

Recent Research in English Urban History, c.1450-1650*

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Résumé/Abstract

Au cours de la dernière décennie, peu d'aspects de l'histoire d'Angleterre ont progressé aussi rapidement que celui du milieu urbain pré-industriel. Alors que, il y a tout juste dix ans, peu d'universitaires sérieux œuvraient dans ce domaine et qu'il se donnait peu de cours à ce sujet au niveau du baccalauréat, il existe maintenant un cours complet et de haut calibre dans le programme de l'Open University. De plus, les monographies en histoire urbaine semblent avoir supplanté l'histoire des comtés comme sujet de prédilection de thèses de doctorat.

Une bonne partie des récents travaux sur les problèmes urbains de l'ère pré-industrielle visent toujours à éclaircir des questions qui ont été posées il y a dix ans ou plus. Ces travaux qui portent sur les dissensions politiques, l'évolution des institutions, les relations entre les municipalités et la couronne, et sur d'autres problèmes semblables, ne doivent pas être écartés parce que dépassés. Comme le sujet est très diversifié, il faudra produire un grand nombre de monographies avant de pouvoir généraliser.

Les études portant sur de nouveaux concepts sont tout aussi importantes et peut-être plus innovatrices du point de vue de la méthode de travail car elles touchent en général un plus grand nombre de disciplines et tendent davantage vers la méthodologie quantitative. Elles reposent dans une grande mesure sur le travail de l'anthropologue, du démographe et du géographe et ont, en très peu de temps, élargi considérablement les horizons de l'historien qui s'intéresse à la ville pré-industrielle, grande et petite.

Interest in few areas of English history has developed as fast in the last decade as in the pre-industrial urban setting. Where there were few serious academics at work and little instruction at the undergraduate level, we now have an entire – and very impressive – Open University course on the field, and the genre of urban case studies seems to have replaced the shire as favoured ground for English doctoral theses in history.

Much of the recent work on pre-industrial urban problems continues to probe questions raised a decade or more ago. These studies, which deal with political factionalism, constitutional development, town-crown relations and similar problems, must not be dismissed as obsolete; the enormous diversity of the subject itself necessitates a great number of case studies before generalizations may be obtained.

Equally important and perhaps more innovative in method are those studies of fresher conceptualization, typically more interdisciplinary in approach and more inclined towards quantitative methodology. These rely heavily on the work of the anthropologist, the demographer and geographer and have in a short time greatly expanded the bounds of the historian of the pre-industrial town and city.

A decade ago it would not have been much of an exaggeration to describe pre-industrial English urban history as still the research purview of borough archivists, retired officers of the British forces and a small band of dedicated academics, most of whom were not sheltered in departments of history. Except for the University of Leicester and a few sixth-form classes, the subject was rarely taught in the British Isles and virtually never elsewhere.

Today, by contrast, this is a genuine growth area among historians in Britain. The Open University has an impressive set course (A. 322) relating the elements of early modern English towns to undergraduates,¹ several more traditional universities have fostered programmes² and the "town study" threatens to replace the "shire study" as the leading genre of doctoral thesis. This paper summarizes some of the themes of this work and suggests what new directions might be taken in the years ahead. For the convenience of organization recent work is divided into

that which is fundamentally political in orientation and that which leans more towards the social and economic.

I

Somewhat by accident, the smaller political category derived much impetus from the work of Sir John Neale and others on parliamentary boroughs. As Lamar Hill noted in a 1977 article, this unintended effect of Neale's work created an interest in sundry aspects of borough politics unrelated to the parliamentary context.³ Hill also noted the distortion of borough affairs when treated by historians of national institutions; by contrast, he found a rich continuum of urban life described for its own sake in the work of such town biographers as Wallace MacCaffrey (for Exeter) and Tom Atkinson (for Winchester).⁴ Indeed, he might even have criticized such studies for actually neglecting the national scene.

Among the first to examine local reactions to national issues were those who investigated the politics of the London merchant oligarchy in the English Civil War and interregnum. Although Valerie Pearl, James Farnell and Robert Brenner neither agreed amongst themselves nor

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extended their analysis beyond London, they did make a genuine attempt to understand the forces of London politics at work at the time, and the connection between local and national issues.⁵

More recently, Peter Clark and John T. Evans have looked at the politics of Gloucester and Norwich respectively in the same period, and both emphasize the extent to which local reaction to that national crisis was determined by specific conditions in those towns.⁶ Roger Howell Jr. has now attempted to draw rather more general conclusions about town politics during the Civil War. Although he agrees that most towns saw the national conflict in predominantly local terms, he also suggests that most towns wished to remain neutral as long as they could.⁷ Howell is supported to some extent by Peter Clark, who concluded that Gloucester's fervent support of the parliamentary side was probably highly atypical, but several more case studies of individual towns are necessary before Howell's argument can be accepted with confidence.⁸

If seventeenth-century towns could still perceive such momentous issues from a predominantly local perspective, one may well wonder how much greater the localism of sixteenth-century towns must have been. Clark again lends a hand here when he deals with the impact of the Reformation on towns in Kent. Several others, including David Palliser for York, Wallace MacCaffrey for Exeter, Susan Brigden for London and Charles Phythian-Adams for Coventry, have written of the Reformation in specific towns, but they have too often ignored the ties between local and national issues.⁹ Much remains to be done in this regard.

Finally, some recent work has been carried out on the constitutional and political aspects of Tudor and Stuart towns. The late Shelagh Bond and Norman Evans have elucidated the process whereby Tudor and Stuart towns secured charters of incorporation, and I have attempted to show why they did so with such intensity in the middle years of the sixteenth century.¹⁰ It was my contention that this great boom in incorporations was not simply the desire of an insecure monarchy to cultivate local loyalties, but rather an expression of social and economic distress which led the boroughs to seek incorporation as a remedy for their ills.¹¹

It is indeed odd that there are comprehensive political treatments for so few of the chief English cities of this period along the lines, for example, of John T. Evans's study of Norwich¹² or, though it deals with much more than politics, D.M. Palliser's study of York.¹³ London itself, so much larger than any other English city at this time as to render it a category of one, has most conspicuously defied such comprehensive coverage. Despite this glaring hiatus, however, F.F. Foster and G.D. Ramsay,

among others, have contributed important studies on aspects of London's political life, and Valerie Pearl has posed an important and provocative challenge by emphasizing the stability and continuity in that metropolis.¹⁴ The rich treatment of London in other periods sustains one's hopes that the task can be accomplished for the early modern period in the not too distant future.

II

The work of social and economic historians of the pre-industrial urban scene has been so much more diverse, and the sheer quantity of its recent expression so much greater, that it is best to concentrate on what appear to be the major issues of controversy. These areas were crystallized in the two works of Peter Clark and Paul Slack, published in 1972 and 1976 respectively, and are reflected in the Open University set course A 322 begun in 1977.¹⁵ This section of the paper will focus on recent work on the issues of urban decay and recovery (which entails a close look at demography as well), and the structure and mobility of urban society in this period.

The question of urban decay and the related issue of declining or stagnating population have taken up a large share of attention in the past few years (as have, for that matter, similar questions regarding rural society). Much of this recent debate has revolved around efforts to chart the chronology of urban decay and regeneration in the 1450-1650 era, and to account for those patterns of change.

A.R. Bridbury remains nearly alone in arguing for a relative prosperity in towns and the realm in general by the end of the fifteenth century.¹⁶ Though his analysis of the 1524 tax assessments does seem to show both a relative and an absolute growth of urban wealth since the fourteenth century, most now regard the fifteenth century as marked by economic stagnation, urban decay and a related lack of growth in urban populations. As numerous historians of rural communities affirm, this gloomy state of affairs was by no means unique to town and city; it seems largely descriptive of the nation as a whole during that period. Perhaps the most balanced and succinct statement of the urban situation in the high middle ages comes from R.B. Dobson, writing in the *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* in 1977.¹⁷ But while Dobson could write with perfect impunity that "quite when the process of demographic regeneration began is fortunately not the concern of this paper..." we enjoy no such luxury of evasion.¹⁸ As Dobson knows all too well, the going becomes much stickier when an assessment of the timing and process of recovery in the sixteenth century is attempted.

Among writings of economic historians of the national scene can be detected some (though far from unanimous) support for the idea that a national recovery both in de-

mographic and more general terms began tentatively in the 1520s, 1530s and 1540s, sputtered in the harvest failures and epidemics of the 1550s and resumed at a steadier pace in the Elizabethan period.¹⁹ Yet even if this pattern should be deemed accurate for the nation as a whole, it is not inconceivable that many towns lagged behind both London and the countryside in this recovery. Both Charles Phythian-Adams, working chiefly with larger industrial and cathedral cities, and Alan Everitt, working primarily with the smaller market towns, point to the second decade of Elizabeth's reign or roughly the 1570s for the beginning of urban revitalization for most towns.²⁰ Somewhat milder support for this chronology might be gleaned from Clark and Slack and from David Palliser and indeed it seems widely held at the present time.²¹ Though the views of Everitt and Phythian-Adams have much to commend them, both are vulnerable to criticism and a case may be made for signs of an urban recovery before mid-century.

Everitt's work is no longer particularly recent, but so little has been done on the market town since he wrote in 1967 that his views are still current. Everitt reasoned that no one would easily go to the trouble and expense of litigation over fiscal rights to a moribund market, and he assumed that an increase in such litigation, easily measured by counting court cases, would have to be predicated both on a revival of commerce and by a revitalization of the market town itself. Drawing largely on one class of court records in the Exchequer (E.134) as well as some circumstantial evidence, he found a telltale increase in such cases in the 1570s, and thus affixed the revival of markets at about that point.²² In that perfectly logical process he seemed not to have realized that the class of documents in which he had looked for his evidence was only created by a procedural change in the Exchequer just a few years earlier. Prior to that time such disputes over market jurisdiction were tried elsewhere. I have found them in significant numbers several decades sooner.²³ Indeed, if Everitt's reasoning is sound and applied to evidence from other courts than the Exchequer, then it would appear that a revival of commercial activity in basic market towns in many parts of the realm occurred before the mid-century mark.

More sweeping and substantial assertions of prolonged decay have been issued in several forms by Everitt's University of Leicester colleague, Charles Phythian-Adams, most recently in his brilliantly argued and provocative monograph on the City of Coventry.²⁴ Here and in earlier articles it is assumed that the era 1520-70 was the climactic phase of a longstanding condition of urban decay stretching back to the early fourteenth century. These fifty years or so are in Phythian-Adams's mind a period of "unparalleled urban contraction" of such severity that "at no period in national history since the coming of the Danes have English towns in general been so weak."²⁵ The

causes of that perceived crisis were numerous, but at its root lay a population decline of drastic proportions, administrative and economic disincentives to remain in or come to the town and a devastating economic competition from the countryside along the lines proposed by Joan Thirsk.²⁶

Although Phythian-Adams proposed this as a general urban calamity throughout the realm, his own chief work to date has been on Coventry, and his case derives from the experience of that old industrial and cathedral city. Here the evidence seems abundant and dramatic. A population of some 10,000 in 1440 and 9,000 in 1500 appears to have fallen to 7,500 in 1520 and to an astounding 6,000 only three years later, levelling off to somewhere between 4,000 and 5,000 by mid-century. Despite some epidemic disease in that period, much of this decline is attributed to a variety of economic conditions. High costs, slumping demand for traditional industrial products, shortages of credit and capital, strangling restrictions on production and stifling burdens of civic office simply drove off the "honest commoners," the artisans and craftsmen who employed, trained and governed the rest. They left behind them an aging and unskilled population, little opportunity for apprenticeship or investment, vacant and dilapidated buildings no longer supported by sufficient rental incomes and – especially after the Reformation – fewer resources to care for the poor and sick. The city's spirit and cultural identity sagged under this weight, and social disorder became commonplace.²⁷

Indeed, Phythian-Adams's Coventry sounds all too plausible to those familiar with the older industrial cities of North America today, but it is still necessary to ask whether his description is accurate and whether Coventry was typical of other towns at the time.

Alan Dyer of University College, Bangor, is sceptical on both counts, and the grounds of his scepticism need to be considered carefully.²⁸ If towns and cities throughout the realm were losing their artisans and merchants at the same rate as Coventry in the 1510s and 1520s, Dyer wonders where they could have gone without receiving greater notice by contemporaries.

The challenge is taken up with three suggestions. First, Dyer reaffirms the value of the 1524 tax assessments, conveniently underemphasized by Phythian-Adams, in which urban population is not as small as the latter would like it to be. Second, he re-examines Phythian-Adams's use of figures for estimating the population at mid-century and he finds them too low: the 1563 subsidy strikes him as an unreliable bench-mark because its yields would still have been misleadingly depressed by the economic crisis of the 1550s. Thus, while Dyer accepts some significant decline in the population of Coventry, and by implication in such similar towns as Canterbury

and Southampton, he makes it out to be a more gradual process. In the larger perspective, he also finds such examples of urban decay offset by the simultaneous rise of other towns, perhaps of other types (market towns especially) and in other parts of the country. Dyer's pattern is thus one of "undulation" rather than general decline. The urban condition of these years was thus less one of "crisis" than part of a general period of instability throughout the realm, and may even have had little significance as a characteristically urban phenomenon.

At least by implication, Dyer has recognized that not all towns were alike or followed the same patterns: one sees in his work the importance of distinguishing between urban types. Most who study this period now find it convenient to employ the delineation of urban types proposed by Clark and Slack in 1972 and, more extensively, in 1976.²⁹

In brief, Clark and Slack have divided towns into three gradients of size and function: some five or six hundred simple market towns of up to roughly 1,200 residents; perhaps a hundred more specialized centres of about 1,200 to 5,000; and the handful of regional centres of over 5,000 whose functions were sufficiently complex to make at least some of them virtual Londons in miniature. London, whose population exceeded a third of a million by the end of our period, is usually treated in a class by itself, and rightly so, but Clark and Slack have also noted a group of towns made distinct by their establishment in this era. Some thirty "new towns" emerged in this period to serve specific and highly specialized functions: a few manufacturing centres, still quite small, where guild regulations could be avoided, like Manchester, Birmingham and Leeds; some spa towns which sprang to life when the Thirty Years' War cut off continental holidays for the wealthy; and some dockyard towns established to serve the expanding maritime enterprise of the realm.³⁰

Of these categories, Clark and Slack have suggested that the small market towns tended to prosper from at least the mid-sixteenth century to the mid-seventeenth century, but generally languished thereafter in the face of competition from larger rivals. The middling size towns of rather specialized function are presumed to have had more mixed success in the 1560-1650 era. Some, like Coventry, Salisbury and Canterbury, declined steadily, some grew with the economic revival in general, and most remained highly vulnerable to demographic crises and market fluctuations in particular commodities. Many of these seem also to have languished by the late seventeenth century. Those larger towns that were sufficiently populous, economically diverse and regionally dominant were less vulnerable to such crises. Thus, Norwich, Bristol, Newcastle, York and a few others managed to survive the hardships of the sixteenth century and remained important in most cases even to the coming of the railroad.

Finally, the specialized new towns also tended to do well and those that were established as relatively unrestricted manufacturing centres proved the leaders in the urbanization of the industrial age.³¹

So much then for the general patterns of town growth as seen by Clark and Slack, but, again, it is necessary to ask if they were correct in their assessment. John Patten, an historical geographer, remains sceptical both of the categorization and of these perceived patterns of development, but his views seem not to have carried much force.³² Penelope Corfield, a contributor to the first Clark and Slack volume, has generally supported their assumption regarding the larger centres,³³ and Alan Dyer has suggested that larger market towns also did rather better than has been assumed throughout the entire period.³⁴

If the evidence of scholarly attention is any guide, disease and migration continue to be identified as the chief factors responsible for changes in the levels of urban population, along, of course, with natural growth or decline emanating from the normal rates of birth and death. Although the late Andrew Appleby eloquently championed the role of famine as a major brake to population growth, most recent findings have pointed instead to plague and other diseases.³⁵ R.S. Gottfried's monograph on epidemic diseases in the fifteenth century³⁶ and G. Doolittle's short article on the impact of plague in one provincial town in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are important in this context.³⁷ The work of Roger Finlay has been especially noteworthy for his exploration of mortality in London, and indeed this work is methodologically closer to what historians of North American urban demography, or industrial urban demography in general, have come to expect.³⁸ The most lucid and comprehensive treatment of the subject of disease and mortality in this period, however, remains Paul Slack's 1979 essay.³⁹

With the exception of Allan Sharlin's provocative opinion, the model of urban population levels depending for their growth on migration from the countryside continues to gain acceptance.⁴⁰ Sharlin has argued instead that urban mortality rates in the early modern period may not be as high as assumed, and that migration from the countryside may not be a necessary condition for urban demographic growth. Though obviously worthy of serious consideration, Sharlin's views have yet to be tested and remain largely speculative.

The factor of geographic mobility itself is an area which has engendered considerable interest for several years. Possibly following in the footsteps of those who have examined medieval population movements in some detail, especially the followers of J. A. Raftis and his work on tenure and mobility in rural society, students of the early modern period have tended to find much greater mobility than used to be assumed.⁴¹ Peter Clark has been especially

helpful here in sorting out the types of the migrants themselves by distinguishing between "betterment" and "subsistence" migrants. Betterment migrants he describes as those who tended to move short distances, at infrequent intervals and to predetermined destinations for the purpose of improving their employment status. Subsistence migrants tended to move more frequently, over longer distances and in generally unpredetermined patterns in search of employment.⁴²

At best, the betterment migrants formed an important source of population replenishment among the skilled urban workers, and often made their way rapidly through apprenticeship and on to the upper reaches of the urban hierarchy. They are most obvious in London, as G.D. Ramsay and S.R. Smith have shown, but David Palliser, A.F. Butcher and others leave little doubt as to their considerable impact elsewhere as well.⁴³

At the other end of the scale, the influx of large numbers of unskilled and semi-skilled migrants seeking basic subsistence considerably aggravated already pressing urban problems. In larger centres like Norwich, the plague and the employment offered by Dutch and Walloon strangers kept the hordes of such workers to manageable proportions, but even then, as in most larger towns, relief schemes were heavily overburdened.⁴⁴ Over the course of half a century or more there seems to be evidence that while this substantial influx of the poor may have kept up urban populations, it further expanded the distance between rich and poor. Clark has suggested that at least in the Kentish towns this had the effect of increasing "the decay of the urban identity and the erosion of community consciousness."⁴⁵ Others have noted that it somewhat increased the propensity toward violence, though seldom, as Clark has noted elsewhere, to the point of organized revolt.⁴⁶ Here again there is much to be done in charting the geographic patterns and chronological sequence of migration to specific towns, and in assessing its impact on the recipient communities.

As for questions of social structure and social mobility, scholarly attention has dwelt largely on the extremes of the social pyramid: the very well-to-do who may often be discussed by name and with familiarity, and the very poor, who are generally discussed only in the aggregate. This is not usually a result of scholarly caprice, but rather a question of the sources for this period. Unfortunately, such sources have remained somewhat narrow, and only now are such techniques being used as family reconstitution, indexing of manor court rolls or analysis of probate inventories as has been done for other periods and often for smaller units of social organization.⁴⁷

Still, there has been considerable interest in the shape and content of early modern urban society. Several studies have reaffirmed the proposition of W.G. Hoskins and

Julian Cornwall that the social pyramid started out rather sharply pointed and broadly based, and became even more so by the outbreak of the Civil War a century and a half later.⁴⁸ They have also repeatedly affirmed Hoskins's observation that the occupational structure in most towns tended to be dominated by providers of food, clothing and shelter.⁴⁹ Some have suggested that the validity of that observation diminishes in the larger towns. Thus Palliser describes the emergence of a statistically significant professional element in late Tudor York, and John Pound established the growth of craftsmen and merchants in the luxury trades in Tudor Norwich.⁵⁰

Findings such as these suggest a significant degree of occupational mobility, at least in the larger towns, and more recent studies of urban élites have confirmed a striking degree of mobility in other ways as well. Such studies as Palliser's for York, Carl Hammer's for Oxford and Susan Battley's for King's Lynn have begun to yield a clearer picture of those at the top, at least in the larger cities.⁵¹ The most significant result of this research has been to remove any lingering assumptions that urban élites represented a small number of family dynasties which perpetuated their grip on the guilds, often in the same guilds, and hence on town government itself from generation to generation. Though it is still generally accepted, with Clark and Slack and others, that the stresses and strains of town government in the mid-Tudor period had augmented the tendency toward oligarchic urban government,⁵² it now seems clear that those families who occupied positions at the top rarely maintained their status for more than three generations. This seems due to biological failures to preserve the male line, economic fluctuations such as affected Norwich or large-scale geographic mobility out of the town. Thanks largely to the mechanisms for admitting freemen, however, these changes did not extend to the social structure itself. A number of studies now show a surprisingly large inflow of potential freemen from elsewhere, both in London, as we would expect, and in provincial towns.⁵³ Indeed, David Palliser has appropriately likened the urban social hierarchy to a moving bus, with a regular flow of passengers entering and exiting.

From this evidence we may be tempted to infer similarly rapid rates of dynastic turnover in other ranks of society as well, but one of the few completed studies of the middling ranks of urban society gives pause for reflection. In a still unpublished Oxford doctoral thesis of 1976, Mary Prior examined the community of fishing folk and watermen of Fisher Row in the City of Oxford for a period of three centuries.⁵⁴ She finds that, among other things, families at this level did indeed remain in the same social status for generations and even centuries, retaining all the while – in fact being bound by – their economic association with the river culture on the Thames.

Perhaps Fisher Row may prove a sufficiently unique urban community to disqualify Prior's work as a useful paradigm, but it is equally plausible that it may lead us to qualify the assumptions of Palliser *et al.* regarding the consistency of family status from one generation to another. It is especially significant that almost all of the earlier studies were carried out on the urban élites, especially office holders, who are so much more easily traced in the records, and that they have dealt with towns experiencing economic stress in the period covered by the study. Prior suggests some correlation between family stability and general economic growth such as Oxford experienced for the epochs in question.

The ranks of the poor themselves, and the solutions contrived to deal with them, have also been subjects of considerable interest. Earlier work by Webb, Pound and Beier did much to illuminate local reaction to the problem of poverty and more recent research has sought to follow up a number of questions raised in these studies.⁵⁵ What forces prompted urban governments to provide relief: the fear of disorder, the pangs of humanist conscience or the charitable imperative of puritanism? How could such overwhelmingly large numbers of the poor as identified, for example, by W.G. Hoskins have managed to survive? Finally, how did towns cope when statutory provisions of the existing poor laws proved inadequate?⁵⁶

To Hoskins's unremittingly gloomy picture of the number who somehow survived below his theoretical subsistence level, Phythian-Adams has offered the provocative suggestion that such a level ought not to be based on the subsidy returns. Using corroborative evidence for Coventry in the early 1520s – evidence which has yet to surface for other cities – he suggests that many who were too poor to be assessed in 1522 were indeed well cared for as members of their employers' households, and that some of them even kept servants in their own homes. Thus, he suggests, the percentage of urban poor may actually have been much smaller at least during "normal times" than we have tended to think.⁵⁷

Yet if only because such normal times seem abnormal throughout much of our period, Phythian-Adams's suggestion must be considered with care. The few case studies which have been carried out for specific towns do, it is undeniable, deal with those older and decaying towns where one would expect the greatest evidence of poverty conditions, but they none the less tend to confirm Hoskins's dismal estimates.

They also bring to light once again the ingenuity of local communities faced with such problems and, incidentally, the way in which parliamentary legislation tended to follow local initiatives in the creation of national policies. This is certainly evident in the studies of poverty in sixteenth-century Ipswich and Norwich carried out by

Webb and Pound, and substantially so in Paul Slack's study of poverty in seventeenth-century Salisbury.⁵⁸ In a still more recent essay Slack has discussed the manner in which private charitable impulses were reinforced with government support to consolidate the relief institutions of London in the mid-sixteenth century.⁵⁹ In the end, sad but true, neither local nor national policies, nor public nor private support made much of a dent in the ranks of the poor in most of the older and middling or larger towns in this era.

III

Even though there may be some additional issues which could be raised in this paper, it is appropriate to offer some general observations about pre-industrial English urban history and those who deal with it. First, one is struck by just how recent most of this work actually is, especially in relation to research on more modern urban settings or in other national traditions. Though a few lively and bold scholars were charting paths in the 1940s and 1950s, first attempts at a textbook for the urban history of this era (Clark and Slack's *English Towns in Transition*) came only in 1976; first efforts at a journal at least partly devoted to the field (*Urban History Yearbook*) in 1974. In addition, it is surprising that so few North Americans have become involved in urban problems of this era when they have done so much in virtually all other areas of English history and when they have been so quick off the mark to investigate their own urban past.

Perhaps these observations may have something to do with the "social geography" of these practicing historians themselves. With some obvious exceptions, few of these English historians have found posts in those senior universities – Oxford, Cambridge and London especially – which have traditionally charted the pathways of English historical research, and which are literally on the main lines of academic travel and research in Britain.⁶⁰ Though the pattern whereby most of these people have been employed at newer and geographically more remote institutions may have been personally beneficial to some, it is possible to wonder whether it has not tended to isolate many from both the mainstream of English historical research and – save through ties of friendship and common graduate training – from each other.⁶¹

Such isolation seems to be reinforced by at least two other factors. These historians do not depend to the same extent on the resources of the central archives (the British Library, the Public Record Office or the Bodleian) or meeting places (especially the seminars and common room of the Institute of Historical Research in London) as do historians of the national scene. Also, there have been few continuing post-doctoral seminars in this field such as the one the Neale-Hurstfield-Russell group ran at London, or Geoffrey Elton runs at Cambridge for students of political

and national history of the same period. Though this has been compensated for to some extent by the annual spring meeting of the Urban History Group, the pre-industrial historians only declared their semi-autonomy from the larger group in 1978, meeting alone for the first time in 1979.⁶²

Needless to say, all these factors help to explain why North Americans, who have less access to local (and mostly unpublished) archives, have remained largely outside the field. At this early stage personal contact, discussion and joint reflection simply loom as more important than the private consideration of published articles (often in obscure county historical journals all but unobtainable abroad) in the solitude of the North American university office or library.

Finally, though the new urban historians are a most eclectic breed, one notes in their work a relative lack of debate about methodology itself, especially compared to the literature on modern urban history. It is difficult to account for this, for surely the field is marked by a delightfully wide range of methods and approaches. To some extent, perhaps this has something to do with the nature of the sources for the urban areas of this period. On the one hand, in this pre-census era it is difficult to carry out for any group but the élites of urban society the sort of topographical research that is so important to historians of a more recent era. On the other hand, the towns of this era do not often lend themselves to the sort of court roll analysis successfully employed by students of the medieval and pre-industrial village, or by the techniques of family reconstitution such sources facilitate. Certainly it is possible to foresee more attempts to do at least for the smaller and more manageable towns of this era the sort of comparative study which Margaret Spufford has so successfully employed for three Cambridgeshire villages, though it can be noted with chagrin the increasing difficulty in obtaining the sort of funding required by such vast undertakings.

A final point is whether the predominantly English practitioners of this field are as aware as they should be of urban research in other national traditions. The work of the French especially, where the *Annales* approach to the past has so successfully been wedded to a concern for urban questions, has sometimes been adopted but is seldom cited in the literature examined here.

NOTES

1. See discussion of this course in *Urban History Yearbook* (1976), pp.37-38; and D.M. Palliser, "The Open University and Urban History," *Urban History Yearbook* (1978), pp.56-64.
2. A 1975 survey of relevant courses in the United Kingdom is published in *Urban History Yearbook* (1976), pp.35-36.

3. Lamar M. Hill, "Continuity and Discontinuity, Professor Neale and the Two Worlds of Elizabethan Government," *Albion*, Vol. IX (Winter 1977), pp.343-58.
4. Wallace T. MacCaffrey, *Exeter, 1540-1640. The Growth of an English County Town* (Cambridge, Mass., 1958; 1975); Tom Atkinson, *Elizabethan Winchester* (London, 1963).
5. Valerie Pearl, *London and the Outbreak of the Puritan Revolution. City Government and National Politics, 1625-1643* (London, 1961); Robert Brenner, "The Civil War Politics of London's Merchant Community," *Past and Present*, Vol. 58 (February 1973), pp.53-107; James Farnell, "The Navigation Act of 1651, the First Dutch War and the London Merchant Community," *Economic History Review* (hereafter cited as *ECHR*), 2nd Ser., Vol. XVI (1964), pp.439-54; and "The Social and Intellectual Basis of London's Role in the English Civil War," *Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 49 (1977), pp.641-60.
6. Peter Clark, "'The Ramoth-Gilead of the Good,' Urban Change and Political Radicalism at Gloucester, 1540-1640," in Peter Clark, A.G.R. Smith and Nicholas Tyacke, eds., *The English Commonwealth, 1547-1640, Essays Presented to Joel Hurstfield* (Leicester, 1979), pp.167-88; John T. Evans, *Seventeenth Century Norwich: Politics, Religion and Government, 1620-1690* (Oxford, 1979). See also Clark's essay "Thomas Scott and the Growth of Urban Opposition in the Early Stuart Regime," *Historical Journal*, Vol. XXI (1978), pp.1-26.
7. Roger Howell Jr., "The Structure of Urban Politics in the English Civil War," *Albion*, Vol. XI (Summer 1979), pp.111-27.
8. Clark, "'Ramoth Gilead of the Good,'" p.187.
9. David Palliser, *Tudor York* (Oxford, 1979), chap. 9; MacCaffrey, *Exeter*, chap. 8; S.E. Brigden, "The Early Reformation in London, 1520-1547: The Conflict in the Parishes" (Ph.D. Thesis, Cambridge University, 1979); Charles Phythian-Adams, *Desolation of a City: Coventry and the Urban Crisis of the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1979).
10. Shelagh Bond and Norman Evans, "The Process of Granting Charters to English Boroughs, 1547-1649," *English Historical Review*, Vol. XCI (1976), pp.102-20.
11. Robert Tittler, "The Incorporation of Boroughs, 1540-1558," *History*, Vol. 62 (February 1977), pp.24-42. For a case study of such an incorporation, see Tittler, "Incorporation and Politics in Sixteenth Century Thaxted," *Essex Archeology and History*, Vol. VIII (1976), pp.224-33.
12. John T. Evans, *Seventeenth Century Norwich* (Oxford, 1979).
13. David Palliser, *Tudor York* (Oxford, 1979).
14. F.F. Foster, *The Politics of Stability: A Portrait of the Rulers of Elizabethan London* (London, 1977); Valerie Pearl, "Change and Stability in Seventeenth Century London," *London Journal*, Vol. V (1979), pp.3-34. See also the summary of recent work in G. Rhodes, "Research in London, 1952-1977," *London Journal*, Vol. V (1979), pp.57-86.
15. Peter Clark and Paul Slack, *Crisis and Order in English Towns, 1500-1700* (London, 1972), and *English Towns in Transition, 1500-1700* (Oxford, 1976). The latter is the first attempt at a general survey and the first suitable as an introduction for undergraduates.
16. A.R. Bridbury, *Economic Growth: England in the Later Middle Ages* (London, 1962; 2nd ed., 1975); see also Bridbury's essay "English Provincial Towns in the Later Middle Ages," *ECHR*, 2nd Ser., Vol. XXXIV (February 1981), pp.1-25.
17. R.B. Dobson, "Urban Decline in Late Medieval England," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th Ser. (1977), pp.1-22. See also the interesting comments on the debate over late medieval urban decline in S.H. Rigby, "Urban Decline in the Later Middle Ages," *Urban History Yearbook* (1979), pp.46-59, and Susan Reynolds, "Decline and Decay in Medieval Towns: a Look at Some of the Concepts and Arguments," *Urban History Yearbook* (1980), pp.76-78. The latter is especially valuable for raising issues about terminology – always a sign that a debate is becoming "official."
18. Dobson, "Urban Decline," p.22.

19. I. Blanchard, "Population Change, Enclosure and the Early Tudor Economy," *ECHR*, 2nd Ser., Vol. XXIII (1970); John Hatcher, *Plague, Population and the English Economy, 1348-1530* (London, 1977); F.J. Fisher, "Commercial Trends and Policy in Sixteenth Century England," *ECHR*, Vol. X (1939-40), pp.95-117; J.M. Vanes, "The Overseas Trade of Bristol in the Sixteenth Century" (Ph.D. Thesis, London, University, 1975); E.A. Wrigley, "Family Limitation in Pre-Industrial England," *ECHR*, 2nd Ser., Vol. XIX (1966), pp.82-109; W.G. Hoskins, "Harvest Fluctuations and English Economic History, 1480-1619," *Agricultural History Review*, Vol. XII, No. 1 (1964), pp.28-46; A.F. Butcher, "Rent, Population and Economic Change in Late Medieval Newcastle," *Northern History*, Vol. XIV (1978), pp.67-77; R.S. Gottfried, "Bury St. Edmunds and the Population of Late Medieval Towns, 1270-1530," *Journal of British Studies*, Vol. XX, No. 1, (Fall 1980), pp.1-36; R. Tittler, "The Emergence of Urban Policy, 1536-1558," in S.J. Loach and R. Tittler, eds., *The Mid-Tudor Polity, c.1540-1560* (London, 1980); and, finally, S.H. Rigby's critique of Dyer and others, "Urban Decline in the Later Middle Ages," *Urban History Yearbook* (1979), pp.46-59. Blanchard and Hatcher cite indications of rising population even as early as the 1520s and Gottfried sees it yet earlier, but of course the results of that movement did not necessarily benefit the standard of living. Fisher noted long ago the increase in trade of woollen cloths in this period, and this aspect of his provocative article has generally been upheld by more recent research. Hoskins has pointed out that this period was largely devoid of bad harvests, save for the early 1520s, and it was not a notably severe period for epidemic disease. The economic hardships of the mid-century, conveniently summarized by W.R.D. Jones in *The Mid-Tudor Crisis, 1539-1563* (London, 1973) are familiar, as is the general economic recovery in the early Elizabethan era.
20. Charles Phythian-Adams, "Urban Decay in Late Medieval England," in Philip Abrams and E.A. Wrigley, eds., *Towns in Societies: Essays in Economic History and Historical Sociology* (Cambridge, 1978), pp.159-85; *Desolation of a City: Coventry and the Urban Crisis of the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1979); Alan Everitt, "The Marketing of Agricultural Produce," in Joan Thirsk, ed., *The Agrarian History of England and Wales*, Vol. IV (Cambridge, 1967).
21. Clark and Slack, especially *Crisis and Order in English Towns*, Introduction; Clark, *The Early Modern Town: A Reader* (Oxford, 1976), Introduction, especially p.19. See also Palliser, *Tudor York, passim*.
22. Everitt, "The Marketing of Agricultural Produce," especially pp.502-04; Everitt examined some one hundred disputes of this nature in the Public Record Office, E.134, the Special Commissions and Depositions in the Court of Exchequer. The procedure recorded in this class of manuscripts began in 1558, and took ten or twelve years to become a familiar recourse for likely litigants: hence the "marked increase" in such litigation in the 1570s.
23. Similar cases from before the 1570s are to be found in other classes of Exchequer records as well as in records of Chancery (especially C.14 and C.24), Requests (Req.2) and Star Chamber (STAC.2); this is discussed in Tittler, "The Incorporation of Boroughs, 1540-1558," *History*, Vol. 62 (February 1977), pp.24-42, especially p.28 and n.17.
24. See note 21 above.
25. Phythian-Adams, *Desolation of a City*, p.285.
26. Joan Thirsk, "Industries in the Countryside," in F.J. Fisher, ed., *Essays in the Economic and Social History of Tudor and Stuart England* (Cambridge, 1961).
27. Phythian-Adams, *Desolation of a City*, especially parts I, II, IVb and V.
28. Alan Dyer, "Growth and Decay in English Towns, 1500-1700," *Urban History Yearbook* (1979), especially pp.60-64.
29. Clark and Slack, *Crisis and Order*, and especially *English Towns in Transition*, Introduction and chaps. 2-5.
30. Clark and Slack, *English Towns in Transition*, Introduction. The theme of new towns in this era has received so little attention that it seems appropriate to cite two specific studies: C.W. Chalklin, "The Making of Some New Towns, c.1600-1720," in Chalklin and M. Havinden, eds., *Rural Change and Urban Growth, 1500-1800* (London, 1974), and T.S. Willan, *Elizabethan Manchester* (Manchester, 1980).
31. Clark and Slack, *English Towns in Transition*.
32. John Patten, *English Towns, 1500-1700* (Folkestone, Kent, and Hampden, Conn., 1978).
33. Penelope Corfield, "Urban Development in England and Wales in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries," in D.C. Coleman and A.H. John, eds., *Trade, Government and Economy in Pre-Industrial England* (London, 1976).
34. A. Dyer, "Growth and Decay in English Towns," *Urban History Yearbook* (1979), pp.69-70; Dyer, "The Market Towns of Southern England, 1500-1700," *Southern History*, Vol. I (1979), pp.123-34. Dyer also challenges Corfield's assumption about larger towns: while agreeing that most of 5,000 and over flourish in the seventeenth century, he doubts that the pattern holds for the very largest of these; see pp.68-69.
35. Appleby's views were expressed in a number of learned articles, but the thrust of his work is summarized in *Famine in Tudor and Stuart England* (Stanford, 1978).
36. R.S. Gottfried, *Epidemic Disease in Fifteenth Century England: The Medical Response and the Demographic Consequences* (Leicester, 1978).
37. G. Doolittle, "The Effects of Plague on a Provincial Town in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries," *Medical History*, Vol. 19 (1975), pp.333-41.
38. R.A.P. Finlay, "Gateways to Death? London's Child Mortality Experience, 1570-1653," *Annales de démographie historique* (1978), pp.105-34; "Population and Fertility in London, 1580-1650," *Journal of Family History*, Vol. 4 (1979), pp.26-38. Finlay's forthcoming monograph, *Population and Metropolis: The Demography of London, 1580-1650*, to be published by Cambridge University Press, is not available as of this writing, but see the debate on "Natural Decrease in Early Modern Cities" between Finlay and Allan Sharlin, *Past and Present*, 92 (August 1981), pp.169-80.
39. Paul Slack, "Mortality Crisis and Epidemic Disease in England, 1485-1610," in Charles Webster, ed., *Health, Medicine and Mortality in the Sixteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1979), pp.9-60. Other essays in this volume, especially those by Roger Schofield and E.A. Wrigley, are valuable as well. See also A. Dyer, "The Influence of Bubonic Plague in England, 1500-1667," *Medical History*, Vol. XIII (1978), pp.308-26.
40. Allan Sharlin, "Natural Decrease in Early Modern Cities: A Reconsideration," *Past and Present*, 79 (May 1978), pp.126-38.
41. See especially J.A. Raftis, *Tenure and Mobility ...* (Toronto, 1964); E. DeWindt, *Land and People in Holywell cum Needingworth* (Toronto, 1972); and Eleanor Searle, *Lordship and Community: Battle Abbey and Its Banlieu, 1066-1538* (Toronto, 1974).
42. Peter Clark, "The Migrant in Kentish Towns, 1580-1640," in Clark and Slack, eds., *Crisis and Order* (1972), especially pp.138-39.
43. A.F. Butcher, "The Origins of Romney Freeman, 1433-1523," *ECHR*, 2nd Ser., Vol. XXVII (1974), pp.16-27; G.D. Ramsay, "The Recruitment and Fortunes of some London Freeman in the Mid-Sixteenth Century," *ECHR*, 2nd Ser., Vol. XXXI (1978), pp.528-40; S.R. Smith, "The Social and Geographic Origins of the London Apprentices, 1630-1660," *Guildhall Miscellany*, Vol. IV (1971-73), pp.195-206; Palliser, *Tudor York*, chap. V, and Palliser, "A Regional Capital as a Magnet: Immigrants to York," in M.J. Kitch, ed., *Migration in Pre-Industrial England* (London, 1981). See also R.B. Dobson, "Admissions to the Freedom of the City of York in the Later Middle Ages," *ECHR*, 2nd Ser., Vol. XXVI (1973), pp.1-21.
44. John Pound, "An Elizabethan Census of the Poor," *Birmingham University Historical Journal*, Vol. VIII (1962), pp.135-51, and *The Norwich Census of the Poor of 1570* (Norfolk, 1971), Introduction; John Webb, *Poor Relief in Elizabethan Ipswich*, Suffolk Record

- Society Publications, Vol. IX (Ipswich, 1966); Paul Slack, ed., *Poverty in Early Stuart Salisbury*, Wiltshire Record Society (Devizes, 1975), Introduction.
- Although it does not pertain uniquely to the urban context, recent interest in poverty has included a significant debate on the scale and nature of vagrancy in the sixteenth century. J.F. Pound, *Poverty and Vagrancy in Tudor England* (London, 1971) defines basic concepts. See also A.L. Beier, "Vagrants and the Social Order in Elizabethan England," *Past and Present*, 64 (August 1974), pp. 3-29; Paul Slack, "Vagrants and Vagrancy in England, 1598-1664," *EcHR*, 2nd Ser., Vol. XXVII (1974), pp. 360-79; Beier and Pound, "Debate: Vagrants and the Social Order in Elizabethan England," *Past and Present*, 71 (May 1976), pp. 126-34; John Patten, *Rural-Urban Migration in Pre-Industrial England*, Oxford School of Geography Research Papers, VI (1973).
45. Clark, "The Migrant in Kentish Towns," especially pp. 138-39.
 46. Clark, "Popular Protest and Disturbances in Kent, 1558-1640," *EcHR*, 2nd Ser., Vol. XXIX (1976), pp. 365-81. In "The Migrant" Clark saw occasional rioting, as in Canterbury in 1596, but not the sort of "strong political crosscurrent among the poor" which would lead to organized revolt. Similar observations for rural society have been made by Keith Wrightson and John Walter, "Dearth and the Social Order in Early Modern England," *Past and Present*, 71 (May 1976), pp. 12-42.
 47. Exemplars of such techniques for agrarian or village society include the group surrounding Professor J. A. Raftis at Toronto (see n. 41 above) for the medieval period. For the early modern application of such techniques, see Margaret Spufford, *Contrasting Communities: English Villagers in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Cambridge, 1974); Alan MacFarlane, especially in *Reconstructing Historical Communities*, with Sarah Harrison and Charles Jardine (Cambridge, 1977); the demographic analysis of parish registers of E.A. Wrigley, T.H. Hollingsworth, Peter Laslett and the Cambridge Population Group with which they are associated; and Nigel Goose, "Household Size and Structure in Early Stuart Cambridge," *Social History* (October 1980), pp. 347-86.
 48. W.G. Hoskins, "English Provincial Towns in the Early Sixteenth Century," *Provincial England* (London and Basingstoke, 1963), pp. 68-85, and *The Age of Plunder* (London, 1976), pp. 36-42; Julian Cornwall, "Country Towns in the Fifteen Twenties," *EcHR*, 2nd Ser., Vol. XV (1962), pp. 54-69.
 49. Hoskins, "English Provincial Towns."
 50. David Palliser, *Tudor York*, chap. VI; John Pound, "The Social and Trade Structure of Norwich, 1525-1575," *Past and Present*, 34 (July 1966), pp. 49-69.
 51. Palliser, *Tudor York*, chap. 4-6; Susan Battley, "Dynastic Longevity in the Tudor Town: The Oligarchy of King's Lynn, Norfolk" (paper delivered at the Carolinas Symposium on British Studies, October 1980); Carl I. Hammer Jr., "Anatomy of an Oligarchy: The Oxford Town Council in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries," *Journal of British Studies*, Vol. XVIII (Fall 1978), pp. 1-27.
 52. Peter Clark and Paul Slack, *Crisis and Order*, especially pp. 20-22. See also Alan Rogers, "Late Medieval Stamford: A Study of the Town Council, 1465-1492," in Alan Everitt, ed., *Perspectives in English Urban History* (London and Basingstoke, 1973); John T. Evans, "The Decline of Oligarchy in Seventeenth Century Norwich," *Journal of British Studies*, Vol. XIV (November 1974), pp. 46-76; Carl I. Hammer Jr., "Anatomy of an Oligarchy."
 53. Butcher, "Origins of Romney Freeman"; G.D. Ramsay, "The Recruitment and Fortunes of Some London Freeman," *EcHR*, 2nd Ser., Vol. XXXI (1978), pp. 528-40; S.R. Smith, "The Social and Geographic Origins of the London Apprentices, 1630-1660," *Guildhall Miscellany*, Vol. IV (1971-73), pp. 195-206. See also R.B. Dobson, "Admissions to the Freedom of the City of York in the Later Middle Ages," *EcHR*, 2nd Ser., Vol. XXVI (1973).
 54. Mary L. Prior, "Fisher Row - The Oxford Community of Fishermen and Bargemen, 1500-1800" (D. Phil. Thesis, Oxford University, 1976). I am indebted to Mrs. Prior for permission to consult her thesis, and for the welcome news that it is to be published in book form in 1982 by Clarendon Press, Oxford.
 55. See n. 44 above.
 56. Most recently in W.G. Hoskins, *The Age of Plunder* (London, 1976), especially chap. 2. These questions are raised in Paul Slack, "Poverty and Politics in Salisbury, 1597-1665," in Clark and Slack, eds., *Crisis and Order*, chap. 5.
 57. Charles Phythian-Adams, *Desolation of a City*, pp. 128-36.
 58. Webb, *Poor Relief in Elizabethan Ipswich* (Ipswich, 1966); Pound, *Poverty and Vagrancy in Tudor England* (London, 1971); Slack, "Poverty and Politics," and *Poverty in Early Stuart Salisbury*.
 59. P. Slack, "Social Policy and the Constraints of Government, 1547-1558," in S.J. Loach and R. Tittler, eds., *The Mid-Tudor Polity, c.1540-1560* (London and Basingstoke, 1980), pp. 94-115.
 60. For example, of those figures who have been cited most often in these pages, only Slack (Exeter College, Oxford) holds a post as an historian at one of the three senior institutions. Everitt has been joined by Phythian-Adams in the Department of English Local History at Leicester. Palliser is in the Department of Economic and Social History at Birmingham; Clark is in the Department of Economic History at Leicester; Dyer is at University College, Bangor; and Prior holds no university appointment. The Open University, which has become extremely important in carrying this field to others, is at Milton Keynes, but its staff is almost entirely non-resident.
 61. It is particularly significant in this context to note the observation made in the introduction to Clark and Slack's 1976 collection of essays, *Crisis and Order*: "This collection originated in the enthusiasms and warm debates of a group of friends..." Most of those friends, like the editors, were students of W.G. Hoskins, who provided the forward for that "pioneering collection," ironically while he was at Oxford at the end of his teaching career.
 62. Significantly, even these meetings have been at universities which are very much off the beaten track, especially for North Americans studying in Britain. They have been held thus far at Sheffield, Swansea and Loughborough.

