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THE CAMBRIDGE URBAN HISTORY OF BRITAIN

VOLUME I

600–1540

The first volume of *The Cambridge Urban History* surveys the history of British towns from their post-Roman origins in the seventh century down to the sixteenth century. It provides the first ever detailed overview of the course of medieval urban development, and draws on archaeological and architectural as well as documentary sources. The volume combines thematic analysis with regional and national surveys, with full coverage of developments in England, Scotland and Wales. The international team of contributors represent historical, geographical and archaeological expertise, and the whole marks a major step forward in the understanding of the medieval British town.

Part I examines historiographical tradition and the origins of British towns. Parts II and III focus on the early and later medieval periods respectively, and Part IV contains a sequence of systematic regional surveys. Extensively illustrated with maps, figures and pictorial evidence, this volume of *The Cambridge Urban History* is complete with ranking lists of towns and an extensive bibliography.

The editor D. M. PALLISER is Professor of Medieval History in the School of History at the University of Leeds. He has published more than forty books, articles and pamphlets on urban history between the tenth and the sixteenth century.

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THE CAMBRIDGE URBAN HISTORY OF BRITAIN

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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.

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Preface by the General Editor

British cities and towns at the end of the twentieth century are at a turning-point: their role, developed over hundreds of years, is being challenged. The redevelopment of bigger city centres in the 1960s, and of many small county and market towns during subsequent decades, has eroded much of the ancient palimpsest, the mixture of public and private buildings, high streets and back lanes, which has given them for so long a sense of place, of physical coherence and individual communal identity.[1] The decline of traditional urban industries, increasingly at the mercy of global forces, has been partially redressed by the expansion of the service sector, but the recent arrival of American-style out-of-town shopping malls has contributed to the contraction of retailing in the old central areas of towns, even affecting the business of their medieval markets, while shopping parades in the suburbs are littered with empty premises.

Just as economic activity has begun to decamp from the city, so the cultural and leisure life of town centres is being threatened by the migration of cinemas and other entertainment to the urban periphery, and the decay of municipal provision. Fundamental to the weakening position of British cities in recent times has been the erosion of municipal power and autonomy, first through the transfer of key civic functions to the state during and after the second world war and, more recently, through a brutal assault by Conservative governments of the 1980s and 1990s on the financial position of town halls and their ability to sustain their civic responsibilities. It is little wonder that, in this problematic urban world, issues of social exclusion and environmental degradation seem increasingly stark, their effects impacting on the whole of national society.

Of course, the decline of the city is not a uniquely British phenomenon. Throughout much of Western Europe there has been a loss of momentum, a

[1] Such changes have also destroyed much of the archaeological record, the buried archives of towns, so essential for understanding their early history.

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decay of confidence, manifested but hardly resolved by the endless spate of European conferences, research programmes and official reports on the subject, almost an industry in itself. However, the problems and pressures seem particularly acute in Britain, raising questions about how far their current difficulties reflect longer-term structural factors related to the processes by which Britain became the first modern urban nation. Is the peripheralisation of economic and cultural activity the logical conclusion of the spatial fragmentation of British cities, including suburbanisation, which has been occurring since 1800? Why have so many of Britain's great cities fared so badly in the twentieth century? Is this related to the nature of the rapid urbanisation and industrialisation from the late eighteenth century, based on low human capital formation and cheap fuel, which made it difficult to maintain growth once other countries began to exploit cheap fuel as well?

And yet if at least some of the problems of Britain's present-day cities and towns may be rooted in the past, the historic experience of our urban communities encourages us to believe that, given greater autonomy both of leadership and funding, they can generate an effective response to many of the current challenges. As we shall see in this series, past periods of urban decline, with all their attendant social, political and other difficulties, have often been reversed or moderated by changes of economic direction by towns, whether in the late middle ages through the expansion of service trades, in the seventeenth century through the development of specialist manufacturing and leisure sectors or in the early twentieth century through the rise of new, often consumer-oriented industries. At the present time, general images of urban decline and dereliction are countered, however selectively, by the rise of the Docklands area as the new international financial quarter of the capital, by the renewed vitality of Glasgow, Manchester and Newcastle as regional capitals, by the tourist success of towns like Bath and York marketing their civic heritage, by the social harmony and cultural vibrancy of a multi-ethnic city such as Leicester. Propelled by a strong sense of civic pride, Britain's urban system has shown, over time, a powerful capacity to create new opportunities from changing circumstances, a capacity that remains as crucial now as in the past. Certainly if many of the modern challenges to society have an urban origin then urban solutions are imperative.

Undoubtedly, Britain is an ancient urban country, remarkable for the longevity and, for much of the time, relative stability of its urban system. Though the early city barely outlasted the Romans' departure from these shores, after the seventh and eighth centuries a skeleton of urban centres developed in England, which was fully fleshed out by the start of the fourteenth century, headed by London, already a great European city, but with a corpus of established shire and market towns: the pattern established by 1300 was remarkably stable until the start of the nineteenth century. Scottish and Welsh towns were slower to become fully established and even in the early modern

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period new market burghs were founded in Scotland, but by the eighteenth century the island had a strong, generally affluent and increasingly integrated network of towns, which was to provide the essential springboard for the urban and industrial take-off of the nineteenth century. From the Georgian era cities and towns were centres of manufacturing and commercial expansion, public improvement and enlightenment; they were the centre stage for the enactment of a British identity. In Victoria's reign the city with its political rallies, crafts and factories, railways, gothic town halls, societies and civic amenities threatened to swallow up the country. Whether one should see the growing fascination with the countryside after 1918, that fashionable, if fanciful pursuit of Ambridge, as a new kind of anti-urbanism, or rather as the ultimate post-urban annexation of the countryside and its incorporation into the cultural hinterland of the city, remains in hot debate.[2] But the interwar period was, despite the problems of the biggest industrial cities, a time of considerable prosperity and community pride for many cities and towns up and down the country. Even in the aftermath of the second world war, many of the traditional functions and relationships of the British urban system survived – at least until the 1960s.

This is a good time for a systematic historical investigation of the rise of British cities and towns over the *longue durée*. Not just because understanding urban society is too important a task to be left to contemporary sociologists, geographers and planners, but because of the flourishing state of British urban history. Though earlier scholarly works existed, the last thirty years have seen a revolution in our understanding of the complexity of the social, political and other functions of towns in the past, of the social groups and classes that comprised the urban population, of the relationships within the urban system and between cities and the wider society, whether countryside, region or state. Initially most sonorous for the Victorian period and orchestrated by that brilliant academic conductor, H. J. (Jim) Dyos, in company with Asa Briggs and Sydney Checkland, the new concert of urban historians has increasingly embraced the early modern and medieval periods, a historiographical story explained in detail in the introductions to the separate volumes. The result is that for the first time we can follow the comparative evolution of English, Scottish and Welsh towns from the seventh to the twentieth century, traversing those conventional divisions of historical labour, particularly at the close of the middle ages and the end of the eighteenth century. Mobilising the expertise of historians, geographers, archaeologists, landscape historians and others, the modern study of urban history has always sought to pursue a wide-ranging agenda, aiming, so far as possible, to comprehend communities in the round, to see the interrelation of the different parts, even if such ambitions cannot always be fully achieved.

[2] P. Mandler, 'Against "Englishness": English culture and the limits to rural nostalgia', *TRHS*, 6th series, 7 (1997), 155–75.

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Here urban history offers an important methodological alternative to the more fragmented study of specific urban themes, which, through micro-studies focusing on the most interesting sources and communities, runs the risk of seeing issues, social groups or particular towns in isolation, out of meaningful context. Thickets of knowledge of this type are the bane of sustained and innovative scholarly research, and have contributed much to the distancing of academic literature from the public domain. Strikingly, the last few years have seen a renewed or enhanced recognition of the overarching importance of the urban variable, both dependent and independent, in the many different areas of social, business, demographic and women's history.

In the fertile tradition of urban history, the three volumes of the *Cambridge Urban History of Britain* are the product of a collaborative project, with a good deal of friendship, fellowship, hard talking and modest drinking amongst those involved. The idea for such a series was discussed at Leicester as early as 1977, at a convivial lunch hosted by Jim Dyos, but it was not until 1990 that a proposal was made to launch the series. An advisory board was established, editors agreed and several meetings held to plot the structure of the volumes, the contributors and the publishing arrangements. Since then regular meetings have been held for particular volumes, and the discussions have not only produced important dividends for the coherence and quality of the volumes, but have contributed to the better understanding of the British city in general. The involvement of colleagues working on Scotland has been particularly fruitful.

This series of volumes has had no earmarked funding (though funding bodies have supported research for individual chapters), and the editors and contributors are grateful to the many British and several North American universities for funding, directly and indirectly, the research, travel and other costs of contributors to the enterprise. Through its commitment to the Centre for Urban History, which has coordinated the project, the University of Leicester has been a valued benefactor, while Cambridge University Press, in the friendly guise of Richard Fisher, has been enormously helpful and supportive over the long haul of preparation and publication. The fact that the series, involving nearly ninety different contributors, has been published broadly on schedule owes a great deal to the energy, high commitment and fathomless interpersonal skills of my fellow editors, David Palliser and Martin Daunton (to whom I have been heavily indebted for wise and fortifying counsel), to the collective solidarity of the contributors, as well as to the generous support and patience of partners and families.

Thirty years ago in his introduction to *The Study of Urban History* Dyos declared that 'the field is as yet a very ragged one, and those in it are a little confused as to what they are doing'.[3] Plausibly, the volumes in the present series show that current students of urban history are less confused and somewhat

[3] H. J. Dyos, ed., *The Study of Urban History* (London, 1968), p. 46.

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better dressed intellectually, having access to an extensive wardrobe of evidence, arguments and ideas, with a broad comparative and temporal design. The picture of the British town becomes ever more complex, as our greater knowledge recognises variety where once only uniformity was evident. However, we are at last nearer the point of uncovering the spectrum of historical processes, which have shaped our many cities and towns, making the urban past more intelligible and accessible, not just to academics, but to those townspeople whose identification with their own contemporary communities at the turn of the millennium is being so constantly and fiercely questioned.

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Abbreviations

Ag.HEW	*The Agrarian History of England and Wales*
Annales ESC	*Annales: économies, sociétiés, civilisations*
Antiq. and Arch. Soc.	Antiquarian and Archaeological Society
AO	Archives Office
APS	*The Acts of the Parliaments of Scotland*, ed. T. Thomson and C. Innes (1814–75)
Arch. (and Hist.) J	Archaeological (and Historical) Journal
Arch. (and Hist.) Soc.	Archaeological (and Historical) Society
Arch. and NHSoc.	Archaeological and Natural History Society
BAHT	*British Atlas of Historic Towns*
BL	British Library
Bull. IHR	*Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research* (now *Historical Research*)
C	Proceedings in the Court of Chancery, Public Record Office
CBA	Council for British Archaeology
CBA Res. Rep.	Council for British Archaeology, Research Reports
CCh.R	*Calendar of Charter Rolls*
CCR	*Calendar of Close Rolls*
CIPM	*Calendar of Inquisitions Post Mortem*
CPR	*Calendar of Patent Rolls*
DNB	*Dictionary of National Biography*
E	Exchequer Records, Public Record Office
Ec.HR	*Economic History Review*
EHR	*English Historical Review*
ER	*The Exchequer Rolls of Scotland*, ed. J. Stuart *et al.* (1878–1908)
GSt.	*Guildhall Studies in London History*
HJ	*Historical Journal*

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HMC	Historical Manuscripts Commission
HMSO	Her Majesty's Stationery Office
HR	*Historical Research*
J	*Journal*
JEcc.Hist.	*Journal of Ecclesiastical History*
JMed.H	*Journal of Medieval History*
JUH	*Journal of Urban History*
LJ	*London Journal*
LMAS	London and Middlesex Archaeological Society
Med. Arch.	*Medieval Archaeology*
New DNB	*New Dictionary of National Biography*
NHist.	*Northern History*
PIMSST	Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, Studies and Texts
P&P	*Past and Present*
PRO	Public Record Office, London
Proc.	*Proceedings*
Proc. Soc. Antiq. Scot.	*Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland*
RCAHMS	Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments and Constructions of Scotland
RCHM	Royal Commission on Historical Monuments
RMS	*Registrum Magni Sigilli Regum Scotorum*, ed. J. M. Thomson *et al.* (1882–1914)
RO	Record Office
RRS	*Regesta Regum Scottorum*, ed. G. W. S. Barrow *et al.* (1960–)
RS	Rolls Series
SHist.	*Southern History*
SHR	*Scottish Historical Review*
SP	State Papers Domestic, Public Record Office
SR	*Statutes of the Realm*, ed. A. Luders *et al.*
SRO	Scottish Record Office, Edinburgh
TLMAS	*Transactions of the London and Middlesex Archaeological Society*
TRHS	*Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*
UH	*Urban History*
UHY	*Urban History Yearbook*, now *Urban History*
VCH	*Victoria County History*

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Introductory

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