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

R. H. Britnell

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## GROWTH AND DECLINE IN COLCHESTER, 1300-1525

This is a study of economic and institutional change in one of England's principal cloth towns during the late Middle Ages, drawing extensively upon unpublished records in Colchester borough archives and elsewhere. The approach to urban history is an exceptionally broad one; this is the first history of a medieval English town to analyse in conjunction changes in the pattern of overseas trade, in industrial organisation and output, in urban government, and in the economy and society of the countryside. First it describes Colchester in the earlier fourteenth century, its trade, its agricultural setting and its form of government. At this time the town was a small one even by English standards, with fewer than 4,000 inhabitants. The book then shows how clothmaking grew in Colchester after the Black Death and how the population increased until about 1414 it was perhaps twice what it had been before the plague years. The implications of this for the wealth of Colchester's merchant class, the government of the borough and for the town's rôle in the local economy are discussed. It is suggested that urban growth on this scale was not great enough to make much impact upon the course of rural development. The last section of the book shows that Colchester's growth was not sustained through the fifteenth century and that the trade and population of the town contracted, particularly after 1450. Some of the causal links between economic contraction and institutional change in the borough are examined, and it is suggested that for the most part increasing economic regulation and the growth of oligarchic principles of government are not to be explained by reference to economic misfortune. The study closes with an examination of Colchester's contribution to agrarian depression in the Essex countryside.

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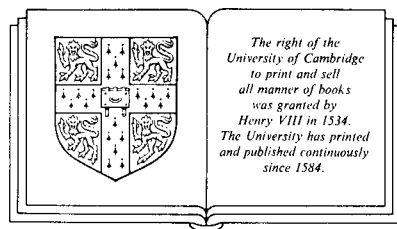
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# GROWTH AND DECLINE IN COLCHESTER, 1300–1525

R. H. BRITNELL

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*For Jennifer*

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My thanks are due to the late Sir Michael Postan and to Dr Marjorie Chibnall. They launched me into the economic history of the Middle Ages and supervised the earlier stages of my research. I am also obliged to Dr Wendy Childs, Mrs Linda Drury and to the late Miss Susan Flower for information brought to light in the course of their work. I have profited from discussing Colchester with Dr Maryanne Kowaleski, who showed me some points of comparison with medieval Exeter, and with Dr Larry Poos, who gave me advance notice of his important findings in the demography of medieval Essex.

Access to Colchester borough records has become easier over the years, and it is a pleasure to acknowledge the help of those who, at different stages of play, have allowed me to use them, often at some inconvenience to themselves: to the last town clerk of Colchester, Mr N. Catchpole, to Mr T.-D. Clarke and his staff at the Colchester and Essex Museum, and more recently to Mr Paul Coverley, Colchester's first archivist. For money my obligations are wholly to the University of Durham.

In preparing my manuscript for publication I have benefited at each stage from the secretarial expertise of Mrs Margaret Hall. My colleague Dr Duncan Bythell kindly looked out passages likely to cause difficulty to readers, and persuaded me to write an Introduction.

Finally I must record this book's debt to my wife, who has helped it forward with encouragement and advice.

R. H. B.

ABBREVIATIONS

PRINTED SOURCES

Texts and calendars published by the Record Commissioners

<i>Rot. Hund.</i>	<i>Rotuli Hundredorum</i> (2 vols., 1812–18)
<i>Rot. Parl.</i>	<i>Rotuli Parliamentorum</i> (6 vols., 1783)
<i>Statutes</i>	<i>The Statutes of the Realm</i> (11 vols., 1810–28)

Public Record Office texts and calendars

<i>Cal. Chart. R.</i>	<i>Calendar of Charter Rolls</i>
<i>Cal. Close R.</i>	<i>Calendar of Close Rolls</i>
<i>Cal. Fine R.</i>	<i>Calendar of Fine Rolls</i>
<i>Cal. Inq. P.M.</i>	<i>Calendar of Inquisitions Post Mortem</i>
<i>Cal. Pat. R.</i>	<i>Calendar of Patent Rolls</i>
<i>Feudal Aids</i>	<i>Inquisitions and Assessments relating to Feudal Aids</i>
<i>L. and P.</i>	<i>Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, of the Reign of Henry VIII</i>

Journals and Reports

<i>Annales E.S.C.</i>	<i>Annales, économies, sociétés, civilisations</i>
<i>B.A.R.</i>	<i>British Archaeological Reports</i>
<i>E.H.R.</i>	<i>English Historical Review</i>
<i>Ec.H.R.</i>	<i>Economic History Review</i>
<i>T.E.A.S.</i>	<i>Transactions of Essex Archaeological Society</i>



Other printed works

<i>Colch. Cart.</i>	<i>Cartularium Monasterii Sancti Johannis Baptiste de Colecestria</i> , ed. S. A. Moore, Roxburghe Club (2 vols., London, 1897)
<i>Essex Fines</i>	<i>Feet of Fines for Essex</i> , ed. R. E. G. Kirk and others, Essex Archaeological Society (4 vols., Colchester, 1899–1964)
<i>Morant, Colchester</i>	P. Morant, <i>The History and Antiquities of the most Ancient Town and Borough of Colchester</i> (London, 1748)
<i>Morant, Essex</i>	P. Morant, <i>The History and Antiquities of the County of Essex</i> (2 vols., London, 1768)
<i>O.E.D.</i>	<i>The Oxford English Dictionary</i> , ed. J. A. H. Murray and others, 2nd edn (12 vols., Oxford, 1933)
<i>Return of Names</i>	House of Commons, <i>Every Member of the Lower House of the Parliaments of England, Scotland and Ireland, i: England, 1213–1702</i> (London, 1878)

MANUSCRIPTS

A. Record repositories other than Colchester borough records

B.L.	British Library
E.R.O.	Essex Record Office
P.C.C.	Prerogative Court of Canterbury
P.R.O.	Public Record Office
W.A.M.	Westminster Abbey Muniments

B. Colchester borough muniments

CR	Court roll
LB	The Ledger Book of St John’s Abbey, Colchester (Davis no. 269)
OB	The Oath Book
RPB	The Red Paper Book

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## DATES

Dates given in the form 1310/11 signify the office year from Michaelmas to Michaelmas. The convention is useful for Colchester's own records, since borough officers began their term of office on the Monday after Michaelmas. It may also be employed in references to manorial records, since manorial officers normally took up their duties on Michaelmas day or the day after. Accounts or other records which do not correspond to these terms (e.g. many royal receivers' accounts) are dated in the form 1310–11 where no more exact information is necessary; this date implies a period from some time in 1310 to some time in 1311.

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## REFERENCES TO COLCHESTER BOROUGH RECORDS

Except in the case of the Cartulary of St John's Abbey, which is adequately edited (*Colch. Cart.* above), references to Colchester borough records are to the original manuscripts. A number of Colchester records were edited in translation earlier in the century by I. H. Jeayes and W. G. Benham, and these editions are invaluable as calendars and indexes to the original records. They are not complete or reliable enough, however, to be used as substitutes for the manuscripts in a study of this kind.

### THE REGISTERS

In the case of the Red Paper Book and the Oath Book the folio numbers used in citing references are the modern pencilled ones, since there is no coherent original numbering of the leaves. The Ledger Book of St John's Abbey has fourteenth-century foliation in Arabic numerals, and this has been used in references to the texts it contains.

### THE COURT ROLLS

References to the court rolls are given in the form CR 1/1, where the first number is the modern number given to the roll (in this case the earliest one, that for 1310/11), and the second number is that of the membrane. Each roll comprises a number of membranes sewn Exchequer fashion, and for some rolls there are several alternative numberings of the membranes. References here are always to the earliest numbering, which is usually a medieval one, added at a time when each roll was complete. These were the membrane numbers used by the compilers of the Oath Book index to the rolls. This oldest system of numeration, though it presents some awkwardnesses, has the advantage that there is no ambiguity about which sequence of numbers is in question, and also has the merit of drawing attention to gaps in the record which are obscured by more recent

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numberings of the membranes. However, not all membranes have clearly visible numbers, and in some instances the original ones must be deduced from the sequence of the membranes or from the Oath Book. The following list is designed as a check list to facilitate the finding of references. From this list may be found (a) the year of each surviving roll, (b) the modern numbering of the rolls and (c) the original numbering of those membranes which survive, together with the sequence in which they are now sewn. The oldest roll, for example, dates from 1310/11, is numbered CR 1 and has 12 surviving membranes, those originally numbered 10 and 13 having been lost.

The medieval numbering of the rolls is not usually hard to find. Before 1352 (CR 1–9) it is mostly in the bottom left-hand corner; between 1353 and 1400 (CR 10–31) at the top, in or towards the right-hand corner; from 1400 to 1449 (CR 32–64) at the foot; from 1451 to 1485 (CR 65–82) in the bottom right-hand corner; and in the early sixteenth century (CR 83–102) at the foot or in one of the lower corners. Where there is no surviving trace of a number this has been indicated below by the use of brackets.

Some rolls are sewn up with the membranes in reverse sequence (*i.e.* with the first membrane at the bottom and the last at the top). These are indicated in the list with an asterisk following the membrane numbers.

1310/11	CR 1/1–9, 11, 12, 14
1311/12	CR 2/1–4, (5), 6, 7, (8), 9, 10, (11), 12, 13*
1329/30	CR 3/(1), 2–5, (8)*
1333/4	CR 4/1, (2, 3), 4, 7, 9, 8, 10–14
1336/7	CR 5/1–6, (7), 8–10
1340/1	CR 6/1–6, 8–11
1345/6	CR 7/1–4, (5), 6–10, 12, 14
1349/50	CR 8/10
1351/2	CR 9/(1), 2–8*
1353/4	CR 10/1–14*
1356/7	CR 11/1–14*
1359/60	CR 12/1–19
1360/1	CR 13/7–9, 14, 15
1364/5	CR 14/(1), 2–8, 10–15
1366/7	CR 15/1–18
1372/3	CR 16/1–17
1374/5	CR 17/1–12, 14–18, 20
1376/7	CR 18/2, 4–14, 16–23
1378/9	CR 19/1–8, 10, 11, 9, 12–25, (26), 27, 28
1379/80	CR 20/2, 5, 6, 8, (9), 10, 11, 13–34, 36, 37
1381/2	CR 21/(1), 2–32, (32a), 33–56

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1382/3	CR 22/2-57, (58), 1
1383/4	CR 23/22, 23, 25, 26, 29-34, 36-8, 46, 48, 49, 52, 55-7, 59, 63, 20 <sup>a</sup>
1384/5	CR 24/1-26, (26a), 27-59 <sup>b</sup>
1385/6	CR 25/1-36, (37), 38-47, 49-59, 61 <sup>c</sup>
1387/8	CR 26/(1), 2-48, (49), 50-71
1391/2	CR 27/3-42, 44, 45
1392/3	CR 28/1-29, 35-42 <sup>d</sup>
1395/6	CR 29/1-26, 29
1398/9	CR 30/1-25 <sup>e</sup>
1399/1400	CR 31/1-29
1400/1	CR 32/(1), 2-24
1403/4	CR 33/4-20, (21), 22, (22a), 23-8, (29), 30
1404/5	CR 34/(1), 2-7, 9-26
1405/6	CR 35/1-36
1406/7	CR 36/1-32
1409/10	CR 37/3, 14-20, 29-37
1411/12	CR 38/1-21, (22, 23), 24-36, (37)
1413/14	CR 39/1-6, 6(a), 7-30, 32, (33), 34, (35), 36-8, (38a), 39-46, (47)
1416/17	CR 40/45(a), 3-11, (46), 44, 12-15, 18-28, 31-43, 45 <sup>f</sup>
1418/19	CR 41/1-13, (14), 15-28, (29), 30-4, (35)
1419/20	CR 42/(1), 2-32
1422/3	CR 43/1-7, (8), 9-28
1423/4	CR 44/3-33
1424/5	CR 45/3-39
1425/6	CR 46/1-28
1426/7	CR 47/4-12, 15-31
1427/8	CR 48/3-12, 14-32
1428/9	CR 49/1, 3-35
1429/30	CR 50/1-27, (28), 29-36, (37)
1432/3	CR 51/1-9, (11), 12, 10, 13-20, (21-3), 24-33, (34, 35)
1434/5	CR 52/1-29
1435/6	CR 53/1-30
1436/7	CR 54/1, 2, 4-32
1437/8	CR 55/1-15, (16), 18-50
1438/9	CR 56/1-20, 20(a), 21-39, (40)

<sup>a</sup> Membrane 56 reversed.<sup>b</sup> Membranes 43, 48, 50, 51, 53-9 reversed. Appended to this roll is a single membrane (m. 6) of a roll of business devolved from the royal assizes, mostly instructions to seize Colchester men or to form juries.<sup>c</sup> Membrane 2 reversed.<sup>d</sup> Membrane 1 reversed.<sup>e</sup> Membrane 1 reversed.<sup>f</sup> Membranes 45(a), 8, 46, 44, 45 reversed.

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1439/40	CR 57/1-4, 6-29
1442/3	CR 58/1-18, (18a), 19, 20, (21)
1443/4	CR 59/17-24, 1-16
1444/5	CR 60/2, 4-11, 13-25, (27), 28, (29), 30 <sup>g</sup>
1446/7	CR 61/4-14, (15), 16, (17), 18-21, (23)
1447/8	CR 62/1-3, 7, 4-6, 8-23, (24-6)
1448/9	CR 63/1-3, 14, 15, 4-8, 10-13, 16-23
1451/2	CR 64/1-28, (29)
1452/3	CR 65/1-4, 6-25
1455/6	CR 66/1-28
1456/7	CR 67/1-7, (8), 9-13, (14), 15-17, (18), 19-24, (25), 26, 27
1457/8	CR 68/3-12, (13), 14-20, (21), 22-30
1458/9	CR 69/1-19, (20), 21-4
1459/60	CR 70/1-22, (23), 24, (25), 26
1460/1	CR 71/1-19, (20), 21-5
1463/4	CR 72/1-32
1466/7	CR 73/1-4, (5), 6, (7), 8-10, (11), 12-26, (27), 28-37, (38), 39-41
1470/1	CR 74/1-8, (9), 10-15, (16), 17, (18-23), 24, 25, 27, 28, (29-31)
1473/4	CR 75/1-11, (12, 13), 14-25, (26)
1476/7	CR 76/1-10, (11-13), 14, (15, 16), 17, (18-21), 22, (23-7), 28, (29, 30), 31
1477/8	CR 77/1-3, (4), 5-18, (19), 20-6, (27), 28, (29)
1480/1	CR 78/1-6, (7), 8, 9, (10), 11-13, (14), 15, (16-18), 19, (20), 21, (22, 23)
1481/2	CR 79/(1, 2), 3-7, (8), 9-17, (18), 19-25, (26, 27), 28-37, (38), 39
1483/4	CR 80/(4), 5, 6, (7, 8), 9-12, (13-18), 19, 20, (21), 22, 23, (24-8) <sup>h</sup>
1484/5	CR 81/1, 3-17, (18), 19-22, (23), 24-9, (30), 31
1509/10	CR 82/3-12, (13), 14-18, 20-30
1510/11	CR 83/(1-10), 11, (12-17)
1511/12 <sup>i</sup>	CR 84/(1-5), 6, (7, 8), 9, (10-15), 19, 17, (18, 21), 20
1512/13	CR 85/(1, 2), 4, 4(a), (5), 6, 7, (8-10), 11, (12-15)
1514/15	CR 86/1-29, 31
1515/16	CR 87/1, 2, 6-21, (22, 23)
1516/17	CR 88/(1-3), 5-24
1517/18	CR 89/1-7, (8), 9-27

<sup>g</sup> Membrane 9 reversed.<sup>h</sup> Membrane 22 reversed.<sup>i</sup> Membranes 14-21 belong to 1510/11.

xvi	<i>References to Colchester borough records</i>
1518/19	CR 90/1-7, (8), 9, 10, (11), 12-14, (14a), 15, 16, (16a, 16b, 16c), 17-20
1519/20	CR 91/1-19, (20), 21-3
1520/1	CR 92/(1), 2, 5, 6, (7), 8-14, (15), 16, 17, (19), 18, 20-6, (27) <sup>j</sup>
1521/2	CR 93/1-23, (23a), 24-6
1522/3	CR 94/(1), 2, (3), 4-12, (13), 14-21, (22, 23)
1524/5	CR 95/1-11, (13), 14-17
1525/6	CR 96/(1, 2), 3, 4, 6, 5, 7-20
1526/7	CR 97/1-19, (20)
1527/8	CR 98/1-20
1529/30	CR 99/1-14, (15), 16-24
1530/1	CR 100/1-18, 20(a), 20(b), 21, 22
1531/2	CR 101/1-16, (17-22), 23, (24) <sup>k</sup>
1532/3	CR 102/(1-24)

<sup>j</sup> Membranes 16 and 18 reversed.

<sup>k</sup> Membrane 18 is numbered xvij.