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VOLUME II

1540–1840

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Introduction

PETER CLARK

In comparison to France, the Low Countries or northern Italy, the pattern of British towns for much of the early modern period was remarkably polarised.[1] Apart from London, there were no large cities and few middle-rank centres of importance, rather a multitude of very small market centres. For England and Wales the urban hierarchy retained into the eighteenth century the thumb-print of its medieval past. London's ancient primacy as the seat of government and the country's most important port was consolidated, as the capital's population probably quadrupled in the sixteenth century (to 200,000 in 1600), and then more than quadrupled again over the next two hundred years. During the Tudor and Stuart period it was supported on the English stage by a cast of forty or so 'great and good' towns (see Chapter 11), major provincial towns but all with populations of under 10,000 in the 1520s and under about 30,000 inhabitants in 1700.[2] Of these, only Newcastle, Bristol, Exeter, Norwich and York could claim to be significant regional cities with extensive trading connections and elaborate civic privileges, and they steadily confirmed their positions as provincial capitals. Most of the rest, places like Gloucester, Leicester or Lincoln, were incorporated shire towns supported by localised trades and industries, meeting the needs of the adjoining countryside. By the Georgian period many of them were profiting from the expansion of their retailing and professional activities, sometimes complemented by specialist craft activity. These regional and county towns were surrounded by several hundred minor market centres, places with fewer than 2,000 people in the sixteenth century, quite often as low as a few hundred; their economies were heavily geared towards marketing and exchange links with the countryside, though by 1700 they had begun to acquire more specialist commercial and other functions. In Wales the vast

[1] Cf. J. de Vries, *European Urbanization 1500–1800* (London, 1984), pp. 107–20.

[2] See below, pp. 347 *et seq.*

majority of towns were in this bottom category, effectively micro-towns, and continued thus into the later Georgian period.

In sixteenth-century Scotland the traditional urban hierarchy was a miniature version of the English model. Edinburgh, with about 12,000 inhabitants in 1560, was not only the northern capital but the leading port with an important continental trade; three east coast ports (Aberdeen, Perth and Dundee) functioned as larger regional centres as well as ports; and the rest were mainly small towns, though here, unlike in England, the medieval network was considerably enlarged by the foundation of several score new baronial burghs. Urban growth was sluggish in Britain before 1700, but thereafter the pace quickened, first in England and then later in Scotland and Wales. The urban hierarchy began to fill out, with a rank size order conforming more to the picture in other urbanised regions of Europe. Provincial cities grew in size and importance. Great Atlantic ports like Liverpool and Glasgow boomed, new regional centres like Birmingham, Manchester and Leeds flourished, and there was a mounting array of specialist manufacturing, transport, leisure and naval towns.

Yet urban change was not a national process in early modern Britain, but a tessellation of local experiences. Only slowly do we see the evolution of a more integrated urban system. Orchestrating the national trend was a diversity of regional and local networks of towns, determined by geophysical factors, ancient jurisdictional arrangements, the state of agriculture, communication links and local cultural traditions (as in religious and ceremonial life). At the same time, regionalism is a fuzzy concept for Britain in this period, not least due to the long-established centralising power of the English state.[3] English regions lacked any strong political or cultural identity. There were no regional parliaments or courts (except for the Council of the North at York prior to 1640) such as one finds in France or Spain. Contemporary references to East Anglia, the Midlands or other regions were rare before the end of the eighteenth century. Even the ancient county units often provided only a problematic focus for urban networks. After 1536 the principality of Wales was annexed to the English crown but never enjoyed major regional/national institutions, and the Welsh network of towns was generally fragmented. By contrast, Scottish towns inherited from the medieval period their own institutional framework, which not only included the division between royal and baronial burghs, but the coordinating and regulating role of the Convention of Royal Burghs. Administrative and legal differences with English towns continued despite the union of crowns in 1603 and the parliamentary union of 1707. Yet within Scotland, as Chapter 4 (and later chapters) demonstrate, there were also significant regional and sub-regional variations of considerable complexity.[4]

[3] For the problems and importance of the regional perspective see P. Hudson, ed., *Regions and Industries* (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 3, 13–23, 30–3; J. Langton, 'The Industrial Revolution and the regional geography of England', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, new series, 9 (1984), 145–67; see also Langton's discussion below, pp. 462 *et seq*.

[4] See below, pp. 158 *et seq*., 177 *et passim*.

Regions then have to be seen as fields of action, even states of mind, in early modern Britain. Many were shaped by externalities: the effect of commercial and shipping links with the continent in the case of East Anglia and the South-East; the Irish and Atlantic trades for the North and South-West. In Tudor and Stuart Wales, the small country and port towns of the central and southern shires looked for leadership to English centres like Shrewsbury and Bristol. Particularly important was the way that London's powerful economic and cultural influence extended in this period from its home territory in the South-East to penetrate (in some measure) other English regions, Wales and even Scotland.

As the following chapters illustrate, regional diversity on the ground requires sensitive interpretation: for some areas a greater recognition of institutional aspects, for others of commercial and industrial forces or of the wide variety of sub-regional networks. None the less, for all the difficulties, a regional approach remains essential, if we are to understand the complexity of British urban change in the period. As we saw in Volume I, by the close of the middle ages the English pattern already displayed significant regional variations, including the greater density of towns in the South-East and East Anglia than in the Midlands or North, the plenitude of small boroughs in the South-West, and the relatively small size of nearly all towns in the North.[5] Despite the increased integration of the British urban system during the later part of the period, one finds strong indications of greater regional differentiation, not only varying rates of urbanisation but the emergence of heavily integrated regional networks of towns in the West Midlands, central Lancashire, the West Riding, north-east and western Scotland, quite often closely associated with the advent of new regional cities.

Regional analysis also sheds light on the changing geographical balance within the urban system at this time. After the Reformation the centre of gravity was still firmly located, as during the middle ages, in the southern and eastern regions of England with their high population densities, fertile farms, river and coastal traffic, and links to the Low Countries and France. By 1840 the balance was tilting towards the uplands – the Midlands, the North, central Scotland and South Wales – as industrialisation and urbanisation in those areas predominated. But such a picture may be too linear. In the early nineteenth century, some of the towns of the South-East and East Anglia fought back, diversifying into new sectors such as military and leisure activity, or developing as transport or commuting centres: in this way they demonstrated the underlying strength and robustness of the traditional urban system.

Any regional partition of England must be essentially strategic, with a choice of scenarios available. The division between the South-East, East Anglia, the Midlands, the North, and the South-West does, however, allow us to examine

[5] D. M. Palliser, ed., *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain*, vol. I: *600–1540* (Cambridge, 2000), ch. 22.

the nature of the urban networks in different parts of the country and the forces shaping their development.[6] We can also identify the evolution of more localised networks. The studies of Scotland and Wales likewise enable both comparison with England and the English regions, and the exploration of local trends. Chapters 2 to 4 open the window on the range, depth and diversity of the British urban system, as it evolved in the three centuries after 1540. We can see the urban system at work, in harness, before we move on to study the different thematic developments and types of town in Parts II and III.

[6] The English regions in Chapter 2 have been identified as follows: *East Anglia*: Cambridgeshire, Huntingdonshire, Norfolk, Suffolk; *South-East*: Bedfordshire, Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Essex, Hampshire, Hertfordshire, Kent, Middlesex, Oxfordshire, Surrey, Sussex; *South-West*: Cornwall, Devon, Dorset, Gloucestershire, Somerset, Wiltshire; *Midlands*: Derbyshire, Herefordshire, Leicestershire, Lincolnshire, Northamptonshire, Nottinghamshire, Rutland, Shropshire, Staffordshire, Warwickshire, Worcestershire; *North*: Cheshire, Cumberland, Durham, Lancashire, Northumberland, Westmorland, Yorkshire.