
The Rise of the English Town, 1650–1850

Prepared for the Economic History Society by

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1

The rise of urban England, 1650–1750

The network of towns in 1650

In the middle of the seventeenth century a rapidly growing London dominated urban England. Around 375,000 people lived in the City, Westminster, adjoining Middlesex parishes and Southwark in 1650, compared with 120,000 a century earlier [1:2]. In contrast there were between 600 and 750 provincial towns with from 400 to 20,000 people, nearly all expanding much more slowly [2:219–22].

Most important in the dominance of London was its control of inland trade. This was based on the use of the coast by shipping, and on its location near the mouth of one of the two most important navigable rivers and the inherited system of main roads which met there. London's manufacturing base, foreign trade and the growing demands of its own population helped to cement its place at the hub of domestic trade in foodstuffs, raw materials, fuel and industrial goods. Coal came by ship from Newcastle and some of it was distributed by water elsewhere in south-east England. Corn came overland, some of it from ports on the Thames and the south and east coasts. Luxury goods, either imported or made in London, were mainly sent on by packhorse or waggon. Dairy produce and textiles for finishing and export came by road and water, and livestock by land. London's importance in English foreign trade was still partly based on its position opposite north-west Europe. The biggest export, woollen cloth, went particularly to Holland and Germany, with Spain and Portugal as secondary outlets. London handled four-fifths of all imports, with most trade conducted by individuals or a few active partners, some of whom

were among the wealthiest City merchants. For example, the Levant Company was an association formed to secure favourable terms for traders, and the East India Company was a joint-stock company with single management [3:24, 36, 41–5].

Beier has emphasised London's role as the largest English manufacturing centre [4:142]. Cloth made in the West Country and other areas was dyed and finished in London; silk-weaving, sugar and tobacco-refining industries were created there by imports. Shipbuilding developed from waterborne trade. London's resident aristocracy, gentry and professionals bought London-made luxury goods such as jewellery, watches, stationery and books. Population growth and rising living standards among the upper and middle classes made house-building crucial. Although the City Corporation and about 90 guilds tried to control the crafts and trades, their position was weakened by the enormous extensions of building beyond the City walls. The Corporation and the guilds failed to stop retail trade by foreigners or limit handicrafts to those apprenticed and independent of a company. This relaxation may have encouraged economic growth to a small extent.

London was the seat of the court, Parliament and the lawcourts. The monarch's household and entourage numbered around 2,600 by 1640, and there may have been around 1,500 administrators [1:12]. The Inns of Court housed around 1,000 members. It was by far the greatest meeting-place of the landed classes, with several hundred residents, as well as annual and occasional visitors.

More than half of the provincial towns had a population of between 450 and 1,000, and at least 500 numbered fewer than 2,000. Market or country towns served a rural hinterland of between three and six miles. By 1650 even the smallest had a majority of craftsmen and traders, with a handful of professionals and perhaps several gentry families [5:5; 6:1]. Market towns were more numerous in the cereal-growing Midlands and the East than in the North, with its extensive heath and moorland. Traders often attended two or three markets within twelve or fifteen miles, especially those well known for a particular product. Towns on main roads were full of inns, and coastal centres had shipbuilding or fishing. In industrial areas townsmen not only sold food and other goods but also worked up and distributed raw material such as wool and bar iron, stored the finished product and dispatched it

outside the region. While some historians have studied centres with populations of at least 2,000, the population – 5,230,000 in 1650 – was small and, except in London, sparsely distributed, so that urban functions are clear in centres with as few as 500 people [7:257–71; 8].

The majority of around fifty towns with populations ranging from 2,000 to 5,000 were small county, diocesan or subregional centres which influenced the trade of several neighbouring country towns [9; 10]. The markets in these centres handled more goods than those of the average centre, and were sometimes well known for selling local specialities. The larger traders were wholesalers as well as retailers, serving the grocers and mercers of the country towns and, at least in the South, the shopkeepers in the villages. There were also specialised retailers not usually found in the lesser towns, such as watchmakers, goldsmiths, vintners and stationers. The county towns had visiting and partly or wholly resident gentry, attracted by assizes, quarter sessions and the wide range of shops; and well-to-do clergymen inhabited the diocesan sees. The county and diocesan centre of Winchester had between thirty and forty lawyers, about 140 pupils at Winchester College, and canons living in rebuilt houses after the Restoration, according to Rosen [11:170–84].

A few larger towns were ports handling river, coastal and overseas trade. The rest served the industrial hinterland as well as engaging in manufacturing. While spasmodic efforts were made by corporations and guilds to control trades and crafts by insisting on apprenticeships or buying the right to trade and work, and inspecting manufactures, regulations were about to fall into disuse.

More than half of all townspeople lived in centres of more than 5,000 inhabitants [6:90; 2:217]. The majority were Londoners. There was less physical and working contact with the surrounding countryside. Around twenty-five larger towns had between 5,000 and 20,000 inhabitants. York and Chester, both county towns and diocesan sees, were regional centres. Ten towns, all county centres and some diocesan sees, had farming hinterlands which also engaged in manufacturing and fishing. Among them, textiles were important for Exeter, which also had a large seaborne trade [12], Colchester, Canterbury, Salisbury, Nottingham, Reading (which was dependent on traffic along the Rivers Thames and Kennet) [13:53–74], and Worcester and Shrewsbury, which both used the River Severn.

Ipswich men owned and built ships, especially for coastal trade, and Yarmouth was the largest fishing centre, particularly for herrings [14:87–141]. Both Oxford and Cambridge had celebrated university functions, as well as being county towns and Oxford a diocesan see. Coventry, Manchester, Leeds and Tiverton in Devon were mainly textile centres. Plymouth had a naval station and coastal trade, and Hull a growing river, coastal and overseas trade.

With Exeter the largest provincial towns were Norwich, Bristol and Newcastle. Newcastle was the great coal port and the county centre of Northumberland, and had small coal-based industries. Besides its small industries, Bristol conducted the biggest foreign trade after London and dominated the inland commerce of the West near the mouth of the Severn. Norwich, the largest provincial town, was a county town and diocesan centre, and the seat of the East Anglian wool industry.

The urban hierarchy was becoming more integrated. By 1650 boroughs sent 425 members to Parliament, the central lawcourts were increasingly used by wealthy townsmen, and the capital was emerging as a social centre for visiting peers and wealthy gentlemen who had close contacts with neighbouring county towns when resident on their country estates. Transport and financial services helped the growth of trade between towns. While regular carriers linked London with more than 200 provincial centres, payments and the provision of credit between different parts of England were made by inland bills of exchange on London, where goldsmiths and scribes were also becoming bankers.

Compared to the English, fewer people in Wales, Scotland and Ireland lived in towns. This was because their standard of living was on average lower on account of poorer soil (except in Ireland), greater dependence on farming, and inadequate communications. In Ireland, a large peasantry rented tiny holdings. The largest Irish town was Dublin which numbered around 62,000 in 1700 and which dominated Ireland as the commercial, administrative and legal capital and seat of Parliament. The next largest town was Edinburgh, with about 50,000 people and similar functions. In contrast, in Wales, a largely mountainous country with no natural centre, the biggest town was Wrexham on the English border, with around 2,500 people. Welsh ports and county towns were dependent for trade on Bristol, Hereford,

Shrewsbury, Chester and later Liverpool, which added to these towns' economic importance.

Around 17 per cent of English people lived in towns, and 7 per cent in London, in 1650. Although provincial centres had grown during the previous century, so had the rural population, and the largest were still much smaller than the largest elsewhere in western Europe. The phenomenal growth of London, faster than that of continental capitals, with an economy linked to north-west Europe, was the major reason for the rising number of townspeople within the English population.

Urban prosperity and change, 1650–1750

The century after 1650 was a critical time in the growth of London. By 1700 it had overtaken Paris to become the largest European city. While the total English population rose only slightly, the capital's population grew from around 375,000 to 650,000 in 1750, comprising 11 per cent of the total, compared with 2.5 per cent in Paris. London's domestic trade expanded enormously, helped by more navigable waterways and improvements to roads, on which waggons were replacing packhorses. Transport improvements were made necessary by the growth of London's own consumption, the collection of goods to be exported and the distribution of imports. Five great wholesale markets organised the sale of food to retailers, with a few factors increasingly handling corn, livestock, dairy goods and coal. Foreign trade was still dominated by London. West and East Indian commerce grew rapidly, and re-exports of sugar and tobacco were especially important in continental trade. London's foreign trade totalled £9.9 million in 1699–1700 and £14 million in 1752–4, or 75.8 and 69.8 per cent respectively of all English foreign and colonial trade. A quarter of the working population may have been connected with the port in 1700.

The City was becoming a financial centre. The Bank of England was founded in 1694, and private banks serving merchants in the City and visiting landowners in the West End emerged in the early eighteenth century. Dealing in stocks in the National Debt (created by the French Wars from 1689) and the big trading companies (including several new ones), the City was responsible for a Stock Exchange, with marine and fire insurance becoming active by the

1720s. Over a wider area luxury manufactures, such as watches (employing more than 5,000 people), jewellery, coaches and scientific instruments, were bigger and more intricate and varied. Porcelain workshops opened in the 1740s, and cabinet-making with mahogany grew. Silk manufacturing in Spitalfields, which employed about 12,000 weavers at its peak, was helped by French Huguenot refugees in the 1680s and subsequent tariffs against French silks. Dirty trades, many located south of the Thames, such as tallow-making, limeburning and dyeworks also flourished, with big concerns in brewing and distilling. After 1689 a London civil service of several thousand employees was created to meet the need for money in the Wars. The annual convening of Parliament from 1689, the presence of the Court, and improved main roads encouraged the further growth of a London winter season for the peers and gentry, who filled Westminster with their families and servants, spent lavishly on entertainments and luxury goods, and hired many of the numerous lawyers and doctors [15:66–81; 16; 17:140–48].

The hierarchy of provincial towns changed. The non-manufacturing country towns, district and regional centres developed slowly as the rural population they served ceased to grow. With rising farm and industrial output and general prosperity, inland and coastal trade and travel expanded, creating more town shops with a greater variety of goods and fostering middlemen, innkeepers, carriers, professionals and a few resident leisured families.

The development of a town culture, including classical architecture as houses were given brick façades, the layout of tree-lined walks and bowling greens, the arts such as drama and music, sports such as horse racing, and the quest for status and sociability among the more prosperous townspeople created an ‘urban renaissance’, in the words of Peter Borsay [18]. Weatherill shows that in bigger towns, and especially in London, the houses of the elite and middle orders became lavishly furnished and equipped for eating, drinking and sleeping to a greater extent than in farmhouses [19:76–90]. According to Estabrook, musical instruments, books, pictures, window curtains, mirrors, clocks and carved and japanned furniture were owned by the more prosperous Bristol people, whose lack of contact with country folk seems to partly explain why such consumption failed to penetrate the villages [20:129–53]. Towns became increasingly distinct from

the countryside as crafts allied to farming, such as toolmaking and food-processing, became less dominant features. Populations of less than 2,000 grew on average by no more than 200 to 300, and bigger centres by 500 to 600. For example, the market town of Ormskirk in south-west Lancashire had 981 people in 1680 and 1,210 in 1754 [21:*xix*].

Rapid expansion occurred in a few ports with big coastal and overseas trade, and especially in the centres of industrial districts. By virtue of its commerce overseas, via the Severn, with South Wales and inland to the east, Bristol was the ‘metropolis of the West,’ according to Minchinton [22:297–313]. Liverpool and the smaller Whitehaven grew faster on the north-west coast, together handling coastal, Irish and American trade in sugar, tobacco, salt, coal, textiles, hardware and farm goods [23:2–4; 24:393–402]. In contrast, while Glasgow was the fourth west-coast port to import sugar and tobacco, it re-exported much of them to the Continent. Newcastle, and increasingly Sunderland, prospered from sending coal to London. Hull dominated the coastal and overseas trade of the industrial West Riding and part of the East Midlands.

Although manufacturing and towns grew together, the precise contribution of urban labour and consumption, and of the towns’ collection of raw materials and distribution of finished goods for industrial growth, is debatable [25:26]. Textile manufacturing had varying influence on towns. Although the population of Tiverton, which made serges, fell sharply, and that of Exeter selling them and Colchester making bays declined a little because of marketing problems [26], other textile centres prospered. The start of silk-ribbon manufacture in Coventry, and an expanding framework-knitting industry in Nottingham and Leicester, brought great prosperity and growth [5:21; 27:103, 122; 28:107–86; 29:96–8]. Leeds made, finished and sold cheap cloths, and in the early eighteenth century began to trade in growing quantities of locally-made worsteds [30:5–7]. Manchester increasingly controlled linen-manufacturing in south-east Lancashire, finishing and selling the goods to merchants in London and elsewhere. The townspeople first made linenware and later cotton-linen cloth [31:111–16]. ‘Norwich stuffs’ continued to be made in what was now a wealthy corn-growing centre and still the largest provincial town [32:263–310].

On the eastern edge of the Black Country, a region of fast-growing metalware production, Birmingham was becoming dominant. Its ironmongers imported much of the area's bar iron and exported finished goods; its craftsmen concentrated on more specialised and expensive wares such as buttons, buckles and intricate brass goods, so that its 'Brumagem pretences' made it the 'toyshop of Europe'; the Snow Hill streets were the centre of the gunfinishing industry [33:58–9]. While Wolverhampton, which made buckles and locks, grew at a similar rate, Walsall, which made saddlers' ironmongery, developed more slowly [5:12; 34:4–5]. Sheffield prospered on cutlery and metal tools such as scissors and files in a smaller metal-producing district that was increasingly making its own steel, as Hey has shown [5:12; 35:93–196]. The populations of Birmingham and Sheffield sextupled between 1650 and 1750, faster even than the fastest-expanding textile towns, Manchester and Leeds.

In addition to the construction of large, heavily-armed ships for long-distance trade in London and Deptford, private shipbuilding brought more work to ports such as Newcastle and Whitby on the north-east coast, replacing Ipswich and other East Anglian towns because of lower costs [36:62–70]. The dockyard towns Deptford, Chatham, Portsmouth and Plymouth needed to be large because the huge size of the warships required a large workforce for their assembly; wars first with the Dutch and after 1689 with the French ensured these ports rapid growth.

Lastly, the market town of Bath was attracting prosperous health and pleasure-seeking visitors to its waters in ever-growing numbers, particularly from about 1700, as staying at inland spas for several weeks in the summer became increasingly fashionable among gentry and well-to-do traders and professional people [5:1–17; 15:17–65].

By 1750 around 25 per cent of England's population lived in towns, and 17–18 per cent lived in centres with more than 10,000 people. The latter figure was now higher than in continental countries (except Holland), where urban growth was much slower because agricultural productivity did not improve, according to E. A. Wrigley [37:63]. While London and the two leading provincial towns of 1650 continued to grow, the great provincial cities of the future now also emerged.