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VOLUME II
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EDITED BY
PETER CLARK
Contents

List of plates page x
List of maps xii
List of figures xiv
List of tables xv
List of contributors xvii
Preface by the General Editor xix
Acknowledgements xxiv
List of abbreviations xxvi

1 INTRODUCTION 1
Peter Clark

PART I AREA SURVEYS 1540–1840

INTRODUCTION 27
Peter Clark

2 ENGLAND 31
(a) EAST ANGLIA
Penelope J. Corfield
(b) SOUTH-EAST 49
C.W. Chalklin
(c) SOUTH-WEST 67
Jonathan Barry
(d) MIDLANDS 93
Alan Dyer
(e) NORTH 111
John K. Walton
## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Pages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Wales</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Philip Jenkins</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Scotland</td>
<td>151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>T. M. Devine</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>PART II URBAN THEMES AND TYPES 1540–1700</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Towns in an Agrarian Economy 1540–1700</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Paul Glennie and Ian Whyte</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Population and Disease, Estrangement and Belonging 1540–1700</td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>P. Griffiths, J. Landers, M. Pelling and R. Tyson</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Politics and Government 1540–1700</td>
<td>235</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ian A. Archer</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Reformation and Culture 1540–1700</td>
<td>263</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Vanessa Harding</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>The Urban Landscape 1540–1700</td>
<td>289</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Michael Reed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>London 1540–1700</td>
<td>315</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jeremy Boulton</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Great and Good Towns 1540–1700</td>
<td>347</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Paul Slack</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Ports 1540–1700</td>
<td>377</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>David Harris Sacks and Michael Lynch</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Small Market Towns 1540–1700</td>
<td>425</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Alan Dyer</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>PART III URBAN THEMES AND TYPES 1700–1840</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Urban Growth and Economic Change: from the Late Seventeenth Century to 1841</td>
<td>453</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>John Langton</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

viii
# Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Authors</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Population and Society 1700–1840</td>
<td>Pamela Sharpe</td>
<td>491</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Politics and Government 1700–1840</td>
<td>Joanna Innes and Nicholas Rogers</td>
<td>529</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Culture and Leisure 1700–1840</td>
<td>Peter Clark and R.A. Houston</td>
<td>575</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>The Transformation of Urban Space 1700–1840</td>
<td>Michael Reed</td>
<td>615</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>London 1700–1840</td>
<td>Leonard Schwarz</td>
<td>641</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Regional and County Centres 1700–1840</td>
<td>Joyce Ellis</td>
<td>673</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Ports 1700–1840</td>
<td>Gordon Jackson</td>
<td>705</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Small Towns 1700–1840</td>
<td>Peter Clark</td>
<td>733</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Health and Leisure Resorts 1700–1840</td>
<td>Peter Borsay</td>
<td>775</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Industrialising Towns 1700–1840</td>
<td>Barrie Trinder</td>
<td>805</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>Peter Clark</td>
<td>831</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Select bibliography 837
Index 860
Plates

Between pages 164 and 165
1 London: St Paul’s and the Strand c. 1559
2 Norwich: William Smith’s map 1588
3 Bath: John Speed’s map 1611
4 Prospect of Haddington, Scotland, 1693
5 Cockenzie and Port Seton, Scotland, 1688
6 Heriot’s Hospital, Edinburgh
7 Procession in London 1638
8 Election in the Guildhall, Oxford, 1687
9 A Merchant House, Shrewsbury, c. 1575
10 Musselburgh Tollbooth, Scotland, 1590
11 The Banqueting House, Whitehall, London, 1622

Between pages 640 and 641
12 Porcelain factory at Worcester 1752
13 London dockside c. 1757
14 Billingsgate market women 1810
15 Bristol shopping arcade 1825
16 Street poor by William Hogarth 1738
17 Common Council Chamber, Guildhall, London, c. 1809
18 Bedford elections 1832
19 Assembly at Bagnigge Wells, Finsbury, London, c. 1770
20 Club life: the Lumber Troop 1783
21 St George’s church, Hanover Square, London, 1721–1724
22 Domestic housing in Georgian Stamford
23 Moray Place, New Town, Edinburgh, 1820s
24 Birmingham Town Hall, 1830s
25 Borough High Street, Southwark, c. 1729
List of plates

26 Angel Hill, Bury St Edmunds, 1774
27 A prospect of Bridgnorth 1732
28 A south-west prospect of Bath 1757
29 Scarborough seaside, early nineteenth century
30 Early industrial Bradford
31 Arrival of the railway at Leicester c. 1840
Maps

2.1 Towns in East Anglia c. 1670 page 35
2.2 Towns in East Anglia 1841 43
2.3 Towns in the South-East c. 1670 58
2.4 Towns in the South-East 1841 62
2.5 Towns in the South-West c. 1670 76
2.6 Towns in the South-West 1841 77
2.7 Towns in the Midlands c. 1670 97
2.8 Towns in the Midlands 1841 100
2.9 Towns in the North 1540–1840 113
3.1 Towns in Wales 1550 135
3.2 Towns in Wales 1841 144
4.1 Principal towns in Scotland 152
5.1 Wheat prices in England and Wales December 1698 to January 1699 (shillings per quarter) 179
5.2 Prosecuted attenders at two nonconformist meetings, 1684 186
5.3 Customers of an Ambleside shop c. 1670 191
13.1 Market towns of England and Wales (including large towns) 1600–1700 426
14.1 Towns and urbanisation in the seventeenth century 464
14.2 The biggest fifty towns in 1801 and the fastest growing fifty towns from the seventeenth century to 1801 469
14.3 The biggest fifty towns in 1841 and the fastest growing fifty towns 1801–1841 470
14.4 Regional urban populations in 1801 and their growth from the seventeenth century to 1801, and counties with higher than average levels of urbanisation in 1801 484
14.5 Regional urban populations in 1841 and their growth 1801–1841, xii
and counties with higher than average levels of urbanisation in 1841.

19.1 Metropolitan parishes outside the City of London 1763

19.2 Rich and poor in the metropolis: mean household rent per annum 1693–1694

19.3 Rich and poor in the metropolis: capital value of property and stock per (residential) hectare 1693–1694

22.1 Distribution of freemason lodges in smaller English towns c. 1800
Figures

16.1 Improvement acts per parliamentary session 1700–1840 by region

16.2 Urban communities, corporate forms, improvement acts and parliamentary representation by region

22.1 English small towns: demographic surpluses: ten year averages by region (excluding North and North-West) 1700–1837

22.2 English small towns: baptisms: ten-year averages by region (excluding North and North-West) 1700–1837

22.3 English small towns: burials: ten-year averages by region (excluding North and North-West) 1700–1837

22.4 English small towns: surpluses: ten-year averages by population band 1700–1837

22.5 English small towns: burials: ten-year averages by population band 1700–1837
Tables

2.1 Urban East Anglia in the 1670s ................................. page 36
2.2 Urban East Anglia 1670s–1841 ............................... 42
2.3 Leading East Anglian towns (pop. 3,000 +) 1700–1841 .... 46
2.4 Tonnage of shipping of south-eastern ports in 1571–2 ........ 54
2.5 The population of leading seaside resorts in the South-East in 1801 and 1841 ..................................................... 64
2.6 Urbanisation in the South-West of England by county in 1660, 1801 and 1841 ..................................................... 68
2.7 Population in towns of varied sizes in the South-West of England in 1660, 1801 and 1841 ............................................. 72
2.8 Market towns in the South-West of England c. 1600–1840 .... 85
10.1 European cities with 75,000 + inhabitants 1550–1700 ........ 316
11.1 The largest English provincial towns 1524–5 and 1700 ...... 352
11.2 Housing and status from the hearth taxes: English provincial towns and Edinburgh ................................................. 360
11.3 Some urban services 1540–1700 ................................. 367
12.1 Populations of the principal English towns and ports c. 1520–1700 ............................................................. 384
12.2 Members and creeks of English and Welsh ‘headports’ 1565–1700 ............................................................. 388
12.3 Percentages of national taxation levied on Scottish burghs 1587 ............................................................. 415
12.4 Populations of larger Scottish towns and ports 1691 ........ 419
13.1 Density of distribution of markets by English and Welsh counties (excluding Middlesex, and including larger towns) ..... 430
13.2 Changes in market numbers (England and Wales) ............ 433
14.1 Numbers and populations of British towns in different size categories in the seventeenth century .................... 463
14.2 The number of towns in Britain from the late seventeenth to the early twentieth century .................... 466

xv
List of tables

14.3 Numbers and populations of British towns in different size categories in 1801 and 1841 471
14.4 Populations, ranks and growth of the largest twenty British towns in the seventeenth century, 1801 and 1841 473
14.5 Average annual rates of growth of fifty-five English county capitals and cathedral towns, by region 478
14.6 Regions with the five highest and five lowest annual average percentage urban growth 480
16.1 Contested general elections in boroughs and counties 1701–1831 559
16.2 Extra-parliamentary agitations 1769–95 564
19.1 Estimated figures for London’s population 1700–1851 650
19.2 Crude vital rates in London 1730–1830 651
20.1 The largest provincial towns c. 1700–1841 679
20.2 Trades and professions in regional centres 685
21.1 Tonnage of shipping entering and clearing the major ports in foreign trade, sample years 1716–1772 and 1790–1841 709
21.2 Number and tonnage of vessels registered at major shipowning ports 1791 and 1841 719
22.1 Population distribution of English small towns c. 1670 (percentages) 738
22.2 Population distribution of English small towns c. 1811 (percentages) 740
22.3 Population distribution of English small towns c. 1851 (percentages) 741
22.4 Population distribution of Scottish small towns c. 1811 (percentages) 742
22.5 Population distribution of Scottish small towns c. 1851 (percentages) 742
22.6 Multi-functional specialisms in English small towns c. 1673 749
22.7 Primary functions of English small towns in the 1790s 759
22.8 Primary functions of English small towns c. 1850 761
22.9 Occupations in small towns in East Anglia and the West Midlands c. 1830 762
In comparison to France, the Low Countries or northern Italy, the pattern of British towns for much of the early modern period was remarkably polarised. Apart from London, there were no large cities and few middle-rank centres of importance, rather a multitude of very small market centres. For England and Wales the urban hierarchy retained into the eighteenth century the thumb-print of its medieval past. London’s ancient primacy as the seat of government and the country’s most important port was consolidated, as the capital’s population probably quadrupled in the sixteenth century (to 200,000 in 1600), and then more than quadrupled again over the next two hundred years. During the Tudor and Stuart period it was supported on the English stage by a cast of forty or so ‘great and good’ towns (see Chapter 11), major provincial towns but all with populations of under 10,000 in the 1520s and under about 30,000 inhabitants in 1700. Of these, only Newcastle, Bristol, Exeter, Norwich and York could claim to be significant regional cities with extensive trading connections and elaborate civic privileges, and they steadily confirmed their positions as provincial capitals. Most of the rest, places like Gloucester, Leicester or Lincoln, were incorporated shire towns supported by localised trades and industries, meeting the needs of the adjoining countryside. By the Georgian period many of them were profiting from the expansion of their retailing and professional activities, sometimes complemented by specialist craft activity. These regional and county towns were surrounded by several hundred minor market centres, places with fewer than 2,000 people in the sixteenth century, quite often as low as a few hundred; their economies were heavily geared towards marketing and exchange links with the countryside, though by 1700 they had begun to acquire more specialist commercial and other functions. In Wales the vast

2 See below, pp. 347 et seq.
majority of towns were in this bottom category, effectively micro-towns, and continued thus into the later Georgian period.

In sixteenth-century Scotland the traditional urban hierarchy was a miniature version of the English model. Edinburgh, with about 12,000 inhabitants in 1560, was not only the northern capital but the leading port with an important continental trade; three east coast ports (Aberdeen, Perth and Dundee) functioned as larger regional centres as well as ports; and the rest were mainly small towns, though here, unlike in England, the medieval network was considerably enlarged by the foundation of several score new baronial burghs. Urban growth was sluggish in Britain before 1700, but thereafter the pace quickened, first in England and then later in Scotland and Wales. The urban hierarchy began to fill out, with a rank size order conforming more to the picture in other urbanised regions of Europe. Provincial cities grew in size and importance. Great Atlantic ports like Liverpool and Glasgow boomed, new regional centres like Birmingham, Manchester and Leeds flourished, and there was a mounting array of specialist manufacturing, transport, leisure and naval towns.

Yet urban change was not a national process in early modern Britain, but a tessellation of local experiences. Only slowly do we see the evolution of a more integrated urban system. Orchestrating the national trend was a diversity of regional and local networks of towns, determined by geophysical factors, ancient jurisdictional arrangements, the state of agriculture, communication links and local cultural traditions (as in religious and ceremonial life). At the same time, regionalism is a fuzzy concept for Britain in this period, not least due to the long-established centralising power of the English state. English regions lacked any strong political or cultural identity. There were no regional parliaments or courts (except for the Council of the North at York prior to 1640) such as one finds in France or Spain. Contemporary references to East Anglia, the Midlands or other regions were rare before the end of the eighteenth century. Even the ancient county units often provided only a problematic focus for urban networks. After 1356 the principality of Wales was annexed to the English crown but never enjoyed major regional/national institutions, and the Welsh network of towns was generally fragmented. By contrast, Scottish towns inherited from the medieval period their own institutional framework, which not only included the division between royal and baronial burghs, but the coordinating and regulating role of the Convention of Royal Burghs. Administrative and legal differences with English towns continued despite the union of crowns in 1603 and the parliamentary union of 1707. Yet within Scotland, as Chapter 4 (and later chapters) demonstrate, there were also significant regional and sub-regional variations of considerable complexity.

Peter Clark


4 See below, pp. 158 et seq., 177 et passim.
Regions then have to be seen as fields of action, even states of mind, in early modern Britain. Many were shaped by externalities: the effect of commercial and shipping links with the continent in the case of East Anglia and the South-East; the Irish and Atlantic trades for the North and South-West. In Tudor and Stuart Wales, the small country and port towns of the central and southern shires looked for leadership to English centres like Shrewsbury and Bristol. Particularly important was the way that London’s powerful economic and cultural influence extended in this period from its home territory in the South-East to penetrate (in some measure) other English regions, Wales and even Scotland.

As the following chapters illustrate, regional diversity on the ground requires sensitive interpretation: for some areas a greater recognition of institutional aspects, for others of commercial and industrial forces or of the wide variety of sub-regional networks. None the less, for all the difficulties, a regional approach remains essential, if we are to understand the complexity of British urban change in the period. As we saw in Volume I, by the close of the middle ages the English pattern already displayed significant regional variations, including the greater density of towns in the South-East and East Anglia than in the Midlands or North, the plenitude of small boroughs in the South-West, and the relatively small size of nearly all towns in the North.\(^5\) Despite the increased integration of the British urban system during the later part of the period, one finds strong indications of greater regional differentiation, not only varying rates of urbanisation but the emergence of heavily integrated regional networks of towns in the West Midlands, central Lancashire, the West Riding, north-east and western Scotland, quite often closely associated with the advent of new regional cities.

Regional analysis also sheds light on the changing geographical balance within the urban system at this time. After the Reformation the centre of gravity was still firmly located, as during the middle ages, in the southern and eastern regions of England with their high population densities, fertile farms, river and coastal traffic, and links to the Low Countries and France. By 1840 the balance was tilting towards the uplands: the Midlands, the North, central Scotland and South Wales as industrialisation and urbanisation in those areas predominated. But such a picture may be too linear. In the early nineteenth century, some of the towns of the South-East and East Anglia fought back, diversifying into new sectors such as military and leisure activity, or developing as transport or commuting centres: in this way they demonstrated the underlying strength and robustness of the traditional urban system.

Any regional partition of England must be essentially strategic, with a choice of scenarios available. The division between the South-East, East Anglia, the Midlands, the North, and the South-West does, however, allow us to examine

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the nature of the urban networks in different parts of the country and the forces shaping their development. We can also identify the evolution of more localised networks. The studies of Scotland and Wales likewise enable both comparison with England and the English regions, and the exploration of local trends. Chapters 2 to 4 open the window on the range, depth and diversity of the British urban system, as it evolved in the three centuries after 1540. We can see the urban system at work, in harness, before we move on to study the different thematic developments and types of town in Parts II and III.

6 The English regions in Chapter 2 have been identified as follows: *East Anglia*: Cambridgeshire, Huntingdonshire, Norfolk, Suffolk; *South-East*: Bedfordshire, Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Essex, Hampshire, Hertfordshire, Kent, Middlesex, Oxonhshire, Surrey, Sussex; *South-West*: Cornwall, Devon, Dorset, Gloucestershire, Somerset, Wiltshire; *Midlands*: Derbyshire, Herefordshire, Leicestershire, Lincolnshire, Northamptonshire, Nottinghamshire, Rutland, Shropshire, Staffordshire, Warwickshire, Worcestershire; *North*: Cheshire, Cumberland, Durham, Lancashire, Northumberland, Westmorland, Yorkshire.