itinerary' contains precious information on the state of the towns.⁷

The second half of the sixteenth century saw a rising interest in chorographical descriptions but although it produced works such as William Smith's *The Particular Description of England with the portraiture of Certaine of the Cheiffest Citties and Townes 1588*; William Harrison's *Description of England*; Camden's *Britannia* and Carew's *Survey of Cornwall* the focus was still on county rather than town. The appearance of town histories like Stow's *History of London* or William Aldersey's *Annals of Chester* may be a sign of growing urban self-consciousness.⁸ Local town histories began to be written in greater numbers in the early seventeenth century. Nathaniel Bacon, the recorder of Ipswich, compiled the *Annals of Ipswich* ostensibly to make available to the aldermen the precedents for the government of the city. To do so he used the town records which he combed with a lawyer's eye. In his introduction he spoke of records 'whereof no recollection hath bein formerly made, and therby lay buried up as it were in a heap of rubbish'

which he sought to recover because few of the town's residents were aware of the true nature of its government. His underlying purpose, however, was to argue for the value of the participation of people in their own government. This is how he sees the elected town officials as opposed to the bailiffs who are described as Norman officers to control the town. The stress is on mutual consent and community. He disapproves of monarchs who intervened as 'touching too much as was thought, upon the prerogative of kings . . .'.⁹ Promoting their towns was the object of studies like Henry Manship at Yarmouth, John Twyn at Canterbury and John Hooker at Exeter.

In the later seventeenth century interest in this appears to have dwindled, and urban studies in the early eighteenth century were dominated by gentlemen and clerics with a fashionable interest in Roman remains, castles and churches rather than recent history. It reflects the increasing integration of the upper classes into town life and their appropriation of its interpretation.¹⁰ A history like John Throsby's *History of Leicester* in 1791 claimed to be novel in that it avoided conjecture, speculation and wonder and confined itself to visible demonstrations of truth. The contents perhaps do not quite live up to these claims as he starts with King Leir and his daughters and devotes much time to scholarly (and now discredited) speculation about the Roman remains, but he does use information from leases and town records to amplify his illustration of the physical remains, from the charters to justify the town's role in defence, from parish registers to establish death rates and from the churchwardens' accounts to detail the reformation changes.¹¹

His nineteenth-century successor James Thompson illustrates a swing towards a national perspective and an interest in social history. Much influenced by the French historian, Thierry, he believed that proof was a complete narration which assembled material scientifically and used art to breathe life into it.¹²

The political exploitation of urban histories can be seen in the Irish historiographical tradition from the eighteenth century. Published Irish town histories promoted an English vision of their history and role. Most of them have been described as mediocre and they concentrated on the fashionable interests of the day.

Scottish town histories have a similar national focus, providing a general history of the kingdom into which the occasional events of the town are fitted.¹³

As the nineteenth century advanced, 'professional' and academic histories became a separate genre from the more popular histories which included myth and anecdote and by the later nineteenth century were directed at a growing tourist market. Such popular works, like Walter Thornbury's *Old and New London*,¹⁴ were often still organised topographically. They were not unscholarly but they recorded the stories which formed the common perception of the past. Professional historians were engaged in the establishment of history as a discipline and took every opportunity to denigrate popular or antiquarian works as inadequate or misleading. History was to be 'scientific' and 'objective', which tended to limit study to the technical and demonstrably factual.

Gradually a set pattern for the academic histories evolved which treated each town as a self-contained whole, independent of the world around it. They started with an account of the institutional structure and economic organisation. Most were tightly focused on the individual town and on the narrow issues of the formal authority and management of the corporation. The towns pressed on with publication of borough records like Mary Bateson's *Records of Leicester*. Comparative studies were limited to town administration or the gilds.

The writing of 'patriotic' histories of towns in which national events were external to the actions of the corporation continued for much of the first half of the twentieth century. There was a continuing demand for works which charted and dated matters relating to the ongoing physical and corporate life of the body. Interest in the town as a form of local community which might have significant regional variations, however, slowly grew in the interwar period with the work of historians like W. G. Hoskins and H. P. R. Finberg.

The post-Second World War period saw a significant shift of focus as the British Isles painfully adjusted to a changing status in the world. Early works such as Wallace MacCaffrey's study of Exeter for the first time started to look at the city as part of the

wider polity both influential and influenced by the nation, by events outside any individual or corporate control such as the discovery of the Americas, and by imperatives such as religion. A more analytical approach revived interest in the social structure and social life of the people who inhabited the towns. Paul Slack and Peter Clark renewed interest in the history of the poor and the problems of disease in towns. Historians, influenced by architects and sociologists, started to look at the town as built environment which embodied the ideology and vision of the elite and the resistance of the poor. The rituals and symbolism which formed part of the means by which social and political order were maintained were subjected to anthropologically inspired dissection. Not all of these approaches were acceptable to every urban historian. Interest in ritual in particular was seen as breaching the invisible wall which limited historians to matters for which the evidence was direct and relatively unambiguous.

Scholars were increasingly anxious, however, to find means of explicitly addressing the problems of motivation and means. Historians like David Sacks and David Underdown concentrated on the dynamics of change: what enforced shifts in merchant thinking; what effects new trading demands had on the commercial structure of business. The evidence was at best indirect and conjectural but the importance of the subject was imperative. The approach to urban history, which saw each town as an isolated unit, had gone. Susan Brigden embarked upon a major attempt to integrate London and national religious experience of change in the early sixteenth century. Increasingly this is not enough as historians in the context of contemporary supra-national developments need to set even national events in a global context.

The questions which historians are now addressing include the following. Was the urban system in Britain a relative failure or a comparative success? What was the level of urbanisation in Britain in 1500 and how had it changed by 1700? What were the dynamics of change? What drew people to towns and cities? What explains the appearance of new towns and the decline of once flourishing settlements. Was it a largely local phenomenon or part of a developing system? Was the growing size of some

towns fuelled by new or considerably altered functions? Was it structurally associated with the increasing need for large-scale coordination of economic activities? Were there different ways of organising work? How significant were the interaction of government functions, the management of religion in the interests of social cohesion, the channelling of exchange and control and monopoly control of resources. Did the interplay between specialists living in close proximity with a resultant cross-cutting of social relationships create a new and more fluid community? Was a city more than simply the location in which otherwise significant events occur or did the town occupy a strategic position in the nation?