The three volumes of The Cambridge Urban History of Britain represent the culmination of a tremendous upsurge of research in British urban history over the past thirty years. Mobilising the combined expertise of nearly ninety historians, archaeologists and geographers from Britain, continental Europe and North America, these volumes trace the complex and diverse evolution of British towns from the earliest Anglo-Saxon settlements to the mid-twentieth century. Taken together they form a comprehensive and uniquely authoritative account of the development of the first modern urban nation. The Cambridge Urban History of Britain has been developed with the active support of the Centre for Urban History at the University of Leicester.
Advisory committee

Caroline M. Barron  Royal Holloway College, University of London
Jonathan Barry  University of Exeter
Peter Borsay  St David's College, Lampeter, University of Wales
Peter Clark  University of Leicester
Penelope Corfield  Royal Holloway College, University of London
Martin Daunton  Churchill College, University of Cambridge
Richard Dennis  University College London
Patricia Dennison  University of Edinburgh
Vanessa Harding  Birkbeck College, University of London
Gordon Jackson  University of Strathclyde
Derek Keene  Institute of Historical Research, University of London
Michael Lynch  University of Edinburgh
D. M. Palliser  University of Leeds
David Reeder  University of Leicester
Richard Rodger  University of Leicester
Gervase Rosser  St Catherine's College, University of Oxford
Paul Slack  Linacre College, University of Oxford
Richard Trainor  University of Glasgow
Sir Tony Wrigley  Corpus Christi College, University of Cambridge
THE
CAMBRIDGE
URBAN HISTORY
OF
BRITAIN

VOLUME I
600–1540

EDITED BY
D. M. PALLISER
Contents

List of plates xi
List of maps xii
List of figures xiii
List of tables xv
List of contributors xvii
Preface by the General Editor xix
Acknowledgements xxiv
List of abbreviations xxv

Part I Introductory

1 Introduction 3
   D. M. Palliser

2 The Origins of British Towns 17
   D. M. Palliser

Part II The Early Middle Ages 600–1300

3 General Survey 600–1300 27
   Grenville Astill

4 Power and Authority 600–1300 51
   James Campbell

5 Society and Population 600–1300 79
   Richard Holt
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Authors</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>THE ECONOMY OF BRITISH TOWNS 600–1300</td>
<td>Richard Britnell</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>CHURCHES, EDUCATION AND LITERACY IN TOWNS 600–1300</td>
<td>Julia Barrow</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>THE TOPOGRAPHY OF TOWNS 600–1300</td>
<td>D. M. Palliser, T. R. Slater and E. Patricia Dennison</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>LONDON FROM THE POST-ROMAN PERIOD TO 1300</td>
<td>Derek Keene</td>
<td>187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>THE LARGE TOWNS 600–1300</td>
<td>David A. Hinton</td>
<td>217</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>SMALL TOWNS 600–1270</td>
<td>John Blair</td>
<td>245</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>PART III THE LATER MIDDLE AGES 1300–1540</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>GENERAL SURVEY 1300–1540</td>
<td>Barrie Dobson</td>
<td>273</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>GOVERNMENT, POWER AND AUTHORITY 1300–1540</td>
<td>S. H. Rigby and Elizabeth Ewan</td>
<td>291</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>THE ECONOMY OF BRITISH TOWNS 1300–1540</td>
<td>Richard Britnell</td>
<td>313</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>URBAN CULTURE AND THE CHURCH 1300–1540</td>
<td>Gervase Rosser, with Scottish material by E. Patricia Dennison</td>
<td>335</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT 1300–1540</td>
<td>John Schofield and Geoffrey Stell</td>
<td>371</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>LONDON 1300–1540</td>
<td>Caroline M. Baron</td>
<td>395</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>THE GREATER TOWNS 1300–1540</td>
<td>Jennifer Kermode</td>
<td>441</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Contents

19 **PORT TOWNS**
(a) **ENGLAND AND WALES 1300–1540**
   Maryanne Kowaleski
(b) **SCOTLAND 1300–1540**
   David Ditchburn

20 **SMALL TOWNS 1270–1540**
   Christopher Dyer

**PART IV REGIONAL SURVEYS**

21 **REGIONAL INTRODUCTION (ENGLAND AND WALES)**
   Derek Keene and D. M. Palliser

22 (a) **THE SOUTH-EAST OF ENGLAND**
   Derek Keene
(b) **THE SOUTH-WEST OF ENGLAND**
   T. R. Slater
(c) **THE MIDLANDS**
   Christopher Dyer and T. R. Slater
(d) **EAST ANGLIA**
   Bärbel Brodt
(e) **NORTHERN TOWNS**
   Jennifer Kermode
(f) **WALES AND THE MARCHES**
   Ralph A. Griffiths

23 **SCOTLAND**
   E. Patricia Dennison and Grant G. Simpson

**PART V CONCLUSION**

24 **CONCLUSION**
   D. M. Palliser

**APPENDIX: RANKING LISTS OF ENGLISH MEDIEVAL TOWNS**

Alan Dyer
Introduction

1a Pre-Conquest towns: area within fortifications of Anglo-Saxon

bars

ix
Contents

1b Pre-Conquest towns: number of surviving coins from each mint 973–1066 750
2 Ranking of Domesday towns 1086 752
3 Ranking of towns in farms, tallages and aids 1154–1312 754
4 Ranking of towns by taxable wealth: the subsidy of 1334 755
5 Ranking of towns by taxpaying population: the 1377 poll tax 758
6 Ranking of towns by taxpaying population: subsidy of 1524–1525 761
7 Ranking of towns by taxable wealth: the subsidy of 1524–1525 765
Ranking summary of the more important towns mentioned in Appendices 768

Select bibliography 771
Index 789
Plates

Between pages 537 and 538
1 The seal of the town of Oxford 1191
2 The mace of the town of Ilchester, early thirteenth century
3 London, Westminster and Southwark in the mid-sixteenth century
4 Burgh seal of Dunfermline
5 Southampton: the Bargate
6 Bristol: fifteenth-century plan of the town at the time of its foundation
7 Holy Trinity church, Hull
8 Pilgrim badge of St Osmund
9 Royston Cave (Herts.): carvings of saints
10 Stratford-on-Avon: the guildhall, chapel and almshouses
11 Alabaster head of St John the Baptist
12 Merchants’ marks, Dunfermline
13 Toy soldier on horseback (c. 1300)
14 Micklegate Bar, York, in 1777
15 Part of the London waterfront c. 1540
16 A reconstruction of the London Guildhall
17 Statues from the Guildhall porch, London
18 Mercat cross, Banff
19 Survey of property in Mincing Lane and Fenchurch Street, London, 1612
20 A London alderman of the fifteenth century
21 Exeter Cathedral Close c. 1590 from the manuscript of John Hooker
22 Aerial view of Pembroke
23 Aerial view of Caernarfon
24 Bird’s eye view of St Andrews, c. 1580
25 Fifteenth-century view of Stirling
Maps

2.1 The towns of Roman Britain  page 20
3.1 The more important towns in 1086  43
4.1 The Midland counties and county towns in relation to rivers  54
7.1 The four main orders of friars in British towns  146
11.1 Origins and hierarchies of towns in the English South Midlands  269
19.1 Customs headports and jurisdictions in the fifteenth century  473
20.1 Density of small towns in England and Wales 1270–1540  509
20.2 The hinterland of Hedon (Yorks.)  519
20.3 The hinterland of Andover (Hants.)  520
22.1 The South-East of England and its principal towns during the later middle ages  546
22.2 Towns of South-East England by date of first evidence of urban status c. 900–1550  547
22.3 Affiliation of borough customs up to 1256  566
22.4 Towns of South-East England c. 1300 according to their significance as urban centres  567
22.5 Principal English towns 1377  571
22.6 Urban potential in England 1377  578
22.7 Residences of debtors to Londoners, c. 1400  579
22.8 Towns in the South-West of England  584
22.9 Towns in the English Midlands  610
22.10 Towns in East Anglia  640
22.11 Towns in northern England  658
22.12 Towns in Wales and the Marches  682
23.1 Towns in Scotland  717
23.2 Scottish burghs before the Reformation  726
### Figures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>Later Saxon Gloucester and Exeter</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>Later Saxon Colchester and Chichester</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>The churches and graveyards of twelfth-century Gloucester</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>The churches and graveyards of medieval Chester</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>The churches, parishes and graveyards of medieval Hereford</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>The development of Dundee, eleventh, thirteenth and fifteenth centuries</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>Atherstone: a single-street planned town</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>Plan analysis of Bridgnorth (Shropshire)</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>Plan analysis of Stratford-on-Avon</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>The ecclesiastical precincts of York</td>
<td>179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>London in the seventh, eighth and ninth centuries</td>
<td>189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>The City of London c. 1300</td>
<td>193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.1</td>
<td>The four major <em>wic</em> sites: London, York, Ipswich and Southampton</td>
<td>219</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>Hereford: the development of part of the western defences</td>
<td>223</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>Oxford: the city’s development c. 950–1350</td>
<td>224</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>Winchester in the mid-twelfth century</td>
<td>237</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>Bristol: plan and foreshore development</td>
<td>239</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.6</td>
<td>Salisbury, c. 1300</td>
<td>242</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>Ecclesiastical nuclei and urban growth in early medieval Britain and Ireland: six examples</td>
<td>254</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.2</td>
<td>Plan of Steyning (Sussex): an example of a proto-town around a minster</td>
<td>257</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>Twelfth-century planned towns: three examples</td>
<td>263</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>Two Oxfordshire ‘Newlands’</td>
<td>266</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17.1a-c</td>
<td>London’s and England’s raw wool exports 1279–1543</td>
<td>414</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17.2a-c</td>
<td>London’s and England’s cloth exports 1348–1543</td>
<td>417</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of figures

17.3a–b London's and England's wine imports 1403–1547 420
17.4a–d London's and England's goods liable to petty custom, 422
    1399–1547 and poundage 1402–1547
17.5  The Company Halls of London, c. 1540 430
## Tables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>Estimates of money stock in circulation in England c. 1000–1311</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>Occupations of some citizens in York, Norwich and Winchester around 1300</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>The twenty wealthiest English towns in 1334, with changes in ranking since 1086</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.1</td>
<td>Trade-related revenues from the borough of Newport (Mon.) 1402–1522</td>
<td>317</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.2</td>
<td>Estimates of money stock in circulation in England 1300–1546</td>
<td>324</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.3</td>
<td>Occupations of some citizens in York, Canterbury, Norwich and Chester in the later fifteenth century</td>
<td>326</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.4</td>
<td>The twenty wealthiest English towns in 1524, with changes in ranking since 1334</td>
<td>329</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.1</td>
<td>Characteristics of the greater towns</td>
<td>442</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19.1</td>
<td>The relative importance of English headports in overseas trade 1203–1204 and 1478–1482</td>
<td>477</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19.2</td>
<td>The relative importance of English headports in the cloth export trade in three periods 1352–1510</td>
<td>479</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19.3</td>
<td>The relative importance of English headports in the overseas import trade of non-sweet wine in two periods 1350–1500</td>
<td>481</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19.4</td>
<td>The relative importance of English headports in the alien overseas trade 1324–1329 and 1478–1482</td>
<td>482</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19.5</td>
<td>The naval service of English and Welsh ships in three periods 1336–1430</td>
<td>488</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19.6</td>
<td>The relative importance of English and Welsh ports in the Bordeaux wine-carrying trade in three periods 1372–1483</td>
<td>490</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20.1</td>
<td>The small towns of England</td>
<td>507</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20.2</td>
<td>Debts recorded in small-town courts</td>
<td>524</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20.3</td>
<td>Changes in small-town populations 1377–1381 to 1524–1525</td>
<td>536</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of tables

22.1 Principal towns in the South-East estimated as a proportion of regional values 558
22.2 Counties of the South-East as a proportion of regional values 570
22.3 Most prominent towns in each county of the South-East as a proportion of that county and the region 573
22.4 Densities of population and towns in the South-East 1100–1500 574
22.5 Numbers of towns and the rates of their foundation in the South-East 1100–1500 575
22.6 Rank order of towns in the South-West in 1334 601
The history of British towns is a very distinctive one in a European – even in a world – perspective. Until the eighteenth century most of them were small by international standards, yet in the nineteenth century Britain became the first country in the world to urbanise, that is, to have more than half of its population living in towns. The divide is neatly measured by the 1851 census, which showed (depending on urban definitions and boundaries) about 54 per cent of English and Welsh people, and 52 per cent of Scots, town dwellers. No one, therefore, questions the importance of British towns and urbanisation in the last two centuries, and it is indeed possible to write British history since 1850 from an urban point of view. For the pre-industrial period the subject has understandably seemed less important, since though southern Britain at least has had towns for most of the last two millennia, for much of that long period they were relatively small: relative, that is, both to contemporary continental cities, and to modern towns. Visitors from Venice judged late medieval London to be the only important British city, while Patrick Collinson has described Tudor towns (other than London) as ‘small-scale Toytowns and Trumptons’ compared to the great imperial cities of Germany and the Netherlands.

Yet if London stood alone in the first division of European pre-industrial cities, other British towns were not therefore unimportant. They housed a substantial...
minority of the population (at least in England), larger than is generally believed. Though some writers have put the urban proportion of the population at only 5 or 10 per cent as late as 1500, the best recent estimates are considerably higher: up to 10 per cent in 1086, 15 or more per cent by 1300, 20 per cent in 1377, and after perhaps a fall in the fifteenth century, a return to about 20 per cent by 1524. Furthermore, they were regular places of resort for the rural majority, whether for economic, social, administrative, judicial or ecclesiastical purposes, and 'it is easy to forget that...towns can often seem more important to those who visit them than those who live there'. Nearly everyone, for instance, lived within easy reach of a market town by the thirteenth century, at least over the greater part of England. This volume is full of examples of the relationships between town and country in the middle ages, a natural feature of an island much of which was becoming commercialised as early as the tenth and eleventh centuries. Studying British and European urbanisation 'requires a lengthy look backward in time. The answers to many questions about the nature of contemporary European cities lie in the medieval period, not in the modern industrial era.'

The work reviewed here, and in Volume II, should help to dispel any lingering 'suspicion that urbanization in the centuries before the period of classic industrial revolution is too petty for study'. The importance of our theme — indeed of the theme of all three volumes of the Urban History of Britain — was justifiably long ago by James Tait: to trace urban growth 'from the advent of the town-hating Angles and Saxons down to these latter days, when five-sixths of the population of Great Britain are massed upon pavements' was, he said in 1922, 'a task worthy of the best powers of an historian of institutions'. We might put this slightly differently now. One of the myths dispelled by modern scholarship is that the English peoples who invaded Britain in the fifth and sixth centuries were 'town-hating' folk, but none the less the collapse of Roman urban centres left them little opportunity to live in towns. Now we would perhaps emphasise towns as social and economic communities, and not think of them only as boroughs or institutions. Nevertheless, as a reminder of the huge growth of towns over nearly fourteen centuries, and the consequences it has entailed, Tait's programme can hardly be bettered.

(i) THE IDENTIFICATION AND IMPORTANCE OF TOWNS

An issue to be faced at the outset is that of definitions: what are meant by a town, and by the middle ages? Whatever may be true of later periods, there are great

---

7 Waller, Town, City and Nation, p. 58 (from a paper first given in 1922).
difficulties in agreeing on an urban definition valid for all the centuries usually labelled ‘medieval’. Over the long time span concerned, functions of ‘central places’ changed, and definitions valid for one century might not help for another. The functions later concentrated in multi-purpose towns were often separated in the early middle ages, with a royal centre in one, a major church in another and perhaps a market, mint or port in a third. ‘A settlement growing up around a royal and / or ecclesiastical site in the seventh or eighth century should not be judged as non-urban by the criteria applicable to a later Saxon burh, just as these latter places should not be judged by the standards of later medieval towns’. The literature is also confused by the relationship between places with a legal, and those with a socio-economic, identity, between ‘borough’ and ‘town’; and if we adopt a socio-economic definition, as we broadly shall, there is the problem of evidence: criteria in terms of population, or of economic and social structure, cannot be applied in the precise and quantitative way that they can for recent centuries.

A definition is, fortunately, no more than an aid to thought: it has no intrinsic value. As Karl Popper has warned, ‘a definition cannot establish the meaning of a term any more than a logical derivation can establish the truth of a statement: both can only shift this problem back’. Nevertheless, a working definition may be helpful, and the one we have adopted here – at least for the high and later middle ages – is that of Susan Reynolds. The first part is functional: ‘a town is a permanent and concentrated human settlement in which a significant proportion of the population is engaged in non-agricultural occupations . . . A town therefore normally lives, at least in part, off food produced by people who live outside it.’ The second part is social: ‘the inhabitants of towns normally regard themselves, and are regarded by the inhabitants of predominantly rural settlements, as a different sort of people’. This is, as she recognises, a loose definition, not because it is defective, but because definitions are human constructs and have unclear boundaries. We are persuaded that such a definition as hers is a better aid to analysis than taking refuge in a ‘bundle of criteria’ (Kriterienbündel) of the kind favoured in some archaeological surveys, ‘one of the less useful concepts that has come to Britain from abroad’.

Our definition of ‘middle ages’ is that almost universally employed in Western Europe, and in North America, to mean the millennium, or thereabouts, between the fall of the Western Roman Empire and the Renaissance. It may seem

superfluous to say that, but a surprising number of British scholars still define the
middle ages as beginning in 1066, thus absurdly relegating the six centuries of the
‘Anglo-Saxon’ period to a kind of limbo. The middle ages are taken here to begin
in Britain with the collapse of Roman imperial power around 409–11, though
since that collapse seems to have entailed the almost complete disappearance of
urban life, our story really begins with the revival of urban life in the seventh
century. The other terminal date is the mid-sixteenth century, when the
Protestant Reformation marks a decisive break in British urban life. The nine cen-
turies we cover are, of course, only very imperfectly designated by the single term
‘medieval’: there were enormous changes over that time, and we have recognised
this by dividing our chronological treatment into two, with the break at around
1300. It makes, of course, for very unequal time spans, but it can be justified not
only by the imbalance in the surviving documentary sources, but also, and more
importantly, by the major changes in British social and economic life at the turn
of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. It certainly makes for a better division
than the Norman Conquest of England, which is a meaningless divide for
Scotland and Wales, and which even in many aspects of English urban life marked
no break at all.13

We have attempted to balance the volume in terms of what is important –
trying, certainly, to summarise established knowledge and recent research, but
also to draw attention to problems and lacunae. We have also drawn extensively
upon the evidence of archaeology and urban morphology as well as documenta-
tory sources, a procedure which is especially (though not only) important for the
period before the twelfth century when documentary evidence for most towns
is sparse. The point is worth stressing because a document-based approach dom-
ninated British medieval urban history until recently, to its considerable impov-
erishment.

We have also been concerned to envisage urban history in terms of people
and places as well as institutions. It is unfortunate that Tait’s brilliant Medieval
English Borough (1936), like much other work published before the 1960s, is
concerned so exclusively with constitutions and institutions: as H. M. Colvin
has remarked, ‘it is as much the failure to envisage towns as actual places as any
defect of scholarship’ that makes it ‘so unsatisfactory an introduction to urban
history’.14 Carl Stephenson’s Borough and Town (1933), to which Tait’s book was
partly a rejoinder, had at least the merit of a stimulating topographical chapter
with plans, however much he was wrong – and Tait right – over the applica-
tion of Henri Pirenne’s insights to English towns. Helen Cam, in a perceptive
and critical review of part of Stephenson’s argument, commended him for

---

asserting ‘very rightly’ that urban evolution ‘must be approached from the side of topography’. However, Tait’s approach was reinforced by the work of F. M. Stenton, especially his massively influential *Anglo-Saxon England* (1943, 1947, 1971), with his ‘literary approach which relied so little on illustrations, plans, or excavation reports’. It has not been possible to illustrate this volume as extensively as we would wish, but we hope to have succeeded in reflecting some of the riches of archaeological and topographical work which have made us more aware of towns ‘as actual places’ over the past generation or so. Likewise, we must remember always that towns were communities of people, and we have drawn on as much evidence as possible to put townspeople into the centre of the story – not only the relatively well-recorded mayors and town councillors, but so far as possible the ordinary men, women and children they represented. However, we have also tried to avoid the excesses of some recent scholarship which is concerned so exclusively with people and places as to exclude the old, constitutional approach altogether. It is not possible to make sense of medieval towns without considering their government and institutions, their customs and by-laws. Boroughs, charters and guilds should not be excluded by the new urban history.

(ii) **HISTORIOGRAPHY: ENGLAND AND WALES**

It may help, as background to our present state of knowledge of medieval towns, to sketch the history of the subject. Some investigations of the urban past can be traced back to the later middle ages, including the civic chronicles of London, and the topographical descriptions of towns by William of Worcester in the 1470s, and by John Leland in the 1530s and 1540s. Detailed descriptions of the urban fabric and its past came together first in Tudor London, with the conjunction of early drawings by Wyngaerde, a huge printed plan of the city, probably also by Wyngaerde (1553–9), and John Stow’s *Survey of London*, begun about the same time though not published until 1598. Many other histories of English towns followed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, usually with a medieval and constitutional bias, with at least 150

Many early histories were antiquarian and uncritical, but the same period initiated real historical research on English towns, even if largely confined to legal and constitutional aspects. Thomas Madox’s *Firma Burgi* (1726) is still of great value, while a century later the debate over municipal reform produced *The History of the Boroughs and Municipal Corporations of the United Kingdom* by Merewether and Stephens (1835), still useful despite its bias.20 Victorian scholars discovered the social and economic dimensions of the subject, revived the serious study of townscape and topography which Stow had pioneered, and in some cases attempted what would now be called rescue archaeology. E. A. Freeman published good local studies (notably *Towns and Districts*, 1883), and launched a series of *Historic Towns* in 1887. His contemporary John Richard Green used town plans helpfully in his *Conquest of England* (1883), and we have his widow’s testimony of a day spent with him in Ancona, where ‘as was his habit, he made his way first to the Town-hall, and from the fragments of Greek and mediaeval carving built into its walls, from harbour and pier, from names of streets, and the cathedral crypt, he extracted century by century some record of the old municipal life’.21 The quotation comes from Alice Green’s own masterpiece, *Town Life in the Fifteenth Century* (1894), which has, astonishingly, ‘not yet been superseded by a work of equivalent length and depth of treatment’.22 By the turn of the century, major publishing enterprises were beginning to tackle the history and historical fabric of towns systematically, notably the Survey of London (started in 1896), the Victoria History of the Counties of England (founded in 1899) and the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments (1908).

The true founders of medieval English urban history, however, were F. W. Maitland (1850–1906) and Charles Gross (1857–1909), both inspired in part by German scholarship. Gross developed his Göttingen doctoral dissertation into *The Gild Merchant* (1890), besides compiling a *Bibliography of British Municipal History* (1897): both are still standard works a century later.23 Maitland published much on the legal and constitutional history of boroughs, including *Township and

---

Borough (1898); he also encouraged Mary Bateson, who edited two volumes of Borough Customs (1904–6), while Gross’ pupil Morley Hemmeon published the definitive analysis of burgage tenure (1914). Bateson had also published an exemplary edition of the earliest Leicester records in 1899, a year which may be taken as initiating really reliable editions of borough archives, for it also saw publication of the first volume of Reginald Sharpe’s Calendar of Letter Books of the City of London. Others inspired to enter the field were E. A. Lewis, who published the first synthesis of Welsh burghal history, and Adolphus Ballard, who initiated a series of digests of urban charters, continued after his death by James Tait.

The 1920s and 1930s were dominated by the rival work of Stephenson and Tait, already briefly noticed. It is unfortunate that Stephenson had invested much of his work in arguing for a late (post-Conquest) development of urban life in England, an argument Tait was able to refute, because the result was that Tait was perceived to have ‘defeated’ Stephenson, whereas both books still have great merit, and moreover Stephenson’s is much the more readable. G. H. Martin has commented that ‘the subject is a difficult one, and Tait made it sound difficult’. That may be why publication of Tait’s book signalled, if it did not cause, a thirty-year period when relatively little of the first rank was published, apart from constitutional analyses by Martin Weinbaum.

Little recognised at the time, however, serious work was beginning in medieval urban archaeology. In Oxford between the 1930s and 1950s important discoveries were made by R. L. Bruce-Mitford, E. M. Jope and W. A. Pantin, and other ‘rescue archaeology’, as it would later be called, was undertaken after 1945 on sites cleared by bombing, providing important medieval evidence in London, Canterbury and elsewhere. Pantin became one of the founders of the Society

---


27 For a judicious appraisal of Tait and Stephenson, see Martin and McIntyre, Bibliography, pp. xxxvi–xxxvii.


for Medieval Archaeology (1956), as well as the author of the first modern study of town house plans in an early volume of its journal,31 and it was partly owing to the Society that the serious study of medieval towns revived in the 1960s, accompanied by much topographical and archaeological work alongside the traditional documentary fare. Early fruits included M. R. G. Conzen’s pioneering analyses of the town plans of Alnwick, Newcastle, Ludlow and Conwy, and publication of the first British volume of the Atlas of Historic Town Plans of Western Europe (1969); the first major urban excavation programme in Britain under Martin Biddle at Winchester (1961–71); Maurice Beresford’s detailed analyses of planted towns in England, Wales and Gascony; and his catalogue, in conjunction with H. P. R. Finberg, of all known English boroughs.32

Since 1970, research and publication in all of these areas has advanced apace. Colin Platt and Susan Reynolds provided the first scholarly surveys of English medieval towns for a generation, closely followed by Ralph Griffiths and others for Wales;33 their work helped to inspire an increased output of monographs on individual towns, editions of urban records and more recently some excellent surveys incorporating much of the new archaeological data.34 New research has been inspired by a series of lively debates about major issues: the extent of urban continuity in the post-Roman period; the nature of revived town life, including the role of *emporia, burhs* and minsters; the relationship of ‘feudalism’ and towns; the nature of urban communities; the role of women; the existence of urban oligarchy; and the extent of late medieval urban decline. The last controversy, though probably irresolvable, led to very fruitful investigations. Surviving medieval buildings have been thoroughly described in comprehensive inventories of Salisbury, Stamford and York,35 though regrettably such inventories have now been discontinued; and an Urban Morphology Group at the University of Birmingham is building on Conzen’s work. And the growing body of archaeological data is now

increasingly being synthesised, not only in excavation site reports, but also in works setting the finds in surveys more accessible to the urban historian, including fine surveys of the buildings, furnishings and artefacts of London, Winchester and Norwich. It is therefore a lively and developing subject at the time of writing, though by the same token it is not an easy time to take stock.

(iii) **HISTORIOGRAPHY: SCOTLAND**

The nineteenth century bequeathed to us a series of studies of individual towns. Many tended to be strongly antiquarian in approach, and at times rested on scholarship which was unduly influenced by local patriotism. More valuable in the long term has been the work of the Scottish Burgh Records Society, which between 1868 and 1911 produced twenty-six volumes of record material, much of it on Edinburgh and Glasgow and the Convention of Royal Burghs. The nineteenth-century tradition produced massive results in an elaborate study, on which he had been working since the 1880s, David Murray’s *Early Burgh Organisation in Scotland*. This had the merit of displaying considerable grasp of the archival, constitutional and topographical evidence, but his approach to his subject was diffuse, and his theory of origins, that burghs evolved from pre-existing agricultural communities, was based more on assumption and analogy than on evidence.

The sparseness of early evidence, and some failures of clarity on the part of earlier writers, left the field open in the mid-twentieth century for a strong concentration on constitutional aspects. A useful short survey appeared in W. Mackay Mackenzie’s *The Scottish Burghs*. As the title implies, he saw ‘burgh’ rather than ‘town’ as the principal element of the subject, and dismissed the David Murray approach with the crisp opinion that ‘the key-word to the burgh is creation, not growth’. W. Croft Dickinson’s magisterial introduction to the early records of Aberdeen analysed the Scottish burghs as a whole, but concentrated heavily on the royal burghs and touched only occasionally on the economic background. Further constitutional attention was applied in the valuable and accurate handlist of Scottish burghs by George S. Pryde. By this era the history of Scottish medieval towns had come to be viewed in a strongly institutional light.

---

In the last quarter-century physical evidence has been given much greater attention, an approach stimulated by the work of urban geographers such as Ian Adams, and by George Gordon and Brian Dicks’ *Scottish Urban History*.\(^{41}\) Nicholas Brooks and G. Whittington were, moreover, pointing a way forward, with their article on St Andrews, for assessments of town growth by the use of documentary, cartographic and archaeological evidence.\(^{42}\) Archaeological investigation, also, in early towns commenced in Scotland in the early 1970s, albeit at first on a fairly small scale. The steady stream of excavations which has followed, especially in Perth and Aberdeen, and the resulting published reports,\(^{43}\) have contributed vastly to knowledge of the subject: buildings, possessions, pottery, diet, health and other topics have been illuminated on particular sites. It is, perhaps, inevitable, if regrettable, that syntheses are slow to appear in print, as archaeologists generally prefer to build up from minutiae rather than attempt ‘the big picture’; a general overview of urban archaeology in Scotland would be welcome.

The Scottish Burgh Survey Series, funded by the then Scottish Development Department, produced some fifty reports on the archaeology and history of individual towns. The historical research of Anne Turner Simpson and the archaeological overview of Robert Gourlay and Sylvia Stevenson were not, however, closely intermeshed. Two perceptive short surveys, by A. A. M. Duncan and G. W. S. Barrow, emphasised the stimulus of trade and the need for a good location as fundamental to early urban activity, and viewed the crown’s grant of privileges to a community as a comprehensible but formal part of the process.\(^{44}\) Elizabeth Ewan then attempted to fit the urban archaeological material with the documentary evidence for towns as a whole.\(^{45}\)

Michael Lynch’s ‘Whatever happened to the medieval burgh?’ pointed to a new approach to urban history, and in 1988 the entire subject was given a notable stimulus in a set of essays on *The Scottish Medieval Town*, edited by Lynch, together with Michael Spearman and Geoffrey Stell,\(^{46}\) a volume which both summarised current ideas and pointed the way ahead towards areas requiring investigation. Spearman’s contribution on Perth, for example, was the first published topographical analysis

---


of an early Scottish town, following the lines of the seminal study of Alnwick by Conzen.47 Individual studies of particular towns continued to be undertaken, with results appearing either in print or in thesis form: Glasgow, Dunfermline, Dundee, Selkirk, Leith and Montrose, for example, have all been the subjects of detailed studies on a variety of aspects.48 Indeed, the individuality of towns, as against a sameness of appearance, has come to be given more emphasis.

An interdisciplinary approach to the study of individual towns has been adopted by the new series of Burgh Surveys. These are funded by Historic Scotland and produced in the Centre for Scottish Urban History, Department of Scottish History, Edinburgh University, with Pat Dennison as historian and Russel Coleman as archaeologist. Documentary, archaeological and cartographic evidence is allied to other visual remnants of the built environment in an attempt to recreate the historic town.49 And by the year 2000 a two-volume history of the town of Aberdeen, funded by Aberdeen District Council, will add substantially to our knowledge of town life in Scotland.50

(iv) PLAN OF THE VOLUME

This volume, like its successors, is designed to provide an authoritative and up-to-date account of British towns within its period, looking at their nature and functions, their origins and development, and the relationships between towns, between towns and their hinterlands and between towns and the state. We have been especially keen to draw wherever appropriate on sources and disciplines other than document-based history, and the balance of our team of authors reflects that. Archaeology, architecture, urban morphology and other disciplines provide vital evidence where documents are lacking, and often greatly enrich our knowledge even after urban documentation becomes available.

47 Conzen, Alnwick.
49 Fifteen towns were assessed in 1994–7: Kirkcaldy, Stranraer, Cumnock, Hamilton, Musselburgh, Dunblane, Coupar-Angus, Stornoway, Melrose, Dalceth, Forfar, Dumbarston, Lanhorthg, Nairn and North Queensferry. Pat Dennison and Russel Coleman are the authors, and the surveys are published by Historic Scotland in association with Scottish Cultural Press. Aberdeen has also been the subject of a survey: E. P. Dennison and J. Stones, Historic Aberdeen (Scottish Burgh Survey, 1997).
Temporal and spatial coverage provide even more problems than for the early modern and later modern periods which are the subjects of the following volumes. The ‘middle ages’, as defined above and as followed in this volume, represents a span of time about twice as long as the periods covered by Volumes II and III combined, and changes over that time were enormous. It is true that the bulk of surviving urban archives is much less than for post-medieval times, but the ‘buried archives’ of archaeology have added enormously to our knowledge over the past generation or so. It has not been easy in a single volume to do justice to it all, though we hope that the bibliographical references we provide will enable readers to explore much more of it.

The British coverage of the volume also creates problems, for historians have usually discussed English, Scottish and Welsh towns separately – for the very good reason that medieval Britain was a geographical expression and not a united state. The context of the earliest towns and central places was one of a multiplicity of small states which only gradually coalesced into the kingdoms of England and Scotland. Once they did so, these two kingdoms developed their own political and administrative systems, so that the framework for English boroughs and Scottish burghs was never quite the same: the recent work on Scottish medieval towns listed above has stressed not only many similarities with English towns but also striking differences arising from their political, social and ecclesiastical as well as geographical context – the greater uniformity of burgh law and custom in Scotland, for instance, or the more unified voice of the towns in Scottish national politics (at least by the fifteenth century).51 The Welsh context was even more complex, since although medieval Wales was ‘an identifiable geographical unit’ by the time that towns developed, ‘it had never known political unity other than the hegemony temporarily imposed by military might’;52 even when the last independent principality was conquered by the English king Edward I the country remained divided under different systems of administration. For these reasons a number of chapters have been written jointly by English and Scottish experts, while Part IV includes separate surveys of Welsh and Scottish towns.

The structure of the volume balances the main themes of urban history against these temporal and spatial dimensions. Parts II and III take a broadly chronological approach, dividing the nine centuries or so under discussion, very unequally, in the decades either side of 1300, for reasons already stated: where we have to distinguish the two broad periods, we use ‘early middle ages’ for the period before 1300, and ‘later middle ages’ for the fourteenth, fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Within each part the structure is approximately the same, to allow for comparisons between the two periods: an introductory survey is

followed successively by accounts of towns in a political, social and economic context (in the broad sense of those terms); by surveys of the interlocking themes of culture and the Church; by discussion of the physical fabric or townscape; and then by a series of three or four chapters considering the different levels and types of town from London – then as later the largest British town – to the smallest of market towns. In Part IV we shift our focus to the geographical context, looking at the different regions and states within which the towns were located – six English and Welsh regions, and a separate survey of Scotland – where the stress is on the patterns and distinctions between towns in different parts of Britain rather than over time. Finally, a conclusion sums up some of the main themes and findings identified in the volume, and an appendix of ranking tables of towns acts as a point of reference for the volume as a whole.

We hope that the evidence presented here, some of it for the first time, will demonstrate abundantly how much change and development took place over the long time span we cover, so easy to foreshorten when lumping together medieval and early modern towns as ‘pre-industrial’ in the manner of Gideon Sjoberg, whose model, as Peter Clark rightly remarks, ‘is only of limited value for the analysis of the Western European . . . town’. David Nicholas, whose richly detailed survey of the medieval European city was published as our volume was being completed, stresses the same point: he divides the medieval centuries, like us, at around 1300 to stress the great changes of the later medieval period, and his conclusion emphasises how greatly urban life changed between the fourth and fifteenth centuries: ‘the Roman city when it survived at all was only a central core of a settlement that was far more complex socially, economically and topographically than its ancient predecessor had been . . . The urban pattern of the modern period was clearly recognisable by 1450.’ That may be to stress progress and increasing complexity a little too strongly – he himself surveys evidence for retrogression in English towns in the fifteenth century – but he is surely right to stress the great distance in character as well as in time between Roman and late medieval. British towns by 1450, and even more by 1540, had come a long way, and much of what we would find if we could visit an early sixteenth-century town would be nearer to modern urban life than to the distant revival of town life in the early seventh century.

55 Nicholas, *The Later Medieval City*, p. 344.