TRANSACTIONS OF THE
ROYAL HISTORICAL SOCIETY
ENGLISH PROVINCIAL TOWNS
IN THE
EARLY SIXTEENTH CENTURY
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I

ENGLISH historians have concentrated almost exclusively
upon the constitutional and legal aspects of town develop-
ment. They have concerned themselves with the borough
rather than the town, with legal concepts rather than topography
or social history, just as the agrarian historians have been pre-
occupied with the manor rather than the village. Local historians
of towns and villages have, with two or three notable exceptions,
followed suit in this ill-balanced emphasis. The result is that
we know surprisingly little about the economy, social structure,
and physical growth of English towns before the latter part of
the eighteenth century.

Literary sources help us to form some idea about late medieval
towns, but taken by themselves they can be misleading. Thus
The Italian Relation of England,¹ written about 1500, tells us
that ‘there are scarcely any towns of importance in the kingdom
excepting these two: Bristol, a seaport to the West, and Boraco,
otherwise York, which is on the borders of Scotland; besides
London to the South.’ English provincial towns may well have
been small by Italian and Flemish standards, but one cannot single
out York for special mention without speaking equally of Nor-
wich and Coventry, Exeter and Salisbury, Ipswich, Canterbury

¹ A relation, or rather a true account, of the isle of England, about 1500,
translated from the Italian by C. A. Sneyd (Camden Society, O.S., xxxvii,
1847).
and Lynn, all of which were substantially wealthier than York at this date.

It is not until we come to Leland that we hear much of English towns in general, and even that is meagre and tantalizing enough. Leland was an antiquary and was little interested in economic affairs. Many of his incidental descriptions of the countryside he traversed, and of the towns he visited, are of some value as contemporary evidence, but like most of his contemporaries he had eyes only for the cloth industry and for active markets, so far as economic matters were concerned. Repeatedly he tells us that a town 'standeth all by clothing' or is 'a good quick market', but beyond that he rarely ventures into the economic field; and where he does we may be led astray by his impressionistic picture.

Of Birmingham, for example, we are told that 'a great parte of the townes is mayntayned by smithes', who got their iron out of Staffordshire and Warwickshire and their coal out of Staffordshire. We might be forgiven for envisaging Birmingham already as mainly a town of metal trades. The smiths, lorimers, and nailers probably made more noise and show, but wills and tax-assessments tell us that the wealthiest townsmen were still tanners and butchers, as in many other Midland towns. Leland in fact tells us very little about industrial and commercial England, valuable though he is as an occasional commentator; nor does he enable us to form the slightest idea of the comparative size and importance of towns.

If we wish to obtain an accurate picture of the English economy in the first half of the sixteenth century we must turn to the accounts and assessments of the lay subsidies of that period, above all to the comprehensive subsidies of 1523–7 and 1543–4; to the preliminary survey of 1522, in the few cases where it still survives; and, for some urban population figures, to the chantry certificates of 1545. These are the basic records that enable us to check and to amplify Leland’s descriptions, and to place the towns in the order of their importance in the national economy.

This is no place to discuss the deficiencies of the lay subsidy authorized in 1523. It is sufficient to say that it was by far the

1 An account of the origin and incidence of the subsidy is given in the Introduction to Suffolk in 1523: Subsidy Return (Suffolk Green Books, no. x. Woodbridge, 1910). For the text of the act of 1523, see Statutes of the Realm, iii. 230–41. The act did not extend to Queen Catherine, nor to the inhabi-
most comprehensive of any subsidy either before or after, that it was indeed the most all-embracing tax since the poll tax of 1377, and that, unlike that tax, it attempted a differential assessment of incomes from lands, of the capital value of personal estate, and of incomes from wages, all of which valuations bore some recognizable relationship to the true facts. It was a completely new valuation, abandoning altogether the assessments of the past which had become increasingly conventional and remote from reality. The greater part of the subsidy was gathered in two instalments in the early months of 1524 and 1525. A third instalment in 1526 fell upon persons with lands to the value of £50 a year and over, and need not be considered in any account of the towns; and a fourth instalment, gathered in 1527, fell upon all who possessed personal estate to the value of £50 and more. I have used the totals of the first, second, and fourth payments, so far as they are available, to draw up the following table (overleaf) showing the ranking, in order of taxable capacity, of the first twenty-five provincial towns, to which London has been added for the sake of comparison.

Neither Newcastle and Durham nor Chester and Carlisle were taxed in 1523. Of the economic importance of Chester, Carlisle, and Durham we can form almost no idea; that they would have appeared somewhere in the above list is just possible. The omission of Newcastle is more serious, but can be rectified with some tants of Ireland, Wales, Calais, Guernsey, and Jersey. In England it excluded the English inhabitants of the Cinque Ports and the members thereof, the counties of Northumberland, Cumberland, Westmorland, and Cheshire, the bishopric of Durham, the towns of Brighton and Westbourne, the wardens of Rochester Bridge, and the town of Ludlow.

1 There is no need to multiply examples; the treatment of Salisbury was typical enough of the new approach. In the tenth granted in 3 Henry VIII Salisbury was called upon to pay £65. 6. 10. The lay subsidy in the same year yielded £143. 16. 8, while the subsidy of 1523–7 yielded £852. 5. 7.

2 All those assessed at £40 and over in lands or goods were required to pay the first instalment of the subsidy by way of an Anticipation in the autumn of 1523, but the tax so paid is included in the accounts and assessments of 1524.

3 The figures are extracted mainly from the totals returned to the Exchequer and may be found in P.R.O., Exchequer L.T.R., Enrolled Accounts (Subsidies), E. 359/41. They have been supplemented where necessary by an examination of the particular assessments (E. 179). Very occasionally both these sources fail to produce a complete answer, which accounts for the approximate figures attached to some towns in Table I.
Table I. Tax Yield of London and 25 Leading Provincial Towns in the Subsidy of 1523–7 (to nearest pound)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Town</th>
<th>Tax Yield</th>
<th>Town</th>
<th>Tax Yield</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>London</td>
<td>£16,675</td>
<td>Lavenham</td>
<td>£402</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norwich</td>
<td>1,704</td>
<td>York</td>
<td>379</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bristol</td>
<td>1,072</td>
<td>Totnes</td>
<td>317</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coventry</td>
<td>974</td>
<td>Worcester</td>
<td>312</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exeter</td>
<td>855</td>
<td>Gloucester</td>
<td>307</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salisbury</td>
<td>852</td>
<td>Lincoln</td>
<td>298</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ipswich</td>
<td>657</td>
<td>Hereford</td>
<td>273</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lynn</td>
<td>576</td>
<td>Yarmouth</td>
<td>260</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canterbury</td>
<td>532</td>
<td>Hull</td>
<td>256</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading</td>
<td>c. 470</td>
<td>Boston</td>
<td>c. 240</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southwark</td>
<td>455</td>
<td>Southampton</td>
<td>224</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colchester</td>
<td>426</td>
<td>Hadleigh</td>
<td>c. 224</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bury St. Edmunds</td>
<td>405</td>
<td>Shrewsbury</td>
<td>c. 220</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

degree of confidence. In 1334 she stood third among the provincial towns in order of wealth, exceeded only by Bristol and York. Sixteenth-century musters, especially that for 1547, suggest that she was just about as populous as Bristol, and considerably more populous than York, Exeter, Salisbury, and Coventry.¹ There can be little doubt that had Newcastle been taxed in 1523–7 she would have emerged as not lower than fourth among the provincial towns.

The preponderance of eastern England over the rest of the country was as marked in the early sixteenth century as it had been two hundred years earlier. If we define eastern England in its widest sense, to include what the geographers call the Lowland Zone, no fewer than sixteen of the leading twenty-five towns in 1334 lay in this half of the country, the remaining nine being divided equally between the Midlands, the West, and the South.

¹ The quotas fixed in 1334 for the tenth, whenever it should be demanded, give as accurate a picture of the economic standing of the towns as we could hope for. They are conveniently gathered together in P.R.O., Exchequer K.R. Misc. Books, E. 164/7. The details of the Newcastle musters in 1539 and 1547 are given in R. Welford, History of Newcastle and Gateshead: Sixteenth Century (London, 1887), pp. 173–4, 244. There were 1,714 able-bodied men in the latter year. A conservative multiplier for arriving at the total population would be six, so that the town had rather more than 10,000 people in that year. Newcastle maintained her place as fourth among provincial towns during the seventeenth century. The number of hearths at Newcastle in 1662 was exceeded only by that at Norwich, York, and Bristol (C. A. F. Meekings, Dorset Hearth Tax Assessments, 1662–1664, Appendix III (Dorchester, 1951)).
Two hundred years later the balance was much the same: fifteen of the leading twenty-five towns still lay on the eastern side, though there had been some internal changes of place; but there was also a noticeable tilting of the economic balance towards the west in the 1520's with the rise of Exeter, Totnes, and Worcester. There had been other notable changes between the early fourteenth century and the early sixteenth. Most important of all was the greatly enhanced economic strength of London. Whereas in 1334 London had been just over three times as wealthy as the richest provincial town (Bristol), in the 1520's she was just about ten times as wealthy as Norwich, the leading provincial city, and more than fifteen times as rich as Bristol. Another remarkable change had been the emergence of Exeter and Coventry from comparative economic obscurity, and to a lesser degree of Canterbury and Reading, not to mention the two little cloth towns of Lavenham and Totnes.

In the main, the ranking of the towns according to their taxable capacity reflects also their ranking in terms of population, but there are some exceptions to this obvious rule where the presence of one or two exceptionally rich merchants inflated the wealth of the town disproportionately. We know little as yet about the population of the sixteenth-century towns, except at Coventry, where the mayor numbered the people in 1520 and made the total 6,601.1 London at this date had just about 60,000 people, possibly a little under.2 Bristol pretty certainly had between 9,500 and 10,000 people; Exeter and Salisbury round about 8,000, Worcester about 6,000, Gloucester slightly over 4,000, Shrewsbury about 4,000. York, which had had nearly 11,000 people in the late fourteenth century, now had fewer than 8,000 in its four urban wards. For Norwich—the largest provincial city in both wealth and numbers—there is a lack of direct information, but the probability is that the city contained between 12,000 and 12,500 people in 1524.3 Thus only one provincial

1 The Coventry Leet Book, ed. Mary Dormer Harris, iii. 674-5.
2 J. C. Russell, British Medieval Population, p. 298, suggests a population of 67,744 on the basis of the chantry certificates of 1545.
3 My estimates for Bristol, Exeter, Salisbury, and York are based upon the taxable population in the 1524 assessments, as compared with the known Coventry totals. The estimates for Gloucester and Worcester are based upon the chantry certificates. For Norwich, neither the chantry certificates nor the complete 1524-5 assessments survive, but I calculate (by comparison with
town in England contained more than 10,000 people, and not more than twelve or fourteen others exceeded 5,000.

A considerable number of towns, like Plymouth or Taunton, Northampton, Leeds, or Wakefield, numbered from three to four thousand people each, but the majority of active market-towns kept a consistent size with two to three hundred households each, say from 1,000 to 1,500 people in all. In nearly every county one would have found half a dozen such towns. Even smaller were a number of towns that were nevertheless considered significant enough to be incorporated during the course of the century, towns such as Banbury, Bideford, and Sutton Coldfield, with only six or seven hundred inhabitants each.

II

In certain towns one or two rich men dominated the place and gave it a standing which its numbers alone would not have justified. Coventry, Lavenham, and Totnes are cases in point. Though only two-thirds the size of Bristol in population, Coventry ranked nearly as high in taxable capacity by reason of three rich men—Richard Marler, grocer, Julian Nethermill, draper, and Henry Pysford, merchant of the staple, all of whom were much wealthier than anyone in Bristol. Marler alone, one of the three or four richest merchants in provincial England, paid nearly one-ninth of Coventry's tax; and the three together paid a trifle more than a quarter of the total subsidy of the town. The little cloth town of Bradford-on-Avon in Wiltshire was completely overshadowed by Thomas Horton, one of the largest clothiers in the south of England. He paid no less than seventy per cent of the subsidy from the borough and was assessed at ten times the figure of the next wealthiest clothier. In the much larger town of Leicester, William Wigston the younger, merchant of the staple, was a similar magnate. He paid slightly over a quarter of the total subsidy. He and his cousin, William Wigston the
elder, paid just under a third of the total subsidy between them. In the Suffolk cloth town of Lavenham, the eminent Thomas Spring III was equally dominant. He died shortly before the subsidy was levied, but the preliminary survey for it shows him to have been the richest man, other than some of the peerage, outside London. At the time of his death he was lord of twenty-six manors in eastern England, and landowner in over a hundred others. His widow and daughter were assessed together on goods to the value of £1,333.6.8, still the highest assessment of any outside London and the peerage, and his son John at Bures, described as esquire, was assessed at the same time on £200 a year from lands.1 At Lavenham the Springs paid 37 per cent of the total subsidy on goods in the town in 1524.

At Norwich, Robert Jannys, grocer, paid in subsidy practically as much as the entire city of Rochester and rather more than Richard Marler at Coventry; but in a larger and richer city he was not the same dominating figure as Marler. He paid one-fourteenth of the total subsidy, as against Marler’s ninth. Similarly, at Exeter the merchant family of Crugge, represented by a widow and her son, paid one-tenth of the entire subsidy from the city in 1524.

In contrast to Norwich, Coventry, and Exeter, neither Bristol nor Ipswich contained any over-mighty merchant family. At Ipswich the highest individual assessment was £300, at Bristol only £240. William Canynges, the most eminent provincial merchant of his age, had died fifty years earlier and his vast business had dissolved. Bristol had not collapsed or even gone into a decline as a result, because its economy was too broadly based; but in a lesser town the disappearance of a single dominating business or family, such as the removal of the Wigstons from Leicester, might have a serious effect upon the whole community, above all in a time of economic and political changes when there were new opportunities waiting to be seized by energetic or visionary men.

1 Beatrice McClenaghan, The Springs of Lavenham and the Suffolk cloth trade in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (Ipswich, 1924), passim, for the possessions of Thomas Spring III. The Spring tax-assessments of 1524 will be found in Suffolk in 1524, pp. 19, 24, 405. A transcript of the 1522 survey for Babergh hundred in Suffolk, which includes Lavenham, is to be found in the Ipswich public library.
The disappearance of the Canynges from Bristol illustrates, indeed, a general feature of the social and economic history of English towns, and that was the remarkable constancy with which successful urban families came and went in a matter of three generations at the most. No merchant patrician class ever formed in the English towns. Recruited largely from the younger sons of the free peasantry and the minor gentry of the adjacent countryside, the successful merchants returned to the land within a hundred years—usually much less—and their businesses dissolved into farms and fields, crops and stock. For a time, in the second and third generations, they might own a not inconsiderable amount of urban property, but there seems to have been no attempt to retain this at any time as a long-term investment.

It is sometimes said, and often implied, that the merchant-class was recruited largely from among landless men, often hardly better than vagabonds. Pirenne cites the remarkable case of Godric of Finchale, born of peasant stock in Lincolnshire towards the end of the eleventh century, who began his career as a beachcomber, made a lucky haul, started a pedlar's pack, and thereafter never looked back. Such a start may have been commoner in the beginnings of mercantile society, but by the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries the successful merchant was far more likely to have started with a little property of his own, or at least with the financial and moral support of a franklin family behind him. Hooker's Commonplace Book at Exeter gives us potted biographies of all the sixteenth-century mayors, who were, with very few exceptions, merchants by calling. They had, again with few exceptions, come into the city from outside, some from far afield, from Wales, Cheshire, Suffolk, and Worcestershire, others from the adjoining counties of Somerset and Dorset, and most from the Devonshire countryside. Of the Devonians who rose to be mayors of Exeter, the Periams, Hursts, Staplehills, Sparways and Peters, among others, were all members of franklin

1 H. Pirenne, Economic and Social History of Modern Europe, pp. 47, 49, 163, 164. At Swaffham in western Norfolk there is a somewhat similar story about one John Chapman, a fifteenth-century merchant, who is supposed to have begun his successful career as a pedlar after finding (directed by a dream) a useful cache of goods. Such stories are not uncommon in other countries, and may have a considerable basis of truth, but they serve to show the rarity of the vagabond-type becoming successful merchants rather than the opposite.
families with pedigrees and lands going back two or three hundred years; and those who came in from other counties were often similarly descended, like Richard Martyn (mayor in 1533), who was the second son of Sir Richard Martyn of Athelhampton in Dorset. It is significant that of all the mayors described by Hooker only one—Robert Tucker, mayor in 1543—is described as ‘of mean parentage’.1

At Leicester, the substantial merchant-family of Wigston had originated in the neighbouring village whence they took their name, and where they had a pedigree and deeds going back well into the twelfth century. They had migrated to Leicester in the 1340's, but do not seem to have established themselves as considerable merchants until about a hundred years later. At Coventry, the immediate origin of the Marlers, who first appear in the town in the 1460's, is uncertain, but they are found as small landowners (perhaps of the peasant class) not many miles from Coventry in the early fourteenth century. London, too, recruited her merchant-class to a marked degree from the younger sons of small landed families in the provinces—such as the Greshams of Norfolk, the Skevingtons of Leicestershire, the Cloptons of Warwickshire, and so on. They may have been landless in strict truth, but it was a considerable help to have behind one several hundred paternal acres and doubtless some liquid capital. In London and in the provincial towns the merchant-class was constantly changing in composition, losing its successful members to the landed class and recruiting from the same class, though possibly from a lower level.

Once arrived in town, three generations usually sufficed to see the end of the commercial or industrial phase. There were three generations of Springs at Lavenham (c. 1400–1523), three merchant-generations of Canynges at Bristol (c. 1369–1474), three of the Marlers at Coventry (1469–1540), three of the Wigstons at Leicester (c. 1430–1536). It was rare for a successful merchant family to stay in town beyond the third generation: often they had left for a substantial country estate within two generations. This rapid extinction might be no matter for surprise in families that had achieved a comfortable fortune, but even among smaller and more humdrum businesses it seems to have been quite exceptional to go beyond the third generation. An examination

1 Exeter city records, Book 51, passim.
of the Freemen's Register at Leicester, a great catalogue of the obscure, shows us that in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries it was rare for any Leicester business to last a hundred years. The exceptions can certainly be counted on the fingers of one hand. Here it is not a matter of a large mercantile business being transmuted into lands, but of some more prosaic death from natural causes. The longevity of urban families and businesses would well repay further enquiry. Even below the ranks of the outstandingly successful, urban businesses were constantly changing in scope and personnel; and so consequently were town populations as a whole. The continual mobility of both urban and rural populations in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and probably at an earlier period also, is very evident. Whether or not the labouring class was as mobile as the remainder of the population is another matter: the records of this class are particularly meagre. The poor have no annals, not even a tax assessment, that sad passport to immortality.

Urban property has been curiously little studied by economic and social historians in this country. In many continental cities, such as Arras, Barcelona, and Lübeck, 'the upper layers of urban society in the Middle Ages sprang from the families which happened to own land in the towns in the early stages of their history, and got rich as the rents and land values of town property rose,' but the history of this class is not everywhere so simple and uniform. English towns have yet to be studied in this way, but even in the early sixteenth century it would be difficult to assert that urban incomes were derived to any noticeable extent from urban property, and equally hard to detect any sustained interest in urban property as an investment. If we may take the examples of the richest merchants in Bristol, Coventry, and Exeter as a guide in this uncharted field, they do not suggest any marked, certainly not a prolonged, interest in such investment. It is true that William Canynges, at the time of his death in 1474, had accumulated fifty-five urban messuages among much other property, but there is no indication that his heirs kept this accumulation together. At Exeter, William Crugge, starting

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as a newcomer, had, at the time of his death in 1520, acquired nineteen houses in the city, which yielded £20 a year clear, but his son and heir had got rid of them all within a dozen years, while retaining most if not all the rural property. At Coventry, Richard Marler owned fifty houses in 1522, producing the respectable income of £41.3.8 a year. A good deal of this was cottage property, let at rents of four to eight shillings a year, which suggests a deliberate investment policy, but again the accumulation was not kept together in the next generation.\footnote{For Canynges's property see The Antiquities of Bristol in the middle centuries, ed. James Dallaway (Bristol, 1834), p. 192. For the Crugge property there are the wills and inquisitions post mortem of William Crugge and John Crugge in Somerset House and the P.R.O. respectively. For Marler there is the survey of 1522 among the Coventry archives (Accounts Various, 18).}

The lack of any widespread or sustained interest in urban property investment is revealed again when the monastic property within the city of Exeter was thrown on to the market from 1539 onwards. Most of the leading citizens were but mildly interested in the acquisition of the house-property, and then only as potential warehouses rather than as residences. There is, however, some clear investment by a few in the middle years of the century, when five wealthy merchants bought ex-monastic house property to the tune of over a hundred pounds apiece. One merchant laid out no less than £309.16.10 for property confined almost entirely to one parish and to tenements held at will.\footnote{Joyce Youings, 'The City of Exeter and the Property of the Dissolved Monasteries', Trans. Devonshire Assoc. lxxxiv (1952), 131, 139–40.} Interest in urban property as an investment quickened noticeably later in the century, stimulated by the rapid growth of population, above all in the towns, in the last quarter of the century, and by the housing problems which this created. We must remember, too, that the comparative lack of interest in this field of investment in towns like Bristol, Exeter, and Coventry in the late fifteenth century and the early sixteenth may well have arisen from the greater profitability of external and internal trading in particularly active towns. The house-property market in such towns was extremely sluggish and uninviting, if we may judge by Norwich, where the act of 1534 for the re-edifying of void grounds within the city recites that a great number of houses had been destroyed in a fire twenty-six years earlier and
had not yet been rebuilt. It would be interesting to discover in what kinds of towns, and among what kinds of people, urban property investment first becomes apparent to a noticeable degree. Stow has a number of references to building activity by Elizabethan merchants and shipwrights on the edge of London, particularly on the eastern side, and chiefly of cottage property for the swarming labouring population; and there are hints of building activity in the provinces about the same time.¹

III

When we turn to consider the occupations of English townspeople in the reign of Henry VIII, we are much in the dark, especially when we move away from the purely cloth towns. We know far more about the foreign trade of this country than we do of its internal economy, and more about the one great export industry at this time than about all the other industries put together. It is time we remedied this deficiency in our knowledge, and the following remarks are offered as a starting-point. They relate to a group of three Midland towns—Coventry, Northampton, and Leicester—for which the necessary information is forthcoming, and they illustrate types of urban economy other than the purely ‘cloth town’. At Coventry we are told the precise occupations of some 635 persons in the military survey of 1522; at Northampton the 1524 assessment for the subsidy gives us the occupations of 390 persons; and at Leicester the very full Freeman’s Register serves the same purpose for several hundred persons round about these years.²

We obtain a clear picture of the economy of these three towns if we list the twelve leading occupations in each:

¹ Stow’s Survey of London, ed. Henry Morley (London, 1893), pp. 375, 384, and passim. At Plymouth one of the principal merchants built a street which in 1584 was called ‘Sperkes newe streate’ and survives as New Street today. It was a middle-class street, judging by the remaining houses. At least two other streets in Elizabethan Plymouth were named after rich merchants, and the assumption is that they financed their building.

² These figures cover most of the occupied persons in these towns. I have excluded from them all such general categories as labourers, servants, and yeomen, who would, in any event, have been fairly evenly distributed among the principal crafts and trades of the town. The Coventry survey has already been noted; the Northampton assessment is in P.R.O., E. 179, 155/124.
Table II. The Leading Occupations of three Midland Towns in the early Sixteenth Century

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Coventry (1522)</th>
<th>Northampton (1524)</th>
<th>Leicester (1510-40)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Cappers 83*</td>
<td>Shoemakers 50</td>
<td>Butchers 27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Weavers 41</td>
<td>Bakers 21</td>
<td>Shoemakers 24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Shearmen 38</td>
<td>Tailors 20</td>
<td>Tailors 18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Butchers 36</td>
<td>Weavers 20</td>
<td>Mercers 16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Shoemakers 28</td>
<td>Tanners 15</td>
<td>Weavers 16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Drapers 28</td>
<td>Mercers 15</td>
<td>Bakers 15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Dyers 28</td>
<td>Butchers 14</td>
<td>Tanners 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Bakers 27</td>
<td>Glovers 13</td>
<td>Glovers 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Mercers 26</td>
<td>Fullers 12</td>
<td>Smiths 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Tailors 21</td>
<td>Drapers 9</td>
<td>Millers 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Tanners 15</td>
<td>Dyers 9</td>
<td>Barbers 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Smiths 14</td>
<td>Millers 9</td>
<td>Shearmen 7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Includes 12 hatmakers.

It should be noticed that the Leicester figures cover a period of time (admissions to the freedom) and that though the ranking of the occupations is comparable with that of the other towns, the individual totals are not.

Northampton and Leicester were towns of roughly equal size, with round about 3,000 people each in the 1520's. Coventry was rather more than twice as large, with 6,600 people. At Northampton, some 63 distinct trades are listed at this time; at Leicester about 60, but here some may have escaped the Freemen's Registers; and at Coventry there were 90 separate trades. In Elizabethan Bristol there were over a hundred distinct trades for apprentices to choose from. If we group this diversity of occupations into certain well-defined classes of trades, some profitable conclusions emerge. Coventry was primarily a textile town, though much less so than Lavenham in Suffolk, and of the three was the most markedly industrial in character. Northampton was less industrial in character, but showed a decided bent towards specialization in the leather trades. Leicester had no marked industrial character, but a leaning towards the leather and allied trades was becoming evident by the first quarter of the sixteenth century.

When we consider the clothing trades, the food and drink trades, and the building trades, three groups which necessarily

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bulked large in any town economy, we observe an interesting similarity between the three towns which suggests a conclusion worthy of general application. The wholesale and retail clothing trades in each provided work for 14 to 15 per cent of the occupied population; the food and drink trades for 15 to 21 per cent; and the building trades for 4 to 7½ per cent. These figures tend to suggest that in any English provincial town with the rudiments of an urban character, some 35 to 40 per cent of the population were employed in three fundamental groups of trades. Even in a more specialist textile town like Coventry, the proportion occupied in these trades is still as high as one-third. With results of this kind, we are beginning to get away from the stock picture of the cloth town and to appreciate something of the variety of urban economies.

Table III. The Trades of three Midland Towns (classified as percentages of all occupations)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trades</th>
<th>Coventry</th>
<th>Northampton</th>
<th>Leicester</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clothing</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food and Drink</td>
<td>15½</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building</td>
<td>4½</td>
<td>7½</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leather (and allied)</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Textile</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>13½</td>
<td>8½</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metal</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentages of all occupations</td>
<td>85½</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>70½</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Minor, yet still significant, differences also reveal themselves in these towns, such as the marked leaning of Coventry towards the metal trades, which were roughly twice as important here as in the other two towns. Besides the universal smiths and pewterers, Coventry had girdlers, wiredrawers, nailers, cutlers,

1 Any system of classification is open to detailed objections, but in distinguishing the textile trades from the wholesale and retail clothing trades I have put the cappers and hatters of Coventry under textiles rather than clothing, as the trade was clearly producing mainly for an external market; and I have classified the shoemakers under leather and allied trades rather than clothing for the same reason.
bladesmiths and locksmiths, spurriers, and a spoon-maker. At Northampton, the building trades were appreciably more important than at Coventry and Leicester, the difference being due mainly to the greater number of masons and stone-slaters (helliers) in a town on the great belt of Jurassic building stone. It is curious to note, in passing, that timber building was replacing stone building in the town by the second quarter of the sixteenth century: Leland observes that all the old building is of stone, all the new of timber. Yet elsewhere it is stone building which replaces timber during the sixteenth century, as in the Cotswolds and in north Yorkshire for example. Is there some difference in the costs of town and country building at this date which would account for this apparent anomaly?

At Leicester the higher proportion of occupied persons in the food and drink trades is accounted for almost entirely by the particularly large number of butchers. Like the metal-workers of Coventry, the number of Leicester butchers suggests the development of a considerable market beyond the purely local. Unless the Leicester butchers were supplying meat to the London market, of which there is yet no evidence, they must have been more interested in providing hides for the local tanners than meat for the townspeople.

The size of local markets, and the magnitude of internal trade generally, is one of the more obscure aspects of English economic history. Unlike foreign trade, with its copious customs accounts and, later, port books, internal trade is documented only intermittently, as for example in lawsuits and occasionally in travellers' notebooks. But that it was vastly important even in the early sixteenth century is borne in upon one by a study of Leland's pages, in which he repeatedly singles out towns with markets above the ordinary level. In Northamptonshire, for example, Oundle was a particularly good market, and Wellingborough was 'a good, quik market toune'. Berkhamstead is described as one of the best market-towns in Hertfordshire; Kingston was the best market-town in all Surrey. In the north, Manchester, with its two fair market-places, was the 'best buildid, quikkest, and most populus tounne of al Lancestreshire'—though in fact it had only about fifteen hundred people in the 1520's—and Leeds is described as having a more lively market than Bradford. Wakefield was better than either—so well served with meat and fish
and all other victuals that an honest man could get a good meal for twopence.

Darlington and Wolverhampton were also specially commended by Leland as good market-towns. Swaffham is described as ‘one of the quikkest markettes of al Northfolk. . . . It stondith much by handy crafte men, and byers of grayne’—an unusually verbose entry for Leland which suggests that the occupational structure of Swaffham would be particularly interesting could we but unravel it.¹ Luton is noted as a specially good market for barley. The high importance of the weekly market in the life of most English towns is revealed, too, when the decay of a whole town, like Leominster, is attributed by Leland to the removal of the market; or when the unquestionable decay of Coventry by the middle of the sixteenth century is attributed by Dugdale to the dissolution of the religious houses of the town, which had attracted a great concourse of people to the town for the supply of their material needs.²

The daily importance of shops and handicrafts is even more difficult to assess, but it is strongly suggested by the foregoing analysis of the three Midland towns, and indeed by a walk today around any small, non-industrial country-town corresponding in size with its counterpart in Tudor England. We tend, I think, to over-emphasize the exceptional features of economic life because the records are more voluminous in these fields. Economic historians at any rate should pay more attention to commonplace things—to the laundry bills, if you like, which H. A. L. Fisher so much despised—or at least to the humdrum tax-assessments. The decline of the international fair in England is only one aspect of commercial history. Internal fairs may be less spectacular, but

¹ The assessments for the subsidy at Swaffham do not give occupations (it is rare for these assessments to do so), and we know nothing more than Leland tells us.

² Dugdale, in his Antiquities of Warwickshire (1656), observes that the city authorities purchased all the monastic lands in and near Coventry, and also all the lands of the gilds and chanctries, but all this enterprise did ‘not balance the Loss this City sustained by the Ruine of that great and famous Monastery, and other the Religious Houses. . . . For to so low an Ebbe did their Trading soon after grow, for want of such Concours of People that numerously resorted thither before that fatal Dissolution, that many thousands of the Inhabitants to seek better Livelyhoods, were constrain’d to forsake the City.’ The simultaneous decay of the cap and cloth trades was another important factor in Coventry’s decline in these years.
none the less important economically. Daily shops and weekly markets, consumer goods and services, servants and labourers, are no doubt all very dull to contemplate, but they are nearer to the truth of past urban economies than thoughtless clichés about cloth, wool, and sheep.

We may put the comprehensive tax-assessment of 1524 to yet another use, and that is to ascertain the distribution of wealth in urban communities. It is possible, by comparing the preliminary survey—allegedly made for military purposes in 1522—with the actual assessment of 1524, to discover what proportion of the town populations escaped the subsidy. At Coventry, for example, no fewer than half the population (699 out of 1395 persons) were written off in 1522 as worth nothing in worldly goods. The subsequent tax-assessment managed to rope in a few of them and to extract from each the minimum sum of fourpence; but even so some 48½ per cent of the population still escaped this sweeping subsidy. At Exeter, the only other sizable town for which we have the relevant figures, the nil assessments amount to about 36½ per cent of the total population. The Exeter tax-collectors dug a little deeper into the pockets of the poor. At Leicester it has been calculated, from other records, that about one-third of the adult population escaped the net of the 1524 subsidy on the ground of poverty.1 Thus in the larger towns of England at this date we may say that fully a third of the population—and considerably more in places—were so poor that they paid neither on the minimum level of wages nor the minimum level of goods. Poor widows were a large element in this propertyless class, as the Coventry survey shows: they were indeed the largest single class in that town.

Few wage-earners escaped the subsidy, and though the assessments vary from town to town in the carefulness of their definitions, we are able to ascertain the size of the urban wage-earning class with some degree of accuracy. When we discover that at Exeter those assessed on wages amount to 47 per cent of the taxable population, at Salisbury to 48 per cent, at Lavenham to

1 The Exeter survey of 1522 is in the city archives (Misc. Book, 156a). It does not give occupations as the Coventry survey does, and is not so informative in other respects. The Leicester estimate is given by D. Charman ‘Wealth and Trade in Leicester in the Early Sixteenth Century’, Trans. Leics. Arch. Soc., xxv (1949), 84.
50 per cent, and at Dorchester to 43 per cent, we may feel some confidence in saying that in the larger English towns just about one-half of the taxable population belonged to the wage-earning class, most of them paying the minimum rate to the subsidy. If to these we add the lowest class of all, those without any recognizable means of subsistence, fully two-thirds of the urban population in the 1520’s lived below or very near the poverty-line, constituting an ever-present menace to the community in years of high food-prices or bad trade. The great mass of the wage-earning class clearly had no reserves at all with which to meet a bad spell.

These formed the broad base of the social pyramid in any given town. Roughly one-third of the population owned no property at all beyond the clothes they stood up in, the tools of their trade, and a few sticks of furniture: they lived at the level of Italian hill-peasants today. Another third of the population depended wholly or very largely on wages, and could exist with some degree of anxiety so long as work was regular and harvests about normal. Above this wide base, the pyramid rose through a middle-class of prosperous artificers, merchants, and professional men, to a needle-like point. Even in a semi-country town like Leicester, with no striking industrial development, we find that six families owned one-third of the taxable wealth of the town between them, and twenty-five persons, or 6 per cent of the taxable population, owned nearly three-fifths.

At Coventry and Exeter the facts are much the same. In the former, 2 per cent of the taxable population owned no less than 45 per cent of the taxable wealth, and 7 per cent owned just under two-thirds. At Exeter, too, about 7 per cent of the taxable population owned nearly two-thirds of the taxable wealth. At the other end of the social scale, two-thirds of the taxable population at Exeter paid the minimum rate to the subsidy. Inequality in the distribution of worldly goods was already deeply rooted and strongly developed in English urban communities by the early sixteenth century, and marriage and inheritance had become powerful factors in the continuance and aggravation of this massive inequality. It is true that rich merchants died and no one might take their outstanding place in the town; that big businesses

1 For Leicester, see Charman, op. cit., 80–1. The figures for Coventry and Exeter are calculated from the 1524 subsidy assessments in the P.R.O.
dissolved and passed away in the form of lands into non-urban hands; that the topmost point of the pyramid was periodically broken off. But this was only a temporary alleviation of the social tension. The oligarchy at the top of the social structure remained small and exclusive, and the wide and solid base of the pyramid did not grow any less.

The problem of poverty was one of the acutest of all domestic problems for the later Tudors, as the price-revolution took its course from the 1540’s onwards. It was above all an urban problem, and it had little or nothing to do with the dissolution of the monasteries and the end of monastic alms-giving. The poor as a class had a far longer history, and there was already a tendency for them to be segregated within certain districts. Though there was still some mixture of social classes in the sixteenth-century towns, outside the one or two principal streets which had long been the preserve of the well-to-do, we find undoubted evidence also of the increasing separation of the poor in the extra-mural suburbs, and in back lanes and side-streets within the walled area. Certain parishes in old cities like York and Exeter were almost entirely populated by the labouring class in the 1520’s, and other parishes were equally reserved for the plutocracy. Though still medieval in so many ways, the provincial towns of the early sixteenth century had some markedly modern characteristics, not least in the lineaments of their social structure.