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978-0-521-07315-8 - Growth and Decline in Colchester, 1300-1525

R. H. Britnell

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

The number of England's inhabitants recovered only slowly from the demographic disasters of the fourteenth century. The best current estimates suggest that, having stood at between 4.5 and 6.0 million in 1348, the population of the kingdom was only somewhere between 2.25 and 2.75 million in the 1520s.¹ If output per head had remained unchanged throughout the period from 1348 to 1525 this would mean that national income in the latter year was approximately one half what it had been in the former. But during the later fourteenth and fifteenth centuries a larger part of the population than before was able to find regular employment, and more resources were available per head of the population. Wage levels rose, and families were able to buy more food and manufactured goods as a reward for their labours. The later fifteenth century was a golden age in the history of standards of living. Even in the 1520s, though real wages had fallen a long way from their fifteenth-century peak, skilled craftsmen could earn 25 per cent more than equivalent wage earners at the opening of the fourteenth century.² The implications of these changes for the level and composition of national income are imperfectly understood. There are as yet no aggregate estimates either of incomes or of output sufficiently dependable to assess the combined effect of lower population and higher output per man. Interpretations of the economic history of these centuries vary considerably according to the emphasis which different historians place upon the main economic variables.

The want of national statistics has encouraged local and sectoral researches into a wide range of topics relating to England's economic performance, and the accumulation of such studies has led to general agreement on some issues which were once controversial. It is now

¹ J. Hatcher, *Plague, Population and the English Economy, 1348-1530* (London, 1977), pp. 68-9.

² E. H. Phelps Brown and S. V. Hopkins, *A Perspective of Wages and Prices* (London, 1981), pp. 28-9.

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commonly accepted that agricultural output was slow to recover from the crises of the fourteenth century, and that land was cultivated both less extensively and less intensively in the earlier sixteenth century than in the early fourteenth. But there is less agreement concerning urban experience, despite the well documented arguments of Mr Phythian-Adams and Professor Dobson to the effect that contraction was more common than growth.³ Dr Bridbury, in particular, has argued that evidence of increased urban wealth between 1334 and 1524 jeopardises any pessimistic interpretation of England's economic performance between these dates.⁴ The difficulty of establishing what happened in towns results chiefly from the poor quality of available statistical data. It is harder to establish how urban economies were faring than to trace developments in those smaller, rural communities for which good estate documents survive. Arguments about variations in urban prosperity are liable to flounder into quantitative statements which cannot be tested or even closely defined.

Besides the obvious uncertainties concerning urban populations, economic activity and wealth, there are other research problems currently linked to the question of urban prosperity. In recent years the *Economic History Review* has accepted articles relating to town government, borough office-holders and the recruitment of burgesses.⁵ The nature of urban oligarchies in the late Middle Ages, pioneered as a topic in constitutional history, is now examined as much for its relevance to the characteristics of urban wealth.⁶ A related issue which has received less attention is the development of restrictive by-laws; Dr Hibbert has argued that the level of regulation in industry and trade was in part determined by expectations of growth, stagnation or contraction, and that townsmen in the late Middle Ages were more constrained by public controls than their forebears because of the typically poorer commercial environment in which they lived.⁷ The documentation needed to study these institutional changes is

³ C. Phythian-Adams, 'Urban Decay in Late Medieval England', in P. Abrams and E. A. Wrigley, eds., *Towns in Societies: Essays in Economic History and Historical Sociology*, Past and Present Publications (Cambridge, 1978), pp. 159–85; R. B. Dobson, 'Urban Decline in Late Medieval England', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th ser., xxvii (1977), pp. 1–22.

⁴ A. R. Bridbury, *Economic Growth: England in the Later Middle Ages* (London, 1962), pp. 74–82; *idem*, 'English Provincial Towns in the Later Middle Ages', *Ec.H.R.*, 2nd ser., xxxiv (1981), pp. 17–22.

⁵ R. B. Dobson, 'Admissions to the Freedom of the City of York in the Later Middle Ages', *Ec.H.R.*, 2nd ser., xxvi (1973), pp. 1–21; Bridbury, 'English Provincial Towns', pp. 1–24; J. I. Kermode, 'Urban Decline? The Flight from Office in Late Medieval York', *Ec.H.R.*, 2nd ser., xxxv (1982), pp. 179–98.

⁶ E.g. R. S. Gottfried, *Bury St. Edmunds and the Urban Crisis, 1290–1539* (Princeton, 1982), pp. 131–66.

⁷ A. B. Hibbert, 'The Economic Policies of Towns', in M. M. Postan, E. E. Rich and E. Miller, eds., *The Cambridge Economic History of Europe*, iii: *Economic Organization and Policies in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1963), pp. 179–229.

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more often extant than good economic statistics. The questions are of interest in their own right, and a great deal of work remains to be done. Yet without direct information relating to economic performance the economic interpretation of social change is a hazardous pursuit. The study of institutional change in towns of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries provides no substitute for economic evidence and in fact runs into difficulties when that evidence is not forthcoming.

There is, however, no corpus of statistical evidence adequate to chart the economic development of most English towns. General surveys have to depend upon an eclectic range of material, and their conclusions must accordingly be confined to broad generalisations about the outcome of changes over long periods. Causal relationships between economic, social and constitutional changes cannot be investigated closely in this type of study because in so many towns the evidence is confined to one or two strands of relevant information. Only in the case of a few well documented towns is it feasible to examine in close conjunction all the various types of evidence relating to economic change which occupy historians working on a larger scale. The present study of Colchester takes up this challenge. It aims to establish with greater precision the chronology of change than a general survey could do. It sets out, too, to examine a variety of themes in close juxtaposition, and to sound out some causal explanations more thoroughly than it would be possible to do with many towns together. The results, though in no way a substitute for general surveys, can serve as a reference point for scrutinising their conclusions. A study of Colchester has the particular advantage that the town is recognised as a principal witness in the case for urban growth, which means that it is legitimate to form some general observations on the strength of its evidence alone.

Though Colchester is a well documented town by the standards of medieval England, the economic evidence is nevertheless of a low quality. The assessment presented here of Colchester's economic performance through the years between 1300 and 1525 depends heavily upon the statistical series printed in the Appendix, all of which are tantalising in that, though related to economic quantities, they do not directly measure outputs or inputs. Most of the series are discussed in the course of the book with a view to assessing their value; each on its own would be open to multiple objections as an economic indicator. However, the agreement between the different sets of figures concerning Colchester's economic growth in the later fourteenth century and contraction during the fifteenth century means that some generalisations may be made which do not depend only upon the independent reliability of the separate series. There is here a point of inductive method which has been widely employed in

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agrarian studies⁸ but which has found less application in the investigation of urban economies. If it is more probable than not that a measured series implies an associated economic change, then that probability is increased if other evidence of similar quality points in the same direction. An increase in the number of mills at work would carry little conviction on its own as evidence of increasing consumption of foodstuffs. It would be *prima facie* more likely to mean this than anything else, however, and the probability that it does so is enhanced by evidence of an increase in the brewing of ale. The combined testimony of these series could be overturned only by showing (1) that there is some non-economic reason why all the series should move in the same direction, or (2) that one or more of the series is more likely than not to imply something other than it seems to do, or (3) that there is new evidence to indicate a different set of conclusions.

The relationship in this study between the different aspects of Colchester's history to be discussed is as follows:

	1300– 49 <i>Chapter</i>	1350– 1414 <i>Chapter</i>	1415– 1525 <i>Chapter</i>
A Colchester cloth and its markets	1	4	11
B Industrial organisation	1	5	12
C Urban population and consumption	1	6	13
D Credit and wealth	1	7	14
E The borough constitution	2	8	15
F Regulation of industry and trade	3	9	16
G The urban impact upon agriculture	3	10	17

Movements of population are of prime importance for the interpretation of urban development, and the sections dealing with this topic are the core around which other matters are organised. Some explanation of Colchester's changing size is offered (chiefly in the sections designated A and B) and some of its consequences are illustrated (chiefly in those designated D, E, F and G). The intricacy of these themes in conjunction, and the scarcity of comparable integrated studies, precludes extensive comparison with other towns, though many points of similarity and dissimilarity are noted in passing. But the fact that the town was exceptionally fortunate during the period under review, when it emerged

⁸ This principle is fundamental to the methods of enquiry pioneered by Professor Postan.

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from the backwaters of English commerce to become one of the dozen wealthiest towns in the kingdom, implies a convenient standard of comparison with other towns. Particular attention is drawn to this point in the further conclusions at the end of the book, but it is implicit in much of the earlier discussion.

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PART I

Rusticity, 1300–49

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Urban economy

I

At the opening of the fourteenth century Colchester preserved the four-square features of its Roman origins. The walls of the ancient *colonia* enclosed a rectangular area of 109 acres, and inside the gates the main thoroughfares formed a T-shape more or less aligned with the principal Roman streets.¹ The trunk of the T, the modern High Street, was unambiguously the town centre. From its highest point at Cornhill down to the church of St Nicholas it was wide enough to contain the markets for grain, dairy produce, poultry, fish and meat.² Despite the inevitable noise and dirt this was a residential street, and some of the best stone-built accommodation in the town was to be found there.³ On its northern side stood the Norman moot hall where sessions of the borough courts were held and where town revenues were collected.⁴ The walled area was also the ecclesiastical heart of Colchester; eight of the twelve urban parish churches were built there, two of them beside the high street, and one of them in the middle of it surrounded by stalls.⁵ It was supposed that Colchester had been King Coel's capital city, and that the defences had been first built either by him or by his daughter St Helen.⁶ For all that, the convenience of the walls as a source of building stone had not been overlooked, and they were consequently in too poor a state of repair to

¹ Morant, *Colchester*, i, p. 6; P. Crummy, *Aspects of Anglo-Saxon and Norman Colchester*, Colchester Archaeological Report, i; Council for British Archaeology Report, xxxix (London, 1981), pp. 48–9.

² CR 34/11d (corn); CR 32/1r (dairy produce); OB, fos. 31v, 33r (fish); OB, fos. 31v, 32r, 33v, 34r (meat).

³ P. Crummy, *Colchester: Recent Excavations and Research* (Colchester, 1974), p. 32.

⁴ Crummy, *Aspects of Anglo-Saxon and Norman Colchester*, pp. 60–3.

⁵ Morant, *Colchester*, ii, p. 1; OB, fo. 168v.

⁶ OB, fo. 20r; Henry of Huntingdon, *Historia Anglorum, 55 B.C.–A.D. 1154*, ed. T. Arnold, Rolls ser. (London, 1879), p. 30.

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be considered any longer as effective fortifications.⁷ Houses were built up against them, and one family had assumed the surname Upthewall.⁸

The residential part of Colchester was not restricted to streets within the walls. As in other walled towns at this time the occupied area extended into suburbs outside the gates.⁹ This was not because the centre was packed with people. The north-eastern quarter was almost devoid of townsmen's houses; a royal castle stood there, reputedly on the site of King Coel's palace,¹⁰ and in the angle of the walls there was a Franciscan friary with its grounds.¹¹ Near the castle lay the fields and meadows attached to it; here, and in the south-western angle of the walls, there were crops growing in the spring and summer months.¹² Even the more populated parts of the town contained many intramural gardens and orchards, and each of the parish churches had its own churchyard.¹³ But beyond the walls there was no physical constraint on development other than the River Colne to the north and east, and on all sides suburban locations had some positive attractions. The river drew artisans who needed water for industrial purposes, and there were further supplies of water from springs and wells.¹⁴ The most important developments were by Colchester's larger monastic foundations, the Benedictine abbey of St John the Baptist and the Augustinian priory of St Botolph, both of which stood to the south of the town centre with populous streets at their gates.

Besides the town walls, castle and monastic buildings, none of which had been built by burgesses, there was no grand architecture in Colchester. The parish churches were small and mostly rubble-built, with a conspicuous ingredient of re-used Roman tile and brick in their construction.¹⁵ Domestic architecture was even less imposing. Stone buildings, where they occurred, were also built of rubble, and were often a patchwork of alterations.¹⁶ Houses were small, since even the wealthier townsmen lived in only a handful of rooms; in 1301 John Menny the tanner had a hall, chamber, kitchen, granary, bakehouse and tannery; Roger Dyer's house

⁷ CR 7/10d; CR 9/6r; CR 9/6r; CR 10/10d.

⁸ OB, fo. 56v; CR 2/6r, 12r; *Rot. Parl.*, i, p. 258.

⁹ R. H. Hilton, *A Medieval Society: The West Midlands at the End of the Thirteenth Century* (London, 1966), pp. 185–7.

¹⁰ OB, fo. 20v.

¹¹ Morant, *Colchester*, ii, pp. 43–4.

¹² *Ibid.*, i, p. 10; P.R.O., S.C.6/839/18, mm. 1r, 2d; S.C.6/839/19, mm. 1d, 2d; J. H. Round, 'Berryfield, Colchester', *T.E.A.S.*, new ser., xvii (1926), p. 37.

¹³ St Runwald's churchyard was beside West Stockwell Street, separate from the church: Morant, *Colchester*, ii, p. 10.

¹⁴ RPB, fo. 65v; Morant, *Colchester*, i, pp. 1–2.

¹⁵ Morant, *Colchester*, ii, p. 1; Crummy, *Aspects of Anglo-Saxon and Norman Colchester*, pp. 47–8.

¹⁶ Crummy, *Colchester: Recent Excavations*, pp. 29–31.

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comprised a living room, a chamber, a kitchen, a brewhouse and probably a separate dyehouse; Peter le Wylde had a hall, a chamber, a kitchen and a barn in which to store his grain.¹⁷ Most townsmen occupied or shared premises smaller than these. The contrast between Colchester housing and that in nearby village streets would not have been very marked, and the town churches were no finer than those of rural parishes. There was accordingly a sharp contrast in size and quality between the properties to be seen in the streets of Colchester and those of neighbouring monastic and manorial lords.

The inhabitants of Colchester were seemingly well placed to trade with the outside world. The Colne flowed by the northern wall and then meandered southwards, rapidly broadening into an estuary approachable from the sea. On the river bank to the east of the town, half an hour's walk from the centre, a detached settlement of seafarers and fishermen had grown up at Hythe.¹⁸ Within the past hundred years wharves here had superseded those at Old Heath further to the south, and warehouses had been constructed to accommodate merchandise awaiting shipment. Though subordinate to Ipswich for customs administration, Colchester was a port of call for merchant ships and a point of embarkation for local agricultural produce and manufactures.¹⁹ Large vessels could ride in the mouth of the Colne estuary in a reach known as the Wodesende between Brightlingsea and Wivenhoe, and from there smaller craft made their way to and from Hythe, sometimes over a distance of as much as five miles.²⁰ Besides fishing boats, some merchant shipping belonged to men of the town.²¹ But the rate of growth of Colchester's sea-borne trade had been surpassed by that of other east-coast ports. Because of the restricted mooring facilities at Hythe, Colchester probably had fewer ships than Brightlingsea at the mouth of the estuary or Salcott along the coast to the south-west.²² And though the community at Hythe owed its existence to developments in Colchester's fishing and maritime trade, neither its size nor its dynamism bore comparison with that of Harwich or Manningtree,

¹⁷ *Rot. Parl.*, i, pp. 243, 244, 248.

¹⁸ An agreement concerning the tithes of St Leonard at Hythe dates from 1227, and the earliest references to 'old hythe' occurs soon after this: *Colch. Cart.*, i, p. 178, and ii, pp. 307–8, 545–6.

¹⁹ For warehouses, see P.R.O., E.101/556/14r, 19Ar. In 1296–7 wheat from north-eastern Essex was collected in Colchester for shipment to Gascony: E.101/556/1, m. 2r.

²⁰ P.R.O., E.101/556/14r.

²¹ *Documents illustrating the Crisis of 1297–98 in England*, ed. M. C. Prestwich, Camden 4th ser., xxiv (London, 1980), no. 199, p. 187.

²² The provisioning of Edward II's muster at Newcastle upon Tyne in 1319 and of his Scottish campaign of 1322 employed ships from Brightlingsea and Salcott but none from Colchester: P.R.O., E.101/556/7r, 10r.

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two nearby coastal towns of thirteenth-century foundation, whose growth of population and wealth had been more rapid than that of their neighbours.²³

Colchester had direct communications with London which, though not drawn on the fourteenth-century Gough Map, are indicated by the inclusion there of Brentwood, Chelmsford and Witham.²⁴ A growing trade on this route in the thirteenth century induced the founding of seven markets along it between 1199 and 1312.²⁵ To the north Colchester had highway communications with Ipswich, and to the west two separate routes led, through numerous small market towns, to Cambridge and Bishop's Stortford. Even eastwards, in the Tendring peninsula, though there were no major thoroughfares, there was some traffic to Manningtree and Harwich, as well as to a number of large villages with little industry of their own which were dependent upon urban manufactures. For all this, the principal urban development of the region in the thirteenth century had been in communities which started off much smaller than Colchester. Brentwood, Chelmsford and the nucleus of modern Witham were new towns of the thirteenth century, and Chelmsford was already of sufficient administrative importance to be functioning as county town for Essex. To the west of Colchester, Braintree, Coggeshall and Halstead all had free messuages appropriate to occupation by artisans and tradesmen.²⁶ The growth of population in the market towns of Essex during the thirteenth century had greatly exceeded that within Colchester, and in this sense Colchester had benefited less than smaller and newer communities from the expansion of inland trade.

In spite of sea communications and road connections, Colchester in 1300 was a town whose products and services were primarily sold to men of the surrounding countryside. Its interests in this respect were sufficiently pronounced to affect the development of rural marketing in north-eastern Essex. Within a radius of eight miles only one new market was founded during the thirteenth century, by a road junction four miles to the east of

²³ Mistley and Harwich accounted respectively for 3.1 and 1.0 per cent of the thirtieth collected in Tendring Hundred in 1237, before Manningtree was founded in the parish of Mistley. In 1334, however, Mistley and Manningtree together contributed 4.6 per cent of the fifteenth collected in Tendring Hundred; Harwich contributed 5.4 per cent: P.R.O., E.179/107/1; *The Lay Subsidy of 1334*, ed. R. E. Glasscock, The British Academy: Records of Social and Economic History, new ser., ii (London, 1975), pp. 88-9.

²⁴ *The Map of Great Britain c. A.D. 1360*, issued by the Bodleian Library (Oxford, 1958); F. M. Stenton, *Preparatory to Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. D. M. Stenton (Oxford, 1970), p. 240.

²⁵ R. H. Britnell, 'Essex Markets before 1350', *Essex Archaeology and History*, xiii (1981), p. 18.

²⁶ R. H. Britnell, 'Burghal Characteristics of Market Towns in Medieval England', *Durham University Journal*, new ser., xlii (1981), pp. 147-9.