

LIFE IN THE MIDDLE AGES

Martin Whittock (London: Running Press, 2009)

CHAPTER 3 – THE GROWTH AND DECLINE OF TOWNS

The huge growth of English towns and their influence happened since the Norman Conquest in 1066. This reveals itself clearly in the case of London, where the Norman impact was massive –with a new palace at Westminster and a new St. Paul's, as well as the building of fortifications at Baynard's Castle and the Tower of London. In addition, the period following the conquest saw the building of 100 parish churches and 11 new monasteries, with the latter being significant economic communities with great effects on the local area. The Conquest also coincided with a leap in London's population, from about 8.000 in 750 to 25.000 in 1100 and 100.000 in 1300. Incidentally, it probably halved around 1350 due to the Black Death.

The union of Normandy and England acted as a stimulus to long-distance trade and with it the growth of certain key towns. But towns were not a Norman invention: they were a Europe-wide phenomenon. Neither was the increasingly rapid growth of towns after 1066 due to a particular Norman set of ingredients, but it would have happened without the Conquest as well.

Towns and trade

By 1300, perhaps as many as 20 per cent of the English population lived in urban centres, most of which acted as market centres for their local areas. They provided rural communities with the products they could not individually provide for themselves, such as clothing and specialty iron tools. They also provided a market for the sale of farming produce from the demesne land of local estates. In this way urban centres enabled local lords to turn the products of their estates into cash. The largest towns had the largest hinterlands¹, with which they were closely connected. London, for example, relied on grain from about ten different counties. The distance of these areas involved with an urban centre varied according to ease of transportation. On a related theme, the concentration of available luxury goods in the largest towns (either imported through them, or produced there) drew in purchasers from considerable distances.

Many towns were established after 1066, while others had a history which stretched back far before the Norman Conquest. Some, of course, had been important centres in Roman Britain (although had lost the majority of their population since then). But many were new towns of the Middle Ages. In these cases, ambitious local lords had seen the advantages a town could bring and invested in setting one up to make the most of a town's money-making opportunities.

The importance of the establishment of new towns is revealed in the fact that between 1200 and 1300 the number of boroughs (originally a defended place but later possessing certain rights, such as self-government) jumped by over 100 per cent, from about 220 to 500. Of these towns about 25 per cent were directly administered by the Crown. However, even though the input of the English Crown was important, this left 75 per cent of towns which had been set up by local lords. The Church also saw the advantages of developing towns on its estates, and 25 per cent of the national total were administered by the Church. The returns to those who established towns, or who invested in them, could be impressive.

QUESTIONS:

1. Look for the underlined concepts and words in the dictionary.
2. Look for information and write 4 lines about the 1066 Norman conquest of Britain.
3. Were cities an effect of the Norman conquest, or were they bound to happen either way?
4. What role did cities have in relation with their surroundings?
5. What were the boroughs?
6. Who could set up (found) and administer towns, according to the text?
7. What reasons were behind of the foundation of some towns?

The benefits enjoyed by townspeople

Towns also offered a wide range of attractions for those living there. As well as providing new job prospects in craftwork and trade, they also offered opportunities for escaping villains to lose themselves in a large

¹ Rural area economically tied to a urban centre.

population. It was this that caused towns to grow as a proportion of the national population from about 10 per cent in 1086 to about 20 per cent by 1300. This growth was driven by migration from surrounding areas, such as in Exeter, where around 27 per cent of its inhabitants had migrated from up to 40 miles (64 kms) away. The types of migrants ranged from poor peasants looking for opportunities to improve their economic situation to wealthier artisans making the most of the trading opportunities through renting a plot of town land.

One clear characteristic of towns was a distinct set of rights (*borough freedoms*) which outsiders did not enjoy. There was not a clear and tidy definition of what these were, but there typically was set of arrangements which varied from place to place instead. Some towns, it is true, had been granted *borough charters* by a lord. These laid out the rights and privileges enjoyed by those living there. Others, however, had evolved a series of local customs which in some cases were later formalised in a charter.

Probably, the most relevant characteristic of English medieval towns was that the properties within it were rented out at a relatively low rent and that those who rented were not liable for any kind of labour service. These plots could be freely sold or given as a gift, and none of this needed the agreement of the lord who owned the land. These conditions were an attractive proposition to a population who were all too familiar with the humiliating restrictions and unpaid workload which often went with renting land in the rural areas. The person who rented land in a town had freedoms that a villain in the countryside could only dream of. [...]

Towns thrived on trade. Owners of town land had the right to hold fairs and weekly markets and were free from the tolls which had to be paid by outsiders visiting these. Townspeople celebrated their membership of an exclusive club and kept outsiders at a disadvantage. In some cases, traders and craftsmen of certain towns who were members of the *guild merchant* had some special privileges, such as transporting goods across the kingdom without paying tolls.

The access to those privileges changed over time: as the Middle Ages progressed they became more restricted, and a distinction grew between those traders and manufacturers who had been granted the 'freedom' of the town and the majority of the town population with fewer privileges. These privileges could be gained through inheritance, purchase or apprenticeship.

Over time, more and more towns enjoyed the benefits of self-government and elected their own mayors and legal officials. This occurred when the *burgesses* (population of a *borough*, citizens) of a town associated and paid a fixed fee to the lord who had originally owned the land on which the town lay. The fee compensated the lord for the loss of income from the rents and tolls of the town and meant that these would, from that moment on, belong to the town itself. This trend boomed after 1189 because the kings Richard I and John (King John Lackland) were short of cash and found granting charters and selling town rights attractive financial propositions. Urban self-rule therefore grew more in royal possessions than in those belonging to nobility or clergy.

Some private lords tried to resist this trend, and found themselves the object of pressures and resentment of townspeople keen to press their rights for more freedom to regulate their own affairs. In 1327 in Bury, townspeople plundered the abbey and imprisoned some of the monks in an attempt to force the abbot to grant them greater self-government.

In these self-governing towns it was the town authorities who were now responsible for carrying out royal instructions and regulations: they had come of age as communities. In some cases, even, this urban autonomy led to cities becoming counties in their own right, such as Bristol (1373), York (1396), Newcastle (1400) and Norwich (1404). Such towns had their mayors and councils, seals and seats of government. They frequently excluded 'lesser trades' from occupying these positions, generally with merchants dominating the town government and only lesser posts open to members of the craft guilds.

Nevertheless, these local governments showed great respect for their communities, and real conflict could occur when financial charges (raising of taxes, for instance) were made without consultation with representatives of the wider town community. Towns, therefore, were not democracies, but they were not run by oligarchies who ignored the less-wealthy members of the urban community. Popular political participation tended to decline, mostly during the fifteenth century, which meant that Late Medieval town councils were often made up of the wealthiest members of urban society, replacing more open assemblies.

QUESTIONS:

8. Look for the underlined concepts and words in the dictionary.

9. What were the reasons for the people to migrate to the towns?

10. What benefits were received by the towns? How did we call them in the previous text (Lorris)?

11. What does "those who rented were not liable for any kind of labour service"? What do you think it references to in Feudalism?
12. The author establishes that one of the differences between living in the fiefs and in the cities was the possibility of selling plots of land: why is that difference present?
13. What were the advantages regarding the markets for the inhabitants of the cities?
14. How could the privileges of some citizens be obtained?
15. How could the burgesses get political power? Why did they have to pay?
16. Why was self-government more significant in royal cities from the late 12th century?
17. What role did the council have? Could they impose their will onto the community with no regard for the rest of the population? Why?

The guilds

Of all the industries located in towns, the largest was the cloth industry. The large numbers of people living in towns provided a good-sized labour pool for the many different stages involved in the industry, from preparing the wool to processing the finished cloth. During the thirteenth century the cloth trade was a major source of the prosperity of towns such as Lincoln, Stamford and York. Regional specialization meant that certain locations were associated with particular products. This high-quality cloth was consumed domestically as well as on the international market. Other towns were associated with other trades and products, varying from knives at Thaxted (Essex) to hearings at Great Yarmouth (Norfolk). [...]

Within towns, traders and manufacturers were grouped into *guilds*, which administered their *mysteries*, that is, their professional knowledge, rules and arrangements. These organisations were made up of three main groups. The first were the *masters*, who owned their own workshops, or shops. They brought in raw materials, owned the tools and the equipment of the trade and sold the finished products. The second group were the *journeymen*, who had been trained but had not acquired their own premises, so they were employed by the masters. The third group were the *apprentices*, who provided free labour to the masters while they learnt the trade. There could be a huge gulf between the wealthiest masters and the skilled workers they employed.

The guild system grew up in English towns mainly during the fourteenth century, though it was under way in the biggest towns from the 1280s. Before guilds became so important, wages and conditions were often decided by the town authorities. And there had been apprentices learning their trades long before the guilds brought together large numbers of craftspeople and formalized their arrangements. The guilds, though, were useful in keeping the elites in control of their areas of expertise. By insisting on long apprenticeships they could limit those coming into the trade and so reduce competition. By limiting the number of apprentices a master could take on, they stopped more energetic masters from dominating the trade of a town and forcing other masters out of the business. Powerful guildsmen did their best to prevent their journeymen from organizing their own groups to press for higher wages, as happened in London in 1396. Guilds also regulated working hours: banning night work and work on Sundays and other holy days.

During the fifteenth century, the guilds in the largest towns gained many functions beyond regulating manufacturing and trade. They took on a religious role by promoting the feasts of their patron saints, paying for candles and ceremonies in local churches, and organizing ceremonies such as the great processions on the celebrations of Corpus Christi and at midsummer.

The guilds also offered mutual support to their members and assisted widows and organised funerals. At Killingholme (Lincolnshire), guild members each paid a half-penny to support other guild members in need. For many poorer townspeople in the fifteenth century, the support of their guild at the time of death was the equivalent of the prayers and Masses said for the souls of wealthier citizens: salvation. [...]

By the mid-fifteenth century many of the most powerful guilds dominated the government of towns. In this way they operated as 'both judge and jury' in ensuring that towns were run in their interests.

QUESTIONS:

18. Look for the underlined concepts and words in the dictionary.
19. What groups made up the guilds? Explain briefly the role of each of them.
20. What does the author refer to when writes that "the guilds [...] were useful in keeping the elites in control of their areas of expertise?"
21. Was the role of the guilds only related with work?

Merchant Adventurers and foreign investors

By this time a new kind of trading association was coming to prominence: the Merchant Adventurers. These were different from the traders' guild of the earlier Middle Ages in their scale, their ambitions, and in their commitment to long-distance trade, coming to dominate the commercial life of some cities by the sixteenth century. Southampton, for instance, was at the hub of a major trading network in which some of the goods imported stretched into Asia. Particularly valuable was the trade in pepper and spices, which commanded huge sums of money. Export goods, however, were less exotic, ranging from English finished cloth to tin and lead. What is very clear is that the yearly total value of trade in and out of England was enormous, and that importance was recognised by the Crown, which required payment for permission for merchants to trade abroad.

This growth in international trade provided opportunities for enterprising bankers. The first financial trading house in London was established in the thirteenth century and belonged to the Riccardi merchants of Lucca, Italy. Italian bankers financed the Crown and other major players in English economy. Other European players developed a keen interest in English international trade. German merchants of the *Hanseatic* trading league set up a base near London Bridge and dominated the fourteenth-century London export trade.

In addition to trading activities, other foreigners were involved in the manufacturing processes. One example are Flemish skilled workers arriving in England in 1337 to assist in the development of finished cloth. This involvement of skilled continental craftspeople boosted the growing English textile industry, which despite periodic trade slumps, remained a major exporter throughout the fifteenth century. This rapid expansion of the textile industry led to towns such as Stamford and Norwich becoming major manufacturing centres of finished cloth. The capital also benefited from these developments, and London's expansion continued as cloth production stimulated the economy. London's dominance was seen in many other industries too, including gold smithing, bell founding, brass making and the growing market in spices.

Cloth production was not the only trade assisted by European involvement. Dutch immigrants brought skills in leather working and gold smithing; they were also at the cutting edge of fifteenth century technologies such as printing, clock manufacturing, optics and even brick-making. Prior to the late fourteenth century few buildings in England were made from bricks; instead construction relied on timber and wattle walls, or stone for the wealthy.

QUESTIONS:

22. Look for the underlined concepts and words in the dictionary.
23. How was the Merchant Adventurers different from the traders' guild?
24. Look for information and write 4 lines about the Hanseatic trading league.
25. What are the main products that were exported from Britain?
26. Was the introduction of foreign workers good or bad for the English?