The Archaeology of Medieval Small Towns

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THIS PRESIDENTIAL address, originally entitled ‘Is the Archaeology of Small Towns Worth Pursuing?’; surveys the results of numerous archaeological interventions in medieval small towns in England and Wales, focusing on work published since an overview that appeared in 1985. Its purpose is to show the value of research on sites which are sometimes seen as unrewarding. The cumulative results of sixteen years of investigation have thrown important new light on urban origins; characteristics and definitions; functions and diversity; and long-term development.

In the 1990s when writing the chapter on small towns in the period 1270–1540 for the Cambridge Urban History, I did not make much use of archaeological evidence.\(^1\) There was no excuse for this omission because of my simultaneous involvement in a research project which had the specific aim of using both material and documentary evidence to explore the Late-medieval urban hierarchy.\(^2\) This paper is designed to fill the gap in the historiography of small towns, and to encourage urban historians to take more note of archaeological evidence. I am anxious to reassure archaeologists who sometimes regard the excavation of small towns as unrewarding, and to persuade them of the value of work in these places.\(^3\)

Those who study small towns, from whichever discipline they come, have to overcome a degree of prejudice. The large towns have attracted most research: they provide historians with large archives, from which many documents have appeared in print; archaeologists are attracted by sites in city centres with their deep deposits, substantial structures and numerous small finds. It is also believed by both historians and archaeologists that enquiries into the past of large towns is justified by their significance in the Middle Ages: they had a wide impact on their region, their merchants contributed to the international exchange, their political influence was strong, and they maintained a sophisticated cultural life. Archaeologists have a particular reason for concentrating on large towns: the revolutionary contribution of archaeology to urban studies has been to change perceptions of the

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\(^2\) The ESRC-funded project on ‘Urban Hierarchy and Functions in the East Midlands in the Late Middle Ages’ (No. R0002359022) was held jointly by the Universities of Birmingham and Leicester (award holders, P. Clark, C. Dyer and A. Grant). The main conclusions have been published in J. Laughton, E. Jones and C. Dyer, ‘The urban hierarchy in the later Middle Ages: a study of the East Midlands’, Urban Hist., 28 (2001), 331–57.

\(^3\) A characteristically pessimistic comment comes from an anonymous English Heritage briefing document on small towns in Gloucestershire. It comments on evaluations in small towns that ‘none . . . has produced any information which contributed to knowledge of the history of the town . . . none have shown any good archaeological survival or potential’.
period before 1100. The discovery of the pre-850 emporia at Southampton, Ipswich, London and York represents a great achievement. Excavation has also revealed the scale, intensity and complexity of the urban settlements of the period 850–1100 at Lincoln, London, Norwich, Stamford, Thetford, Winchester and York. Most small towns, however, developed in the 12th and 13th centuries.

In fact while these early phases of large urban centres catch the headlines, nine-tenths of medieval urban archaeology has been concerned with the period after 1100, and investigation of that period has the capacity to expand our knowledge, deepen our understanding, and reveal new dimensions of medieval towns. This is true of research in all towns, regardless of their size. Excavators in small towns often complain that the material culture which they encounter resembles that of villages rather than cities. In fact the comparison is difficult to make because the opportunities of small-town archaeology are inferior to those in most deserted villages. The continued occupation of many town sites means that the street frontages, that is the main buildings, are often not available for excavation, and modern intrusions have destroyed features, and not just at the front of the building plots.

A caricature can be drawn of a typical small town site as an area of a medieval back yard, which has little stratigraphy and a scatter of pits, with a few postholes that can occasionally be interpreted as a structure. The finds consist of sherds of 13th- and 14th-century pottery, with some residual Romano-British and Early-medieval material. Such sites have indeed been excavated, but I will argue that this rather gloomy view of poor quality deposits is exaggerated, and that even an unpromising site can yield evidence useful for answering broad academic questions.

A great deal of evidence has been accumulated from small towns. When Grenville Astill gave an overview of the subject in 1985, he cited in his footnotes nineteen excavations and a dozen topographical studies. In preparation for this paper, with its focus on the publications of the years 1984–2001, excavation reports have been consulted on more than 60 towns in England and Wales, some of which have been the subject of three or more separate programmes of investigation. This new corpus of work has developed in sophistication, with more open-area excavation, more environmental analysis, and well-informed specialist reports on pottery and other finds. After 1990 the implementation of Planning Policy Guideline 16 has meant that a great number of small trenches have been dug in towns, which have yielded very limited information. The dated pottery from these interventions can throw light on the chronology of settlement (see pp. 93–4, below), but the most valuable results come from larger excavations, which may have diminished in number as the result of the new planning policy.

Astill was able to refer to the very useful surveys of historic towns which were produced for a number of mainly southern counties, including his own exemplary study of Berkshire; English Heritage is now working on more ambitious and detailed documents on each town. Already published are a number of town plan

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analyses, mainly by historical geographers inspired by Conzen’s pioneering approach. Distribution maps of towns and collections of town plans have featured in some of the growing number of historical atlases for English counties, but not in every case.

Although studies of vernacular architecture have only occasionally resulted in systematic surveys of all of the standing buildings in a small town, individual buildings have been published, and a growing number have been dated by dendrochronology. There are some very useful studies in which the analysis of a standing building has been combined with excavations around and inside the structure.

Historians have similarly made advances in their studies of small towns. In 1985 Hilton had just produced a series of chapters and articles which showed that they were an important dimension of urbanization, and were closely connected to the peasantry of the surrounding countryside. Since then historians have contributed detailed studies of half-a-dozen well-documented places, and overviews of small towns in Britain and continental Europe.

In the last sixteen years the subject of small towns has been pushed forward by archaeologists, architectural historians, geographers and historians, and the purpose of this synthesis is to take account of work in these different fields, while highlighting the archaeological contribution. As always, the interdisciplinary path is not an easy one, and sometimes coordinating written and material evidence poses problems. Defining a town is an old conundrum, which still causes difficulties (see below), but to add to the dilemmas, how do we distinguish those which were ‘small’? Historians use a rule of thumb that a small town has a population below 2,000, which is not always easy to apply when we lack precise population figures, and some towns appear in different documents sometimes above the figure, and sometimes below. There is no agreed way of defining smallness in terms of the material evidence, although a ‘bundle of criteria’ is suggested below.

The disciplines are fortunately not separated. Archaeologists who work on urban sites with historical records of the 12th–15th centuries naturally take note of documents. Historians of this subject are not so conversant with the material.

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evidence, but they set the small towns in a context of urban development, and can show their significance in later medieval society. Small towns were numerous, with 600 in England at any one time between 1270 and 1525, and 70 at their peak of development in Wales. They account for about 6 per cent of all nucleated settlements, but because they each gave a living to more people than most villages (most of them had populations of at least 300) they contained almost a tenth of the whole population. The 50 large towns together housed at least 400,000 people, with about the same number in small towns. They provided points of contact between country people and the wider world, as marketing centres, as places of employment, as venues for gatherings for religious devotion or entertainment, and as magnets for migrants. Small towns provided the first stage on the path of those hoping for social betterment. If towns had an influence on the material culture of the countryside, for example by spreading the fashion for jetted timber-framed houses in the 15th century, the builders and their employers would in many cases have seen their models in small towns. The imported or manufactured goods that were being used in the countryside, such as dried cod, dyestuffs or copper-alloy dress accessories, were obtained from market stalls or shops in small towns, or pedlars based on such towns.

We are dealing with small places with large consequences, for which there is an abundance of archaeological evidence. I propose to discuss this material under four themes: firstly, origins; secondly, definitions and characteristics in relation to the urban hierarchy; thirdly, functions and diversity; and fourthly, long-term changes.

ORIGINS

The origins of all towns present us with the same problems, regardless of their size, and of course every town was small for at least a short time. Churches, local centres of power (such as king’s tuns and the centres of hundreds), and fortifications have all been identified as ‘pre-urban nuclei’. The Burghal Hidage, with its lists of fortifications that had grown up in the late 9th century to protect the kingdom of Wessex, includes the burhs which served as embryos from which major urban centres such as Winchester and Southampton grew. Axbridge (Somerset), Cricklade (Wiltshire) and many more burhs reappear in later centuries as small towns, and occasionally, as in recent work at South Street in Wilton (Wiltshire), there is excavated evidence for occupation in the 9th or 10th centuries. The list of small towns associated with fortifications expands when the later phases of burh foundations outside Wessex, such as Newark (Nottinghamshire) and Towcester (Northamptonshire) are taken into account, and we need to remember the lesser military sites which can be discovered mainly from their topography, such as

Avebury (Wiltshire). A high proportion of small towns grew up near a minster church: when, as often happened, the burh was built around an existing minster, the church rather than the burh could have served as the focus for urban growth. Sometimes, as at Witham in Essex, the burh of the early 10th century failed to develop as an urban settlement, and a new town was founded 300 years later.

Witham can stand as a typical example of a new town foundation. On a large manor of the Knights Templar it appears in documents as a nova villa with a main street called 'Newland' in 1212–13. In conventional documentary accounts of the origins of small towns the story begins with an initiative by a lord — a monastery, religious order, bishop, earl, baron, or king — in the 12th or 13th century. But the choice of site for a new town was often influenced by a proto-urban settlement, which may have been no more than a gathering for an informal market. Witham, for example, was the site of a market in the 12th century. Certain places had developed as meeting points and local centres for administration, religion and exchange over centuries. It was no coincidence that some medieval market towns lay on or near to the sites of Roman predecessors — like Cowbridge (Vale of Glamorgan), Chelmsford (Essex), Horncastle (Lincolnshire) and Ilchester (Somerset). Despite the cessation of Roman urban life in the 5th century, the Roman site or a place nearby continued to serve as an estate centre, and was therefore an obvious choice to become the site for a minster church. Other important places, such as hundred meeting places, may have become prominent in the post-Roman Period. The town founders of the 12th and 13th centuries had good reason to expect a town laid out next to a major church or the headquarters of an estate would have a good chance of success because the large and populous territory attached would provide the town with an initial hinterland.

The early iron-smelting and smithy site at Ramsbury in Wiltshire apparently belonged to such an estate centre, and it provides us with a model of urban origins: a craftsman established by a lord to serve the needs of an estate would eventually become a townsman selling his products to all-comers. At Daventry in Northamptonshire, after a phase of occupation in the 6th century, a settlement of the 10th and 11th centuries developed with boundary ditches, rubbish pits and a timber building. Cereals were being threshed and winnowed in quantity at or near this site, suggesting that it was the headquarters of an estate. Another key site is the 10th- and 11th-century settlement spreading to the south and west of the church at Steyning in Sussex, which presumably represents the small town described in Domesday. It had grown up near the important church and adjacent 'high-status' residence. In the 12th and 13th centuries a new town with conventional rows of

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houses was laid out along the High Street (Fig. 1).15 Trowbridge in Wiltshire developed next to a 12th-century castle, but the castle was preceded by a manorial site and stone church which functioned in the 10th and 11th centuries.16 Apparently new post-Conquest castles were sometimes founded on the sites of important pre-Conquest residences and centres of administration, so the towns which are conventionally assumed to have grown around the castle in the 12th century or later may have had an earlier beginning.17 The pre-urban settlement could have had a primarily economic function. The best explanation for the thick deposits of millions of oyster shells from the 10th and 11th centuries found at Poole in Dorset is that the shellfish were being processed, probably by pickling, on the

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shore before the town was founded.\textsuperscript{18} Other small ports developed near to traditional coastal sites for extracting salt or catching fish.

At some places the pre-urban settlement cannot be fitted into the categories of religious, administrative, military or economic centres. In Surrey at Godalming 8th- to 9th-century occupation, continuing until the 14th century, has been located on the edge of the later medieval town, at some distance from the church.\textsuperscript{19} Perhaps the town grew from a coalescence of early farmsteads or hamlets, or this early site, in view of the relative abundance of pottery found, was a high-status settlement that had some influence on subsequent urban growth.

A degree of discontinuity during the period 650–900 is suggested by the recent discoveries of ‘productive sites’. These concentrations of coins and metal work of the 7th, 8th and 9th centuries are now often found in open country, remote from medieval or modern towns. Their location sometimes at road junctions or river crossings supports the suggestion that they were periodic markets or fairs, which failed to establish themselves as centres of exchange in the long term. At Riby Cross Roads (Humberside, formerly Lincolnshire) and Cottam (N. Yorkshire formerly Yorkshire ER) the productive sites proved to have been associated with dwellings, though these were soon abandoned: they were as unstable as many rural settlements of that period. A small port at Sandtun in Kent stands as an example of a coastal trading settlement which was active from 700 to 875 and then declined.\textsuperscript{20} So alongside the small towns like Daventry and Steyning which had a long-term role as ‘central places’ — which have been called the ‘primary towns’ — there were also commercial venues of the 7th and 8th centuries which went out of use in the 9th century or soon afterwards.\textsuperscript{21}

Turning to the towns that appear to have been new in the 12th and 13th centuries, the documents tend to tell an incomplete story because we learn from them about the successful urban ventures. Many of the foundations however failed, leaving traces in the ground but not in documents. At Oversley in Warwickshire the locally powerful Boteler family in the mid-12th century laid out two roads outside the gates of their castle with rectangular plots along them defined by ditches (Fig. 2).\textsuperscript{22} The two roads joined the castle to Ryknild Street, a route with Roman origins which connected the Cotswolds, the Avon valley and the woodland of the Arden; a chapel was built beside this road. The animal bones suggest that this was a centre of consumption rather than agricultural production. This initial planning, on a small scale, was perhaps to be succeeded by further stages if it attracted enough settlers. Some tenants built on their plots, and one was used for a malt kiln,

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but not all of them have evidence for occupation, and the settlement was abandoned in the early 13th century. Alcester, 1.5 km to the north, developed into a successful market town near a small monastery, and at the junction of roads with Ryknild Street, with two river crossings.

In the same county at Dassett Southend a new town was founded at the end of the 13th century, which achieved a modest growth. Houses were closely set along a street called Newland in urban style, and a smithy represents craft activity. It had links with N. Warwickshire, from which roofing slates and pottery were brought. The documents mention artisans and traders, and refer to a market hall, but the main evidence for its urban character comes from excavations. It was well sited near a junction of main roads, at some distance from existing towns, but its relatively late foundation, on the eve of the 14th-century crisis, probably prevented it from establishing its place securely in the urban network.

These two examples show lords experimenting with foundations, establishing new towns within the hinterlands of existing towns, and attracting some artisans and traders, but did not succeed because of the unsuitable site (at Oversley) and the late date (at Dassett). Many other examples of failures in the 12th and 13th centuries could be given—a number of towns near to castles did not flourish, such as Almondbury (W. Yorkshire) and Skipsea (N. Yorkshire, formerly Yorkshire ER), for which the evidence is documentary and topographical rather than from excavation. An age of urbanization was clearly also a period of decayed towns, or at least of nascent towns nipped in the bud. They tell us about the limitations on the powers of lords, and the turbulence of the period of growth, when only the fittest survived. The number of failures is difficult to calculate, because we can only hope to stumble on them by chance.

In the successful new towns the material evidence reveals some of the complexities behind the process of town foundation. Stratford-upon-Avon (Warwickshire) is often regarded by historians as the archetypal planted town, with its prosperity and confidence of the fraternity which established its presence near the edge of the built-up area, on the street which led to the parish church. Limited excavation shows that within the area laid out in 1196 the first burgage plots at 3.5 by 12 perches, or approximately 60 by 200 feet (18 m by 60 m). As it grew, the building plots at its prime points of sale were subdivided in response to commercial pressures. Civic buildings of the 13th–15th century demonstrate the prosperity and confidence of the fraternity which established its presence near the edge of the planned town, on the street which led to the parish church. Limited excavation shows that within the area laid out in 1196 the first phases of occupation belonged to the 13th century. As yet there is no evidence, either documentary or archaeological, that any informal settlement or periodic market had signalled to the lord that this was a propitious site for a town. Pottery of the 11th and 12th centuries has been found in ‘Old Town’, the village that pre-dated the planted town. The outer plots of the planned town may never have been occupied, and in 1251–2 a survey shows two individual tenants holding more than a dozen holding each, which they could have been using as paddocks and gardens.

The medieval planning process has left clear material evidence at a number of towns—the ditches dug to mark the boundaries of the burgage plots have been found at Dorchester (Dorset), Hedon (Humberside, formerly Yorkshire ER) and Newport (Pembrokeshire). But the plan did not always materialize as swiftly and

24 Information from Dr Oliver Creighton.
Stratford-upon-Avon, Warwickshire. The planned town of 1196, showing sites of excavations and observations.
smoothly as at Stratford. Firstly, as we have already seen, the planned town was often preceded by a settlement which demonstrated an urban potential. At Wootton Bassett in Wiltshire the borough was not mentioned in documents until the 13th century, but the first phase of occupation dates from the 12th century. Elsewhere the plan can be shown to have been an afterthought, notably at Bawtry (S. Yorkshire, formerly N. Riding), where in the late 12th century houses were built on the Church Street site, but the street itself with its orderly row of tenements was not laid out until later. A town plan with the usual narrow plots developed as late as the 15th century at Braintree in Essex.

Stratford was unusual because it was planned on a large scale with a grid of six intersecting streets from its inception. Most towns grew in stages, as Conzen found by analysing the plan of Ludlow (Shropshire), and the same happened at the smaller towns of Bewdley (Hereford and Worcester, formerly Worcestershire) and Burton-on-Trent (Staffordshire). In the latter case the five plan units (groups of tenements of similar size and shape, apparently laid out at the same time) can be dated from records in the monastic chronicle to a series of monastic initiatives in the 12th and 13th centuries. Excavations at Dorchester (Dorset) show that the town was extended to the south in a coordinated expansion on to agricultural land in the 13th century (Fig. 4). In the same century at Taunton (Somerset) the town took over land to the east of the High Street, when the boundary ditches of the new plots overlaid 12th-century pits. A suburb of Windsor, the Underore on the river bank, was developed in the 12th century. Town plans were modified, such as the road leading to the north gate of Cowbridge which was added after the main planning stage in the 13th century.

All of these examples demonstrate that the authorities, usually the lords of the towns, could manage growth flexibly, whether by boldly foreseeing the potential of a site and laying out streets at a single creative moment which soon were filled with tenants, or more gradually by imposing plans on existing settlements and adding streets and suburbs, as the town outgrew its original allotted space.

The opposite of these stories of sustained growth is provided by the failure of towns to fill the space designed for them. We have already noted that even a spectacular success like Stratford, which gained a thousand inhabitants in only 50 years, had some empty plots on its fringes. Elsewhere excavation shows that plots

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30 Astill, op. cit. in note 5, 48.
Dorchester, Dorset. Excavation in Greyhound Yard showed that a group of tenements facing on to Durngate were laid out c. 1200. The town had developed in the pre-Conquest estate of Fordington, with houses initially built along High Street and South Street. The Durngate development was a planned extension of the 13th century. Source: Woodward, Davies and Graham, op. cit. in note 27; K. Penn, *Historic Towns in Dorset* (Dorchester, 1980).

were filled quite slowly. A site near St Mary’s church on the edge of another famous 12th-century plantation, Devizes in Wiltshire, produced no material earlier than the late 13th century. At Hedon plots in the southern part of the town were taken up gradually in the 12th and 13th centuries, and then abandoned after a century or so. Of the three plots excavated at Newport (Pembrokeshire) which was founded in c. 1197, two were occupied at an early stage, but a third (building 3) was constructed some decades after its neighbours, though still within the 13th century (Fig. 5).³⁶

The chequered history of the new towns suggests the complexity of the dialogue between the lord and the inhabitants. The lord saw an opportunity at a site where roads met, near a church or some other point of attraction, preferably at

Newport (Pembs.). A semi-schematic plan based on a rental of 1434. The town plan dates from the late 12th century. The development of buildings on the three excavated plots, with four phases within the 13th century, is also shown. Source: Murphy, op. cit. in note 27.
or near a place where unofficially people already gathered to exchange goods. A market would be founded, privileges granted, roads diverted, and plots measured and rented out. Settlers had to be attracted and wooed. They could not be compelled to take up plots. They calculated the advantage, and occupied a plot, but if the town did not take off, they would move to a more promising place. A flourishing town emerged through the combination of initiatives by both lords and the townspeople. Their interactions help to explain the fickleness of the archaeological evidence — sometimes a plot was never occupied, sometimes it had a house built on it which was quickly abandoned, and sometimes it was continuously occupied from the early stages of the town’s existence until recent times.

DEFINITIONS AND CHARACTERISTICS

The theme of definitions can be introduced now that origins have been considered, as the characteristics of a town cannot be recognized until it had been established.

How can small towns be distinguished from large villages? Historians emphasize occupational diversity, so that even the 60 or 100 households of a very small town would have made their livings from twenty separate occupations. Such a variety of trades and crafts would not be apparent from the archaeological evidence. Even after a number of excavations and observations at Farnham in Surrey traces were found of only four different crafts. The material evidence can reveal occupations which do not appear in the documents: bone-working, flax-processing and the making of stone artefacts such as mortars, but many common urban trades, like those of the tailors and the mercers, usually leave no trace in the ground. In others, such as baking and brewing, production for the market cannot always be easily distinguished from domestic preparation of food and drink.

Perhaps the best way to identify towns in terms of material culture is to recognize a distinctively urban use of space: high densities of buildings; rows of houses closely packed along street frontages; narrow plots behind the houses; peculiar street patterns including the accommodation of market places in front of church doors, at the convergence of streets, or in deliberately widened main streets. The character of the town becomes even clearer if buildings survive, because they created a three-dimensional space which must have made entering a town a special experience. Certainly in the Midlands and north until the end of the Middle Ages towns were the only communities with large numbers of two-storey houses. The wealden house with its combination of open hall and two-storey end bays, commonplace in Kent and the adjoining counties in both town and country, in the W. Midlands was concentrated in towns. Some small-town buildings are identical with those in larger centres: a corner shop of three storeys with both upper floors jettied, which can be seen facing the market place at Axbridge in Somerset, would have been incongruous in anything but an urban context. Excavations and

39 J. Grenville, Medieval Housing (Leicester, 1997), 181–6.
documents tell us about a negative effect of the high density of urban settlements, the occasional catastrophic fires. The closely packed timber buildings adjacent to many hearths, kilns and ovens in towns made them more vulnerable than villages to this type of disaster.\textsuperscript{40}

Town can be compared with other settlements with potential town-like qualities, such as the industrial village of Lyveden in Northamptonshire.\textsuperscript{41} The houses were associated with pottery and tile kilns, workshops and iron furnaces, but the buildings were of peasant type, and were widely spaced as would be expected in a rural settlement. The crafts were being combined by the inhabitants with agriculture, and the tenant of one excavated house was apparently committed solely to agriculture for part of the 15th century, which would not have been an easy option in many small towns. In short, Lyveden lacks urban characteristics. More problematic are the trading settlements scattered around the countryside, some of them villages with chartered markets and market places, which bear a topographical similarity to small towns, though their houses are often not arranged with urban compactness. At King’s Norton (West Midlands, formerly Worcestershire) in the later Middle Ages an unofficial market was held on land to the south of the large chapel, now called the Green, which was surrounded by houses recorded as substantial in the early 16th century (Fig. 6).\textsuperscript{42} A number of timber-framed houses were still standing into the 20th century. One house facing on to the Green which did not survive has been excavated. It was occupied in the 13th–14th centuries, and its plan and construction resembled that of a rural dwelling, but the pottery used by the inhabitants came from a wide variety of production centres, and included an unusual range of forms, suggesting close contacts with marketing networks.

On the edge of some small towns were concentrations of industrial activity, almost industrial zones. At Brewood in Staffordshire a timber and stone platform in use between the 13th and 15th centuries next to a stream was associated with barrels set in the ground containing remains of bark and hemp, presumably from tanning and the processing of fibres for ropes or coarse linen.\textsuperscript{43} Near the Wiltshire town of Malmesbury finds of slag, an intensively used hearth, a channel for a mill, and bones apparently discarded by tanners suggested to the excavators that the site had been used for different industries from the 10th century until recent times.\textsuperscript{44} Urban industries were based on the houses, yards and outbuildings of the artisans, but the more noxious trades, such as tanning, tended to be grouped on the edge of the town, near water, and some processes spilt over into suburban open spaces.

Botanical research provides another means for assessing the role of a town in relation to its rural surroundings. This has been demonstrated from environmental

\textsuperscript{40} E.g. at Bawtry: Dunkley and Cumberpatch, op. cit. in note 29, 18.


King’s Norton (West Midlands, formerly Worcestershire). A small non-urban settlement with trading functions, grouped round an unofficial market place. Source: Jones, Ratkai and Ellis, op. cit. in note 42.
evidence from Stone in Staffordshire and Cowbridge in the Vale of Glamorgan. At Stone a site quite near to the later town centre in its pre-urban phase had the characteristics of a homogeneous environment on the banks of a stream with pond weed, sedge and other appropriate plants. From the 12th century onwards as the small town grew the plant remains were transformed with the addition of species representative of a wide variety of rural landscapes — cornfields, heaths, pastures and woodlands. Much of this material had been brought in from a distance, to satisfy the demands of urban consumers for corn, straw, hay, bracken, firewood and rushes. The products of cultivation and gathering would also have come as raw materials for urban manufacturers, like the flax and hemp which appears among the plant remains. Some exotic species, such as grapes and figs, were imported to be sold to better-off town dwellers, and to country people visiting the market. The faunal evidence confirmed this picture of an environmental transformation, from water beetles only in the pre-urban phase, to beetles which lived in the town’s wooden buildings, granaries and dung. Plant finds at Cowbridge came from the fill of a ditch, dated to the mid-13th century, in an early phase of the town’s growth. They show that the town was in contact with a range of rural habitats, from marshes, arable, grassland, moors or heaths and woods, and some of the weeds came from the new local habitats created by the townspeople, such as gardens and patches of disturbed ground. The towns were both changing their own environments, and serving as hubs, unifying their hinterlands and acting as channels of communication between rural economies. This role as centres of exchange benefited the towns but also stimulated production and specialization in the nearby countryside. The presence of foreign fruits at Stone and other small towns reminds us that as well as satisfying basic needs, towns were educating the tastes of their customers, and enabling them to extend their horizons. Even in the middle of Staffordshire, elites could imagine themselves as part of a Mediterranean culture.

Topography, material culture and environment help us to distinguish small towns from other settlements, but how can we tell the difference between small and large towns, or even define different gradations within the range of small towns? Table 1 lists benchmarks that can be used to locate towns within an urban hierarchy. The first column gives the criteria in general terms, such as size of population, social structure and occupations; the second indicates some of the historical evidence that can be used to establish these criteria, like the tax assessments that can act as a proxy for precise population figures; the third column suggests the material evidence which throw light on the criteria for all towns, and the fourth column singles out the material evidence commonly found in small towns. The contents of the fourth column, taken together, amount to a bundle of characteristics which can be used to identify a small town in terms of its material remains.

46 For further comment, see Laughton, Jones and Dyer, op. cit. in note 2.
1. Most small towns contained between 50 and 400 houses, but discovering the number depends on medieval documents or counting the plots visible on early maps. Topographical analysis will reveal a limited number of ‘plan units’, sometimes only one, and rarely more than five. A small town sometimes stimulated the growth of a suburb, either a new settlement, or a village which developed town-like characteristics like Bengeworth near Evesham (Hereford and Worcester, formerly Worcestershire), to mention one of the few where excavations have taken place. This is a rather technical way of making the obvious point that small towns had a limited capacity for physical growth.

2. Small towns did not have a large number of high-status houses appropriate for merchants or gentry. A few have been recognized in excavations, at Alton

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(Hampshire), Windsor (Berkshire), and Seaford (Sussex). Some are still standing, such as the house of the Paycocke family (clothiers) of c. 1500 at Coggeshall in Essex, or Willam Grevile’s house at Chipping Campden (Gloucestershire) (he was a woolmonger at the end of the 14th century). In the same way that these larger houses stand out among the hundreds of commonplace two-storey (or wealden) houses of two or three bays, so among the usual low status and unremarkable small finds an isolated luxury object suggests a wealthier inhabitant, such as the 14th-century mirror and case found at Monmouth. Occasional finds of the bones of hawks, as at Ripon (N. Yorkshire), show that at least a few townspeople could aspire to elite pastimes.

3. The number of occupations in small towns is most fully indicated by documents, and some of these, such as smithing, butchery and leatherworking, have been noted frequently in excavations. We would not expect to find evidence for the more specialized and high-status crafts, such as brass-founding, which were more commonly practised in high-order centres. Some service occupations were common to towns of all sizes, and inns were a characteristic feature of all towns on main roads, which have been identified from standing buildings rather than excavations. We rightly think of small towns as having many everyday trades and crafts, to cater for the varied mundane needs of its local but not very wealthy customers, but some developed a specialism for a wider market. Saffron cultivation at Walden in Essex would be difficult to detect from material evidence alone, but the limestone quarries near to the town centre of Walsall (Staffordshire) reflect that town’s reputation as a centre for lime burning.

4. All towns had market places, but in small towns the space was limited, and often this activity was concentrated in a single main street, though some complex subdivisions are known.

5. We would expect to find that the traders of small towns had a more limited range of contacts, and dealt in commodities over shorter distances, than those located in larger centres. A minor port town like Seaford had a lower proportion of imported pottery of the 13th and 14th centuries than contemporary Southampton, though at Poole as much as 5 per cent of the pottery had been imported from overseas. Ports also obtained some of their pottery and building materials (and no doubt other less durable goods) from coastal trade. In inland towns, both small and large, most of the pottery was brought from nearby centres of manufacture,

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and a smaller proportion of wares came from a distance. Occasionally a few sherds of imported pottery can be found in even a minor inland market town. 53

6. Towns served as administrative and religious centres, to which people in the surrounding country went to attend courts, pay rents and participate in rituals. Castles, official buildings, and important churches and religious houses reflect those functions. Small towns were sometimes founded at the gates of a castle or monastery, but those large institutions dominated them rather than forming part of the town’s infrastructure. In small towns the characteristic institutions would be represented by manor houses, or structures of a more specialized kind such as the stannery buildings still surviving at Lostwithiel in Cornwall, where locally mined and smelted tin was stamped and taxed. 54 Most small towns had a single parish church, or as commonly a chapel which served a territory carved out of an earlier parish. Some fraternities built their own chapels separate from the parish church, though in most cases the chapel would be accommodated within the church. Urban churches also attracted privately endowed chantries, of which the priests’ houses sometimes survive, as at Bridport in Dorset. 55 Few small towns were large enough to justify founding friaries or Augustinian houses, but many were provided with a small hospital or a row of almshouses. Friaries are said to define urbanism, but they serve only as a guide to the large towns, and minor hospitals are a better signal of small-scale urbanization.

7. Civic government was a feature of small towns, though on a lesser scale than in the large centres. As well as guildhalls, market halls, toll booths and other structures associated with municipal administration, small towns equipped themselves, or were equipped with, the infrastructure on which their trade depended. Poole’s warehouse, the Town Cellars, is said to have been used to store wool. Many towns were responsible for the construction and maintenance of bridges and roads. Excavations of bridges are rare, but those at Kingston-on-Thames in Surrey demonstrate the succession of rebuildings and repairs that a major bridge required. At Towcester in Northamptonshire the surface of the main street was paved with limestone, perhaps in the mid-15th century. A number of small towns received royal permission to collect tolls in order to fund the paving of streets, and this is one of the few indications of the quality and scale of these public works. 56 A remarkable modification of the urban space at Monmouth in the mid-late 13th century was the dumping of clay 1 m deep over a number of tenements, raising the level of the buildings. This may have been a response to flooding. 57 Excavators in a number of towns note the diminishing quantities of material datable to the end of

57 Marvell, op. cit. in note 27, 14–16.
the Middle Ages, which may reflect the more systematic disposal of rubbish in that period.

These benchmarks depend on the combination of historical, geographical and archaeological approaches to urban communities, structures, spaces and artefacts. For many archaeologists the most important characteristic of small towns is their lack of high-quality archaeological deposits. This is true of many sites, but some excavations have located deep and well-preserved structures, like the Still site at Peterborough (Cambridgeshire) and Church Street, Bawtry.58 Excavators should not approach small-town sites with unrealistic expectations, because they were often occupied for a relatively short time, by not very affluent people pursuing mundane occupations. Many excavations produce small quantities of information, but cumulatively they can throw light on the development of a particular town, and eventually on urban settlements in general.

FUNCTIONS AND DIVERSITY

Attempts to characterize small towns are made difficult by the variety of their forms and functions. The majority had a role as the market centres for their hinterlands, where a variety of produce could be sold, and wide range of traded and manufactured goods purchased. As most people who came to market were relatively poor peasants and wage earners, they were requiring low key, everyday and cheap goods and services. In consequence the townspeople could not hope to accumulate great wealth, hence the insubstantial structures and limited range of pottery and artefacts on small town sites. A few places specialized in some local resource, such as salt at Droitwich (Hereford and Worcester, formerly Worcestershire) and Nantwich (Cheshire), iron at Trelech (Gwent, formerly Monmouthshire) and alabaster at Burton-on-Trent.59 Some towns developed a speciality through ingenuity and enterprise, such as the knives of Thaxted in Essex, for which the town had no obvious advantage in terms of access to iron, fuel or bone for handles.60

Ports were a distinct type of small town which has attracted much archaeological attention at Hartlepool, Pevensey (Sussex), Poole, and Seaford. In such places ships and boats were built and repaired, resulting in finds of prepared boat timbers of c. 1400 at Poole and a dock of the 12th—14th centuries at Hartlepool (Cleveland, formerly Co. Durham). At the same places ships were victualled, as indicated by the intensively used and plentiful ovens at Hartlepool (Fig. 8), and cattle bones at

Poole.\textsuperscript{61} Goods were carried to these ports along the coast or from overseas, as is evident from the exotic pottery and small finds which are found in greater quantities than in inland towns.

River ports can also have distinctive assemblages of pottery, like the wares represented at Henley-on-Thames (Oxfordshire), which included the predictably high proportion of Oxfordshire wares, but also a good deal of pottery which had come up the river from Surrey and some from the capital. Bawtry’s role as an inland port is reflected in finds of pottery from overseas, including Saintonge ware.\textsuperscript{62} Many towns relying mainly on roads served as ‘gateway’ markets, by providing a channel of communication between contrasting rural regions. Peterborough had such a role on the edge of the fens and near the frontier between wooded and arable landscapes, and its pottery in the period 1250–1450 was supplied mainly from the kilns of S. Lincolnshire and from Northamptonshire, and with some wares from fenland sources, such as Ely (Fig. 7a). Pottery from more distant centres in East Anglia (such as the Grimston kilns) and abroad also came along the fenland waterways.\textsuperscript{63} Inns help us to identify the ‘thoroughfare’ towns which derived part of their living by servicing the travellers on major roads.

Small towns also varied from region to region, and better understanding of these differences will tell us about the towns in relation to the local landscape and settlement pattern. Types of town plan may form clusters in particular regions, and further work on house types, building materials, and timber framing may reveal local peculiarities, such as the wealdens of the W. Midlands already mentioned (p. 98). Excavations at Tynemouth in Northumberland showed that building construction using earthfast posts persisted in the 13th and 14th centuries when it was being replaced by stone foundation walls and timber framing further to the south, even as near as Hartlepool.\textsuperscript{64}

A remarkable local diversity emerges from distribution maps of small towns, which were especially numerous in the south-west and in particular in Devon, but rather sparse in the East Midland counties, such as Nottinghamshire.\textsuperscript{65} Towns should be recognized as part of the wider pattern of settlement, so they stand out in areas of dispersed settlement in the south-east and west, but are not so distinct among the nucleated villages in the ‘feldon’ or ‘champion’ country of central southern England, the Midlands and the north-east. The formation of many towns came later than the presumed period of village nucleation, but the two processes were not completely separate, and both types of settlement formation involved an element of planning.\textsuperscript{66}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[63] Spoerry and Hinman, op. cit. in note 58, 50–82.
\end{footnotes}
a) Peterborough (Cambridgeshire), with ceramic evidence for trade between diverse regions. b) Bulkington (Wiltshire), showing pottery making sites, and towns likely to have played a role in distribution. Sources: Spoerry and Hinman, op. cit. in note 58; Bell and Durham, op. cit. in note 68.
Regional contrasts in material culture are highlighted by comparison between the finds from excavations in small towns. Pottery and small finds are relatively plentiful in the south-east and Midlands, but sparse in Welsh and northern towns such as New Radnor (Powys) and Penrith (Cumbria, formerly Cumberland). Quite extensive work on Tynemouth yielded a total of only 249 sherds of medieval pottery.\(^{57}\)

Excavation on rural sites can give us useful insights into the role of towns. The flourishing of urban industry in the 10th and 11th centuries is well known. Documents tell us about the busy rural cloth industry in the 12th and 13th centuries, which co-existed with the urban industry but then strengthened from the mid-14th century onwards. Town and country industries interacted in complicated ways: both rural and urban weavers depended on country spinners, whose presence is well attested by the finds of spindle-whorls around peasant houses. The clothiers’ houses in towns like Coggeshall (Essex) reflect the coordination of the rural industry by small town entrepreneurs, and it was from the towns that the rural clothmakers obtained their materials, such as dyes, alum and oil.

After a pre-Conquest urban phase, pottery manufacture developed in the countryside. The rural potters had the advantage of accessible fuel and clay, but urban traders seem to have marketed their wares. A recent study of 12th- to 16th-century pottery found at a rural settlement at Bulkington in Wiltshire shows that the wares came mainly from kilns at Crockerton, Savernake Forest, Verwood and Laverstock, and small quantities from Minety (with some also from Bath).\(^{68}\)

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potters may have sold their wares from village to village, but the distances between Bulkington and the production sites (from 15 to 50 km) make it more likely that products were taken to the market towns within a few kilometres of each centre of manufacture — at Warminster, Marlborough, Salisbury and Malmesbury (Fig. 7b). The pots would have been distributed through the market system by middlemen who visited Trowbridge and Devizes markets, where they would have been available to the Bulkington peasants.

Not just pottery was acquired in this way, as we must assume that many of the small finds on village sites came from urban traders. For example, the 21 tofts of the rural settlement at Westbury (Buckinghamshire), occupied from the 10th to the 16th centuries, yielded more than a hundred buckles and buckle plates (some fragmentary), pins, harness fittings, a finger ring, a pendant, a thimble, mirror case, seal matrix, and other copper-alloy objects, together with an iron padlock and spur that are unlikely to have been made by a country smith, imported stone objects such as hone, a mortar and pieces of handmill, and oyster shells.69 The most likely source of such specialized artefacts and traded goods would have been the towns of Fenny Stratford, Stony Stratford and Newport Pagnell. Westbury’s peasants, like those at Bulkington and thousands of other rural communities, lived too far from large towns to be able to use their facilities regularly, though no doubt some of the better quality metalwork or imported goods that they bought in a local market had come down the commercial network from a large town.

We ought not to exaggerate the commercial role of towns in the period 1200–1500. We know that much exchange went on within the village, and that larger producers would sell their corn, hay, animals and firewood directly to the consumers. In a fully urbanized system we might expect that peasants would have sold animals to town butchers, and bought joints of meat from the butchers’ stalls as they needed them. This may have happened, but among the animal bone from the rural site at West Cotton in Northamptonshire were skulls and other parts of the skeleton normally deriving from butchery waste, showing that the animals were killed and the meat distributed in the country by the peasants themselves, or peasants who were also part-time butchers.70

### CHANGES IN THE LONG TERM

The rise of the small towns represents an important phase of medieval urbanization, and the archaeological evidence supports the notion of dramatic growth in the late 12th and above all the 13th centuries. This was the period when many towns began, expanded into new streets, or spawned suburbs. Houses were built, rubbish pits dug and filled, crafts practised and pottery traded. Particularly

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impressive evidence has come from excavations on the edge of the medieval built-up area. Work at Abingdon (Oxfordshire, formerly Berkshire), Crawley in Sussex, Evesham (Hereford and Worcester, formerly Worcestershire) and Godalming have all produced evidence of medieval buildings and occupation at some distance from the town centre.\(^71\)

Expansion may seem obvious because that is also the message of the written sources, above all the thousand market charters of 1200–1350 and documents mentioning hundreds of boroughs especially in the 13th century. But archaeology contributes a great deal to our appreciation of this phase of urbanization, because the documents only tell us about legal market privileges and the conferring of burgage tenure. The market and the town could have existed long before the formal grant of privilege. Or the charters, if they were creating new institutions, might not have succeeded in their aims, and the market or town would not have come into being. The material evidence may lend occasional support for the existence of a ‘proto-urban’ settlement before the advent of a borough. At Hartlepool the town seems to have begun slowly, with scattered buildings inhabited from the late 11th century, but the really intensive occupation, with narrow plots crowded with buildings used as dwellings and for crafts, appeared after about 1250 (Fig. 8).\(^72\)

Archaeology gives us a very useful corroboration of the reality of urban life. It is often said that the new boroughs of the 13th century were no more than villages pretending to be towns. An example is Brewood in Staffordshire, a borough of apparently no more than 25 burgages in the 13th century in the midst of a rural estate of the bishops of Coventry and Lichfield. A wide range of crafts and trades in the town is not documented until 1381, so it is very helpful to see material evidence for industrial activities on the fringe of the town from the 13th century. Together with newly discovered evidence that there were twice as many burgages as previously thought, it has a strong case for being regarded as a fully fledged town.\(^73\) To be more confident about the chronology of urbanization we need to know more of the archaeology of the small towns of the 10th and 11th centuries, such as the numerous early boroughs of the south-west. Similarly the so-called ‘failed boroughs’ of the 12th and 13th centuries deserve more careful investigation. The false starts need not detract from our overall impression of an urbanizing 13th century. The flourishing of a town for a few decades was a significant event at the time: we should not regard such a temporary phase of urban growth as insignificant because the town did not survive into modern times. The casualties arose from fierce competition fuelled by commercial growth, and the ‘deserted towns’, like Oversley (see pp. 91–2, above) were often rapidly overtaken by successful neighbours.


\(^73\) Dyer, op. cit. in note 59, 9–10.
From around 1300, the 'crisis' of the later Middle Ages, there is a mixed impression of decline, survival and growth. Some towns were sliding downhill by c. 1300. Burgage plots fell vacant at Newport (Pembrokeshire) at the end of the 13th century, and a site on the east side of Wareham in Dorset was occupied in the 12th century and abandoned in the 13th. Often houses fell into decay in the 14th and 15th centuries, for example at Brackley (Northamptonshire) and Cowbridge. Tenements at Hartlepool were intensively occupied in the late 13th and 14th centuries, but by c. 1400 one plot became a yard while on an adjoining plot the buildings were reduced in number. Later in the 15th century all of the houses on the site fell into disuse (Fig. 8). Sometimes whole sections of towns were abandoned. On one site in Poole at the end of the Middle Ages a layer of 'dark earth' was recognized, comparable with the evidence for the phase of de-urbanization in Roman towns. The decline of the small port of Pevensey was reflected in the narrower range of imported pottery in the 15th century.

To reflect the contrary view, some excavators have expressed scepticism about the apparent absence of 15th-century occupation on their sites, when documents suggest that the town was still active. Was the lack of material caused by a new pattern of rubbish disposal? Or did plots of land change function, with shifts in the location of crafts, which did not necessarily mean that the town became poorer or disastrously smaller?

Population was low and stagnant in both town and country for almost two centuries after the Black Death of 1348-9, a period which contained a 'great depression' in trade in the middle of the 15th century. In a remarkable tribute to the vigour in sections of urban life some small towns grew in size, and a few new towns emerged. Devon is famous for its prosperity in the 15th century, and we find a proto-town at Exmouth where excavations have revealed a chapel and a cluster of houses, apparently a settlement for fishermen and mariners which began in the 12th century but expanded in the 14th and 15th. On the edge of Newton Abbot, plots which had been laid out in the 13th century were being subdivided and occupied more intensively two centuries later (Fig. 9). Topography and documents tell us that Pensford (Avon, formerly in Somerset) grew in an unplanned cluster of clothmakers' houses straddling parish and manorial boundaries.

Within the small towns, whether they were growing or declining as a whole, new timber-framed houses were being constructed. These may in some cases represent the investment decisions of landlords, who demonstrated their confidence in the long-term future. In others, the houses would have been built by their
NEWTON ABBOT


Buildings in small towns dated by dendrochronology. This is mainly from houses standing on main streets. It includes guildhalls and other secular public buildings, and rectories and vicarages, but in order to focus on the urban fabric, it excludes castles, churches, monasteries, and major aristocratic buildings. The original sample included 5 buildings dated to the 13th century, and 26 from the 17th century, but these are not shown. Sources: see note 80.

occupants, who must have been enjoying some prosperity. From dendrochronological research, on the basis of the 111 dated secular and non-aristocratic buildings in small towns from the period 1300–1600, the early 14th century is quite well represented, especially considering the low chances of survival from such an early period (Fig. 10). The period 1340–1400 was not very active, which differs from the pattern in larger towns, though there was apparently a reduction in aristocratic building at this time. As in the case of peasant houses, the 15th century, and more particularly the period 1430–90, stands out as a period of house construction.80 A

systematic chronology of small-town churches has yet to be attempted, but anecdotal evidence points to a wave of additions and rebuildings, with much internal decoration and furnishing between 1400 and 1540. A considerable number of public works, notably guildhalls, bridges, quays and roads were being carried out in the 15th and early 16th centuries. They were partly connected with the survival and sometimes the growth of commerce and industry, which was itself fuelled by higher living standards. But they also relate to civic pride, religious zeal and a strong sense of the common good, which was articulated by town governments and above all through fraternities.

**CONCLUSION**

Small towns repay the efforts of archaeological investigation. Excavation, work on standing buildings, analysis of town plans and other interrogations of the material evidence can reveal new dimensions of the urban past. Small towns were the meeting places and commercial hubs for the majority of medieval people. Their origins can be traced to the markets beside minster churches or in more remote places before 850, to the estate centres of the same period, and to the burh building of the period 870–1020. Small towns were growing throughout the 11th and 12th centuries, but in the largest numbers in c. 1170–1280. Archaeology shows that this was not just an illusion created by documents, as many small towns made a strong imprint in material terms. The proliferation of small towns was an essential part of urbanization — without the network of small market centres, the larger towns, the ports and the large-scale international trade of the 13th and subsequent centuries could not have existed. In the upheaval of the mushroom growth of the 12th and 13th centuries, some towns failed. The subsequent history of the small towns reflects the reality of the shrinkage in the settlement pattern as a whole after the mid-14th century. Examples of expanding towns, new towns and new buildings warn us from making too gloomy an assessment of a period of much economic and cultural vitality.

The archaeology of the small towns gives us new ways of looking at the countryside in which the towns lay. The towns take on varied aspects in different landscapes, appearing in the ‘champion’ regions, or the ‘Central Province’ as larger and functionally specialized nucleations among many compact villages, but in the south-east and the west towns stand out prominently among the scattered hamlets and farmsteads. The markets of small towns helped to create changes in consumption and material culture in the later Middle Ages which are apparent in the finds and buildings on rural settlement sites. Town and country were entwined in an exchange of goods within hinterlands and between regions. In relation to the urban hierarchy a bundle of characteristics can be ascribed to the small towns, as a type of urban settlement which is distinguished from the higher order centres not in terms of their qualities but by their smaller scale.

Small towns are revealed as diverse communities. They include ports, gateway towns, thoroughfare towns, and occasionally centres of specialized manufacture. A few wealthy inhabitants lived in them. They were planned in a variety of forms, and subsequently some acquired new plan units, and a few gathered suburbs. They
help us to define regional differences, not just in the density of their distribution, but in their material prosperity, architecture and religious institutions.

Research into the archaeology of small towns has taught us much, and in the future will reveal much more.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As this is the address delivered in December 2001 at the end of my three-year term as President of the Society for Medieval Archaeology, I can use this space to record my thanks to the Society for honouring me by electing me to this office, and the members of the Society and its Council, and above all the officers, for their kindness and courtesy on every occasion. In preparing this address, as recorded in footnote 2, I was helped by the discussions during the ESRC research project by my colleagues at Leicester and Birmingham. I gave a version of the lecture to a meeting of the Pre-Modern Towns group in London in January 2002, and I was encouraged and helped by the discussion that followed. I am also grateful for information provided by Umberto Albarella, Oliver Creighton, Robert Croft, Richard Cuttle, Mark Gardiner, Richard Hall, Nicholas Palmer, Andrew Reynolds, Roger Thomas and Alan Vince. I am grateful for Nancy Moore's help with typing, and Andy Isham's preparation of the figures.