

TUDOR CHESTER

by Professor A. R. Myers, M.A., Ph.D., F.R.Hist.S., F.S.A.

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The publication of this paper is the Society's tribute to Professor A. R. Myers, who died on 2 July 1980. When he read this paper to the Society, he was already ill. For a number of years he had carried out research into the history of Chester; sadly, this paper is likely to be the only written result of that research. Professor Myers himself said that 'this lecture can be only an interim statement'. Had he lived, he would have been the author of a chapter on Tudor Chester in the Chester volume of the *Victoria History of Cheshire*, which would have expanded, and perhaps modified, some of the views which he expresses here. His lecture was received with great enthusiasm by his audience; and the Society's Council is sure that Members will welcome its publication, and consider it a fitting tribute to a distinguished historian, who was also a Member of their Society.

The Society is most grateful to the Professor's widow, Mrs. Muriel Myers, for allowing the article to be published.

For an audience meeting in Chester — 'the most medieval-looking town in Britain', as Pevsner calls it — this title is likely to suggest a golden age; for the Tudor age, as traditionally reviewed, is apt to be regarded as one of the most romantic in English history. Even Canon Morris, who had learnt so much about the history of this City, could begin a lecture to this Society on 'Social Life, Manners, and Customs under Elizabeth', by saying: 'The reign of Elizabeth was a very glorious one . . . The people of England came to be happier, more fortunate, in their conditions of living.'

In recent years, this favourable picture of Tudor Chester has been replaced in the popular mind by a much more sombre one. If one visits the Chester Heritage Centre and looks at the description of Chester's fortunes under the heading 'Tudor & Stuart', one reads: 'The prosperity of the medieval period started to decline with the gradual silting-up of the Dee. Despite persistent attempts

to maintain the navigable waterway, the port of Chester steadily lost trade to the developing port of Liverpool. Natural disasters of fire and plague occurred to add to Chester's declining fortunes.' The visitor is given the impression that Tudor Chester had entered a depression which was deepened by the hardships of the Civil War, a decline from which it started to rise again only in the later 18th century, when, as we are told, it was flourishing as a market town and a coaching centre.

This lecture can be only an interim statement, but it seems to me at the present time that the Tudor age was a chequered period in Chester's history — full of interest, but with a complex mixture of sunshine and cloud.¹

In trying to assess the fortunes of Chester and its inhabitants in this period, we must make some effort to set its history in comparison with that of other towns, and to look at some of the current trends in urban history. Dr. John Patten has suggested three dominant themes for the history of 16th century English towns. First, he thinks that it was a period of change rather than of growth or advance. Secondly, he regards it as a time of economic and social frailty for the towns. Thirdly, he stresses that the towns still had a very rural aspect.²

First, change rather than growth. There still lingers an impression that in the 16th century all other ports except London were in decay. According to Professor Laurence Stone, by the 1560s 'London held a monopoly of commercial activity while every other port in the kingdom, with the possible exception of Bristol, appears to have been in an advanced state of decay'. Later in the same article he asserted that this state of affairs continued throughout Elizabeth's reign: 'London', he said, 'maintained the supremacy over the outports that it had already won in 1559, while Newcastle, Hull, Boston, King's Lynn, Portsmouth, Southampton, Poole, Weymouth, Bristol and Chester remained manifestly decayed'.³ Often associated with this view is the impression that in the 16th century Chester as a port was overtaken by Liverpool. C. N. Parkinson wrote, 'Liverpool had already passed Chester, with its other ports (that is, Conway and Beaumaris) in point of commerce',⁴ and even my pupil Dr. K. P. Wilson, who had made a much better study of the port books, said that during 'the second half of the sixteenth century Liverpool ousted Chester from her superior position'.⁵ But Liverpool then surpassed Chester only in the supply of raw materials for the textile industries of Lancashire and sometimes in the supply of skins and hides for workers in the

¹ **Editorial Note:** The typescript of this paper contained few references to the sources from which Professor Myers drew his information. Wherever possible, the sources have been identified, and footnotes prepared.

² J. Patten, *British Towns, 1580-1700*, 1978.

³ L. Stone, 'Elizabethan Overseas Trade', *Economic History Review*, 2nd series, vol. 2, 1949, pp. 39, 50.

⁴ C. N. Parkinson, *The Rise of the Port of Liverpool*, 1952, p. 29.

⁵ K. P. Wilson, 'The Port of Chester in the Later Middle Ages', Ph.D. thesis, University of Liverpool, 1965, vol. 1, p. 170, n. 5.

English leather industry.⁶ For the Anglo-Irish trade Liverpool became the major importing port; Chester remained the major exporting port. In the other trades — in the export of a wide range of commodities to Ireland and in the shipment of goods to and from the continent — Chester remained considerably more important. In some years before the war with Spain began in 1585, when Liverpool's continental trade ceased altogether, Chester merchants were increasing a significant measure of control over the continental trade of Liverpool. If we are looking for the rise of Liverpool to the position of premier port of the North West, we probably have to wait until after the Civil War of the 17th century.

As for the comparison of Chester with other ports of the country, there is no doubt that taken as a whole the 16th century was a time of prosperity for Chester as a port compared with the 14th and 15th centuries. Its continental trade was mainly with France and Spain. In the 1530s, the importance of Chester as a centre of the wine and iron trades stood at its peak in the 16th century; in that decade more than 4,000 tons of Spanish iron, and almost 3,000 tons of wine, especially French wine, were imported. Despite the reduction in the volume of wine and iron imported in the 1540s and 1550s, Chester was still handling more continental trade than at any time during the 14th and 15th centuries, and it seems likely that the annual import of wine alone reached an all time peak for the 16th century during the 1580s. Chester merchants showed considerable enterprise in continuing to trade with Spain through France, after the outbreak of war with Spain in 1585. As for Chester's trade with Ireland, this flourished during the 16th century. The trade had expanded during the first half of the century, and continued to do so in Elizabeth's reign.

Of course, there are qualifications to this apparently rosy picture. The trade between Dublin and Chester was heavily concentrated in the hands of the Dublin merchants. In 1565-66, they handled more than eighty per cent of the trade, and in 1592-93 they controlled more than ninety five per cent of the commodities returned to Dublin. Then, as is well known, since the 14th century Chester had been battling against the ruin of its harbour facilities owing to the silting up of the river. During the 16th century the City authorities tried to improve the facilities offered to ocean going vessels by constructing a quay or haven, known as the New Haven, at Neston, some ten miles downstream from Chester. This project was begun in the reign of Henry VIII, but was probably never completed. Probably the majority of ships, especially the larger ships engaged in the continental trade, anchored downstream and transferred their cargoes into lighters. Dr. Wilson's analysis showed that by the 16th century the busiest outports were well downstream at Redbank and Hilbre; and in Elizabethan times this had made possible the establishment of several inns or at least hostelries at West Kirby and Caldy. Many of the troops, and much of the food and other supplies that were

⁶ For the remainder of this paragraph, and the two following paragraphs, Professor Myers relied heavily on D. M. Woodward, *The Trade of Elizabethan Chester*, 1970, *passim*.

sent to Ireland, especially during the campaigns of the 1590s and the early 1600s against Tyrone, were gathered together at Chester; and from Chester the troops and supplies were sent either to the Mersey or down the Dee to be loaded aboard ships anchored off Hilbre and West Kirby rather than at the New Haven. Thus Sir Henry Sidney, father of the famous Sir Philip, who had lately been appointed Lord Deputy of Ireland, wrote on 3 December 1565 to Sir William Cecil: 'I have taryed here [at Hilbre] and at Chester thyes 15 dayes and all for wynd, and yet have none that wyll sarve my turn. Dyvers barks laden with my stuf and horsys went to sea two or three times, and after ii or iii dayes tossyng on the same wear forced to return bak agayn. I was never so wery of a place, for here is nither meat, drynk nor good lodgyng.'⁷ To some extent this necessary reliance on outports must have detracted from Chester's economic activity. True, trade was still one of the main foundations of Chester's prosperity. It provided a good living for a small group of wealthy merchants, and work, both directly and indirectly, for a sizeable proportion of the City's labour force. But though it was good for Chester that its activity as a port remained buoyant throughout the 16th century, that prosperity has to be kept in proportion. Compared with London, which controlled over half of England's overseas trade, Chester was an insignificant port; many other provincial ports were more important. According to a detailed list of the customs paid in 1594-95, the Port of Chester was ranked twelfth out of eighteen outports; above it were Exmouth, Sandwich, Poole, Hull, Ipswich, Plymouth, Bristol, Southampton, Newcastle, Chichester, and Yarmouth. Probably Chester would have come lower on the list if it had not been the head port of a north western region which included the Welsh ports North of Cardigan Bay and the Lancashire ports as far North as Grange. A list of ships was compiled in 1560, and revealed that Chester possessed only two of the country's seventy six ships of a hundred tons and over. By 1582 the situation was even worse; Chester no longer possessed any of the larger vessels and had only thirteen of the country's 1,383 ships of less than 80 tons.

Dr. Patten's second generalisation is that the 16th century was a time of economic and social frailty for English towns. In some ways this was nothing new, in so far as it saw disaster wrought by disease and fire, in centuries before good medical services, insurance, the welfare state, and government emergency assistance. Chester was swept by the sweating sickness in 1507, 1517, and 1528, and by bubonic plague in 1574 and 1603. In 1564 it was devastated by a great fire.⁸ At the end of the century there were food shortages after the bad harvests and high bread prices of the late 1590s.⁹ As has been observed, the year of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was the year of the highest bread prices of the century. Peculiar, however, to the 16th century, was the dissolution of the religious houses

⁷ Quoted by N. Ellison, *The Wirral Peninsula*, 1955, p. 61.

⁸ R. H. Morris, *Chester*, pp. 64, 74, 78; Chester City Record Office: Assembly Minute book, 1539-1624, Ref. AB/1, f. 278v.

⁹ Woodward, *The Trade of Elizabethan Chester*, pp. 52-53.

and the chantries. Great was the loss of patronage and custom, grievous was the spoliation of their furnishings and treasures, many of them given by successive generations of Chester citizens. There was also the loss of public spirited neighbours, even if there had been friction at times. The nuns had practised alms giving, the monks of St. Werburgh gave away food, the Grey Friars had latterly brought a water conduit from Boughton to the Bridge Gate, along Dee side, in pipes of lead, and seem to have allowed some citizens to draw water from it. The three friaries were sold by the King to John Cockes, a London tradesman who was a great speculator in church property, so that the profits of these lands went outside the City. True, the White Friars site was soon sold to Fulk Dutton, Alderman and Mayor of Chester; but the Grey Friars and Black Friars sites were not sold to a Chester man, Richard Dutton, son of Fulk Dutton, until 7 February 1561.¹⁰

Dr. Patten makes as his third feature of Tudor towns their rural aspect. It is true that from a 20th century viewpoint all towns wore a market town aspect, even London, with its gardens within the walls, its Shambles at Newgate, its market stalls along Cheapside and the Poultry, its citizens' deep concern about enclosures at Hoxton and Islington in 1517. One thinks of examples like the town's cowherd at Newcastle collecting the burgesses' cattle, to lead them out to the Town Moor for the day. But Chester was rural even by contemporary standards. It is clear from Braun's map of Chester of the 1570s that a good deal of the ground within the walls on the West side of the City, and the ground to the North East of the Cathedral, was occupied by gardens, orchards, and even fields. The building along the main thoroughfares — Northgate, Watergate, Eastgate, and Bridge Streets, Cuppin Street, and Pepper Street — was in the main merely frontage building, with long crofts and gardens behind the houses. As for the ribbon building outside the Northgate and the Eastgate, it was quite short; it was scarcely to extend beyond that until the coming of the railway in 1840.¹¹

There has been much discussion in recent years of the essential characteristics of the towns of pre industrial western society. One famous analysis is that of Professor S. Sjöberg. In this book he names five essential features of the pre industrial town: an unusual concentration of population; a specialist economic function; a complex social structure; a sophisticated political order; a distinctive influence beyond its immediate boundaries.¹²

An Unusual Concentration of Population

Chester was small, not only by the standards of modern New York, London, or Tokyo, but by 16th century comparisons. In the Netherlands early in the century

¹⁰ J. H. E. Bennett, 'The Grey Friars of Chester', *J.C.A.S.*, new series, vol. 24, part 1, 1921, pp. 38, 42-43, 52-53.

¹¹ G. Braun's map, from *Civitates Orbis Terrarum*, 1572-1618, is reproduced in Morris, *Chester*, facing p. 528.

¹² G. Sjöberg, *The Pre-Industrial City, Past and Present*, 1960.

there were at least four towns of over 30,000 people — Antwerp, Bruges, Brussels, and Ghent. Before the end of the century, eight cities were growing fast in the northern Netherlands — Amsterdam, Leyden, Haarlem, Utrecht, Gouda, Delft, Rotterdam, and the Hague. At the start of the 16th century there was in Germany a cluster of about ten first rank centres with populations between 20,000 and 30,000; among these were Cologne, Magdeburg, Danzig, Nuremberg, Augsburg, Strassburg, and Vienna. In France Lyon already had about 120,000 people, as an international fair centre, with the development of important industries, especially textiles. Its population was surpassed by that of Paris. But even Paris could not compare in numbers with Venice, which was said to number over a quarter of a million souls.

English towns were not in this league. By the 1560s London may have had a population of 90,000; but it was in a class by itself. The next biggest towns of Bristol, Norwich, and York had populations of around 10,000. Chester was not even in this class. What the population of Tudor Chester was we do not know. Chester was not subject to the lay subsidy of 1523-24, which might have provided some basis for a calculation; nor have the returns of communicants in 1563, as ordered by the bishops, survived for the Chester diocese. It has been noted, however, that there were about 850 householders at Chester in 1630.¹³ In his study of provincial towns in the early 16th century Professor Hoskins assumed that a multiple of five can be used to convert household figures into population figures.¹⁴ The population is likely to have been less in 1603, and lower still in 1558, so that we may perhaps estimate the population of Elizabethan Chester at less than 4,000. We have very little evidence from parish registers, and that is hard to interpret. The Holy Trinity registers are intact only from the late 1590s; there the burials usually exceed the baptisms.¹⁵ In the parish registers of St. John, which date from 1558, the baptisms normally heavily outnumber the burials, except for the years 1597 to 1599, when the burials greatly exceed the baptisms. What are we to make of this except that the years 1597 to 1599 were years of dearth and presumably of hunger and malnutrition? As Dr. Bridbury has reminded us, the year of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1597) saw one of the highest prices for bread in that century, and the lowest agrarian wage rates for seven centuries.

A Specialist Economic Function

Though, as we have seen, Chester was not in the first rank of English ports, it certainly had a specialist economic function. It was an important trading centre, with enough overseas trade with Ireland, France, and Spain, coastal trade, and

¹³ British Library: Harleian MS. 2082, f. 13, quoted by Margaret J. Groombridge, *Calendar of Chester City Council Minutes, 1603-1642*, R.S.L.C., vol. 106, 1956, p. i.

¹⁴ W. G. Hoskins, *Provincial England*, 1968, p. 72.

¹⁵ L. M. Farrall, ed., *Parish Register of the Holy and Undivided Trinity in the City of Chester, 1532-1837*, 1914, pp. 10-11, 65-70.

internal trade in England, to support the prosperity and status of a number of merchants in Chester. For the better off classes of the region, the import of wine and other luxuries brought a higher standard of living, while many other imports — such as iron, wool, linen yarn, and skins — were indispensable to the maintenance of local industry. The export trade, on the other hand, provided an outlet for industrial produce, such as cloth, leather goods, and tanned calfskins, and both branches of trade brought employment for workers in the tertiary sector, such as merchants, shopkeepers, carriers, porters, boatmen, and sailors. It is true that too many craft guilds may have been founded for the economic vitality of the City to bear. In the reign of Henry VII there were twenty three craft guilds in the City; but amalgamations had already begun, and were to continue into the 16th and 17th centuries.¹⁶ One reason for amalgamation was the feeling that united strength would enable the bigger guild to keep strange craftsmen out of the City; this was the reason for the amalgamation of the Coopers, Bowyers, and Stringers. Poverty, and hence inability to pay their share to the lights at the Feast of Corpus Christi and to the production of the Mystery Plays, led some to unite. Few crafts in Chester were rich enough to remain independent. Only the food trades of Bakers, Butchers, and Brewers retained sufficient vitality to remain guilds by themselves. In 1598 even the Mercers and Ironmongers amalgamated into one company.¹⁷

The development of the Mystery Plays in Tudor Chester may have been influenced by the need of the craft guilds to demonstrate their strength and prove themselves to the outside world.¹⁸ It used to be thought that the cycle of Chester Mystery Plays was completed in the early 15th century; that it was, perhaps, elaborated during the century; but that it continued more or less unchanged from the 15th century until its last performance in 1575. This view has been radically revised by the researches of Professor Laurence M. Clopper, Professor Robert M. Lumiansky, Dr. Arthur C. Cawley, Dr. Martin Stevens, and Dr. David Mills. They have shown that whereas as late as 1474 there was only one play, on the Passion, performed on Corpus Christi day, by 1521 there had been a shift to Whitsuntide, that by 1531 other plays had been added, and the Passion Play itself had been broken up into sections, each allocated to a guild. And whereas in 1521 the play was performed in one location, on one occasion, at the church of St. John's, by 1532 the plays were being performed in several places round the City, on waggons, in a period of three days. Each guild now had its own pageant. Why were these alterations made? Dr. Clopper conjectures that the key to the alterations

¹⁶ British Library: Harleian MS. 2104, f. 4, printed in L. M. Clopper, ed., *Records of Early English Drama: Chester*, 1979, pp. 22-23. The twenty three guilds embraced twenty eight crafts.

¹⁷ Margaret J. Groombridge, 'The City Gilds of Chester', *J.C.A.S.*, vol. 39, 1952, p. 94; Chester City R.O.: AB/1, f. 252v.

¹⁸ This paragraph is based on L. M. Clopper, 'The History and Development of the Chester Cycle', *Modern Philology*, vol. 75, 1978, pp. 219-46.

lies with the guilds. They were responsible for the costs of the plays, and they may have wished, he thinks, to escape from the dominance of the clergy and the Corpus Christi festival; this may have encouraged the move to Whitsuntide. The guilds may also, Dr. Clopper suggests, have wished to celebrate the prestige of themselves and the City. 'Further, the display of civic pride brought material rewards. Whenever there was a play, there was a great influx of visitors to the city.'¹⁹ The rapid changes of the decade 1521 to 1531, and the way in which the City government and the guilds clung to the annual performances of the plays in Elizabeth days in spite of royal and ecclesiastical disapproval, seem to testify to the important role which the plays performed in the life of the guilds, and to witness to the vitality of that life in the 16th century.

A complex social structure

Tudor Chester not only had its three days of Mystery Plays, but, like many other towns, its Midsummer Marching Watch. The importance of the Midsummer Marching Watch was primarily to emphasise social importance and distinctions. All men of social consequence within the City were eager to be involved, in careful order of precedence. According to Randle Holme I, the Midsummer Show first made its appearance in 1497: 'This year, the Watch on Midsummer Eve was first sett out and begonne.' It continued each year until the 17th century. The guilds went in procession each headed by a banner, and preceded by mounted men at arms, or a boy gaily dressed. Some of the guilds were charged to produce plays; for example, the Company of Barbers and Barber Surgeons were allotted the play of Abraham and Isaac, the Company of Bricklayers performed Balaam and Balaam's Ass. But the great features of the show were the marvellous structures, figures of monstrous size in buckram and pasteboard, tricked out with tinsel, gold, and silver leaf, each carried by two or more men. There were, besides, the Mayor's Mount and the Merchants' Mount; the latter consisting of a movable ship, worked by a swivel attached to an iron handle by the men who carried it. In attendance upon the Mayor and Sheriffs were men bearing staves and garlands, and above all floated a great banner emblazoned with the City arms, of red, yellow, and blue sarsenet.²⁰

All this was calculated to produce respect among the populace for the City authorities; and there is evidence that the gradations of social and civic hierarchy were becoming increasingly respected. There was a hardening tradition of a *cursus honorum*, as Mr. Macquiban recently reminded us.²¹ On a vacancy in the Common

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 245.

²⁰ Morris, *Chester*, pp. 323-25.

²¹ Except where otherwise shown, Professor Myers based the two following paragraphs on an unpublished paper by T. S. A.-Macquiban entitled 'The Mayors of Chester 1540-1640'. Mr. Macquiban read this paper to the Chester Archaeological Society on 23 September 1978.

Council, by death or elevation to the Shrievalty, a man might, if he had influence, be elected to the Council. If he attended assiduously, and made himself useful and co-operative, he might in a few years time be asked to be a Leavelooker, collecting sea customs and attending to other financial business. After service in this office, he would be eligible to be elected as Sheriff. If he filled this office with competence, holding the Pentice Court three times a week, and the Passage Court, looking after the gaol, collecting fines, the way was open to further advance, though the office of Treasurer, or auditor of the Treasurers' accounts, or Murager to collect the dues for the repairs of the walls. Thereafter he might hope to be Mayor, the very powerful chief officer of the City. In the latter part of the century he might hope to be elected to the élite body of Aldermen, who numbered not more than twenty four, and increasingly occupied the Mayoral office. The 'Inner Cabinet' of the Mayor and his Brethren held the reins of power, sitting as J.P.s, arbitrating in disputes, making appointments. The growing desire to secure oneself in the rank one had attained is seen in the custom, unknown to the Charter of 1506, of those who had served as Sheriffs or Mayors remaining on the Common Council as Sheriff Peers and Mayor's Brethren. There was growing regard for outward signs of rank and eminence. In 1559 an Assembly Order laid down that Aldermen who had not been Mayors were to follow the Sheriffs and were to be followed by the Sheriff Peers. In 1566 it was decreed that Aldermen were to wear their tippets on Sundays, and Sheriffs were always to wear theirs. In 1593 the Assembly reiterated that tippets were to be worn at all its meetings, and that Aldermen were to wear their murrey gowns on those occasions when the Mayor and his Brethren wore their scarlet gowns.²²

Such was the growing importance of rank that in the later 16th century it became increasingly a possibility for men of influence in the county to be elected Mayor without having served as Sheriffs. In the late 16th and early 17th century there were a number of such cases, drawn from families like the Savages, the Gamulls, and the Duttons, who had landed estates in Cheshire and had had members of the same family as Mayors before them. In 1584 the Assembly resolved that vacancies among the Aldermen, Councillors, and all other office holders, should be filled within a week of the decease of the previous holder in order to make it impossible to obtain letters of recommendation from influential persons.²³ There was an increasing danger of this, for the wealth and the civic authority of the City was concentrated, as the century progressed, in fewer hands. In 1562-63, eight merchants controlled more than fifty per cent of the wine and iron shipped to Chester. By the end of the century the large merchants had tightened their grip on the City's trade; in 1602-03 another eight Chester merchants controlled some eighty three per cent of the wine and sixty three per cent of the iron imported from the continent and ninety one per cent of the calfskins exported

²² Chester City R.O.: AB/1, ff. 94, 116, 241.

²³ *ibid.*, f. 196.

to France.²⁴ In the 16th and early 17th centuries, ninety four of the Mayoralities were filled by only twenty six families and seventy one of the Mayoralities by only twelve. The four wealthiest crafts — drapers, mercers, vintners, and ironmongers — provided forty five Mayors and the merchants and gentlemen another fifty three. Of the known fathers in law of Mayors thirty six came from within Chester, but thirty six came from outside. It was another sign of the rising status of the governing class of Chester and its connections with county society.

It was still possible for the exceptional family to rise rapidly to the top. In the early Tudor period a glover, Robert Brerewood, climbed the social ladder, and became Mayor in 1531.²⁵ His son, Robert Brerewood II, was illiterate; when he was Mayor in 1584-85, he made a speech on Christmas Eve, prepared by the Clerk of the Pentice, which he had 'learned by hart . . . for although he could neither write nor read yet was of excellent memory and very brave and gentle otherwise'. This lack of a formal education does not seem to have hampered his trading activities, except that it meant that he had to employ John Houghton, parish clerk of St. Mary on the Hill, to keep his books in order. Robert Brerewood II died in 1601, an extremely rich man. He combined leather dressing and retailing, owning two shops. He had an extensive business as a timber merchant, buying timber all over North Wales and selling to Chester joiners and carvers. He was a farmer on a considerable scale, owning land at Dodleston and Handbridge. At his death his rural stock consisted of eight oxen, two bullocks, forty six head of cattle, twenty eight Irish cows, thirteen horses, fifty eight sheep, twenty one lambs and numerous poultry, as well as wheat, barley, oats, rye, beans, peas, vetches, and hay valued at £101. 11s. 8d. His goods in Chester were valued at £1,600, suggesting that he was nearly three times as rich as any glover. He was also considerably wealthier than nearly all the Chester merchants who traded with the continent during Elizabeth's reign. He was Mayor of the City three times. His second son, Edward, went to Oxford, graduated as M.A. in 1590, and was elected first Professor of Astronomy at Gresham College in 1596. Robert Brerewood's grandson, also called Robert, graduated from Brasenose College in 1605 and then joined the legal profession. He was called to the bar in 1615, appointed a judge of North Wales in 1637, elected Recorder of Chester in 1639, and raised to the bench in 1644.

Such a rapid rise as this was very unusual. The difficulties that young men might have to face, when they started up as craftsmen or merchants, may be seen from the fact that in this century, especially in the reign of Elizabeth, some public spirited men, usually Chester citizens, but including citizens of London and Bristol, left money to be lent to approved young men trying to set up in business. And though we have not the information to quantify the number of

²⁴ Woodward, *The Trade of Elizabethan Chester*, p. 59.

²⁵ This paragraph is based on D. M. Woodward, 'Robert Brerewood, an Elizabethan Master Craftsman', *Cheshire Round*, vol. 1, no. 9, 1968, pp. 311-16.

poor in Chester in this period, it is useful to remember Professor W. G. Hoskins' estimate of Elizabethan Leicester, that something like a third of the population was below the poverty level, and another third lived dangerously near the margin, precariously dependent on fairly full employment whether as wage earners, small craftsmen, or shopkeepers.

A Sophisticated Political Structure

Sjoberg gave us as his fourth distinguishing feature of pre industrial towns the possession of a sophisticated political structure. This, Chester certainly had, especially after the grant of the Charter of 1506.²⁶ Why this was conferred on Chester at that particular moment, it is hard to say. It gave Chester the status and self government of a county. It defined the character of the governing body, the Assembly, more precisely, with its Mayor, its two Sheriffs, its twenty four Aldermen, and its forty Common Councillors. It not only confirmed the existing courts of Crownmote, Pentice, and Portmote, and the offices of Sheriffs, Leave-lookers, and Muragers, but it conferred on the Mayor and former Mayors the powers and duties of Justices of the Peace, and allowed them to exercise the privileges of a court of Quarter Sessions under a Recorder, who was to be appointed by the Assembly.

The effect of the Charter of 1506 seems to have been to strengthen the authority of the town council. During the 16th century men were so keen to be members that Sheriffs and Mayors insisted on continuing to attend the Assembly after their year of office, as Sheriff Peers and Mayor's Brethren. In 1533 the Assembly made a rule that when a Councillor died the filling of the vacancy should remain in the hands of the Mayor, Aldermen, and Councillors, and not simply those of the Mayor. The rule asserted just before 1506 that Aldermen who were absent from meetings should be fined, was reiterated during the 16th century for attendance at the Assembly, for example in 1571.²⁷ There was an increased awareness of the importance of Assembly ordinances. It is true that the initiative for recording the more important ordinances came in the first instance from one individual, Henry Gee, Mayor in 1533-34 and again in 1539-40. He began his book with memoranda of the more important rights and traditions of the City, such as the definition of its boundaries, a record of the rent roll, a list of Mayors and Sheriffs from the 14th century onwards, and some ordinances of the 15th century. But it is significant that others were moved to continue his record in greater detail and with more system, so that by the end of the century this book, the First Assembly Book, had become a council act book.²⁸ Doubtless this was

²⁶ Chester City R.O.: Letters Patent of 6 April 21 Henry VII, 1506, Ref. CH/32, transcribed and translated in Morris, *Chester*, pp. 524-40.

²⁷ Chester City R.O.: AB/1, ff. 74, 126; Assembly file, 1407-1535, Ref. AF/1, f. 10.

²⁸ *ibid.*: AB/1, *passim*. Professor Myers was preparing a calendar of the Assembly Minute book for the period up to 1603.

encouraged by the clerks, whose predecessors had in the 15th century been clerks of the Pentice, but who, after 1506, came to be of greater importance as Town Clerks and Clerks of the Council. By 1587 the City Assembly felt the office of Town Clerk to be so important that it resisted the combined efforts of the Earl of Derby, the Lords of the Council, and Sir Francis Walsingham, to force on the City the appointment of Peter Proby as Clerk of the Pentice.²⁹ The Assembly exercised a wide ranging control over the life of the City. It made ordinances covering law and order — acts of violence, immoral behaviour, playing dice, fire and sanitary regulations, the 8 o'clock curfew. It tried to make provision for the upkeep of the walls and the cleansing of the streets. It tried hard to regulate trade, and took up at once challenges to its authority. For example, in 1557 the Bakers' Company refused to accept the Mayor's ruling on the price of bread and declined to bake any.³⁰ The Mayor therefore issued an order that all persons, both inside and outside the City, might bake bread for general use. The Bakers' charter was taken away, whereupon they complained to the Council in the Marches of Wales. The Mayor was ordered to return the charter, and with this encouragement the bakers continued to defy the Mayor's ruling. Thereupon the recalcitrant bakers, twenty seven in number, were disfranchised, and in August of the following year the Company had to make humble submission, and give bonds for good behaviour. They had to promise to observe the assize of bread, as interpreted by future Mayors. The defeat had its effect, and when in 1562 and 1567 the whole body was presented for not making good and wholesome bread, and not observing the assize, the bakers were each fined 2s. In 1586 complaint was made of the excessive price of bread, and its deficiency in weight and quality. The Assembly thereupon decided that bakers from outside the City should be allowed to come in and sell their bread on Wednesdays and Saturdays, from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. This order was carried out by the Mayor, the executive head of the City. The Assembly became more censorious in this century on what it regarded as frivolous amusements. In the reigns of Henry VII and VIII several ordinances are recorded in the Assembly Books directed against unlawful games and excessive feasting and drinking on such occasions as priest makings, Welsh weddings, and Christmas Day breakfasts. By 1540 the Assembly was so conscious of the need for skill in archery that it suppressed the old custom of football on Shrove Tuesday and substituted races on foot and on horseback, and an archery contest.³¹ But football remained popular, despite the fines imposed on those who played it. In 1589, for example, Hugh Case and William Shurlach were fined 2s. for playing football in St. Werburgh's graveyard when they should have been in church.³²

²⁹ *ibid.*: Mayors' letters, 1546-98, Ref. ML/1/17; 1550-1602, Ref. ML/5/176-217.

³⁰ For relations between the Assembly and the Bakers see Morris, *Chester*, pp. 416-21.

³¹ Chester City R.O.: AB/1, ff. 63v., 67-68.

³² Morris, *Chester*, p. 331.

An Influence beyond the Immediate Boundary

This influence Chester certainly had. Relatively unimportant it may have been in trade when judged by national standards; but it was the head port of the North West. This superior position was confirmed by 1565, when its jurisdiction was defined as extending from Barmouth in mid Wales, all along the North Welsh coast, and up to the Cheshire and Lancashire coasts to the River Duddon in the Lake District. Subsidiary ports like Liverpool might be restive, and claim to have their own deputy officers and separate account books; but the principal customs officers, the collector, the comptroller, and the searcher, were at Chester.³³ Chester merchants went to London much on business, and to important fairs like Rothwell Fair in Northamptonshire, to sell leather goods like boots, shoes, girdles, gloves. Leading merchants invested in lands outside Chester. Perhaps the wealthiest of trading families in Tudor Chester were the Alderseys.³⁴ William Aldersey, who died in 1616, not only owned a house of fourteen rooms near the Northgate, but land at Upton, Eaton, Eccleston, Hoole, Gayton, Heswall, Thingwall, Denbigh, Picton, and Moston. His cousin, Fulk Aldersey, owned property in Chester, land at Runcorn, Halton, and Hawarden. Edmund Gamull owned land in Chester and also at Saughall. His son Thomas, Recorder of Chester from 1606 to 1613, owned much land in Cheshire, Shropshire, and Staffordshire. The bulk of it — over 1,000 acres — was at Buerton in Cheshire. He also owned the Dee Mills and a saltworks at Middlewich. Richard Bavand, champion of the merchant retailers, who died in 1603, owned land, grain, and agricultural implements, the manor of Bromborough, and land at Bebington and Hargrave. There was also a growing connection between Chester merchants and the neighbouring country gentry, through marriage alliances. For example, in 1578, the second William Aldersey married Mary, the daughter of John Brereton, esquire, of Eccleston. The second wife of William Jowett was the daughter of Hamnet Hocknell, gentleman, of Duddon. The two daughters of Edmund Gamull married Cheshire gentlemen — Ann married John Brocke, a gentleman of Upton, and Ellen wedded Richard Swynerton of Knutsford, gentleman.

The areas of recruitment of Chester apprentices were very wide. Of course a high proportion of them came from the City itself and from the closely neighbouring countryside, but quite a number came from distant places. For example, some information is available concerning the place of origin of 185 young men who were apprenticed to the leather craftsmen of Chester.³⁵ Of these, 119 were the sons of Chester men, and forty nine came from various places in Cheshire.

³³ R. C. Jarvis, 'The Head Port of Chester; and Liverpool, its Creek and Member', *T.H.S.L.C.*, vol. 102, 1951, pp. 73, 83. Compare K. P. Wilson, *Chester Customs Accounts 1301-1566*, R.S.L.C., vol. 111, 1969, p. 7.

³⁴ For the remainder of this paragraph see Woodward, *The Trade of Elizabethan Chester*, chapter 6.

³⁵ D. M. Woodward, 'The Chester Leather Industry, 1558-1625', *T.H.S.L.C.*, vol. 119, 1968, p. 95.

But four were from Denbighshire, three from Shropshire, three from Lancashire, and one each from Flintshire, Staffordshire, Leicestershire, Warwickshire, Hertfordshire, Yorkshire, and the Isle of Man. Quite a number of apprentices in other crafts came from areas as distant as Wales, Cumberland, Essex, and London.

The religious changes caused by the Reformation may have extended the City's contacts in some ways, but they certainly impoverished it. Chester became a bishopric in 1541 and, especially when the Elizabethan government had stirred Bishops Downham and Chadderton and their successors into energy for visitation and the discouragement of recusancy, there must have been a lot of coming and going, of visitors from London, and plaintiffs and defendants from Lancashire and Cheshire. The Dean and Prebendaries of the Cathedral should have brought the citizens in touch with a wider world.³⁶ But absenteeism was marked among the Cathedral dignitaries in the late 16th century. In 1559 there were said to be only two Prebendaries in residence. In 1578 Dean Richard Longworth (d. 1579), Chaplain to Queen Elizabeth I, was said to have attended only twice since his appointment six years earlier; Prebendary Hawford, Master of Christ's College, had attended only once in the last ten years, and three other prebendaries had achieved little more. The schoolmaster could not remember seeing the Dean or any Prebendary administering communion during his own thirteen years at Chester. At Bishop Chadderton's visitation in 1583, the Dean, Thomas Modesley (d. 1589) and three Prebendaries, were said to be non resident.

If Chester's contacts with the outside world through the Cathedral were minimised in this way, there can be no doubt about the impoverishment of the City. First the furnishings of St. Mary's Nunnery were removed from the City, followed by the more valuable possessions of St. Werburgh's and St. John's, and then by the goods of the friaries, and the chantries which the citizens had valued so much. This spoliation was not balanced by the endowment of the Cathedral. A conspicuous feature of the Cathedral in Elizabethan days was its poverty. Under Dean William Cliffe (1547-58), much of the Cathedral's endowment was alienated to fee farmers. In 1553 most of the remaining lands, together with some tithes and advowsons, in Cheshire were granted to Sir Richard Cotton (d. 1556). Successive Deans tried to obtain the annulment of the grant, but the best that could be achieved by the early 1580s was an increase in the fee farm rents. What remained of the endowments was leased out, usually for large entry fines and low rents.

In some respects the influence of the City remained restricted even within the City walls, in relation to the church. The City may have been able to absorb any claims to jurisdiction that the Dean and Canons of St. John may have had; but the Dean and Prebendaries of the Cathedral Church of Christ and St. Mary were very conscious of their claims to be the heirs of the rights of the Abbey of St. Werburgh. The North East corner of the City remained a church precinct

³⁶ The remainder of this paragraph, and the two following paragraphs, paraphrase the *Victoria History of Chester*, vol. 3, 1980, pp. 188-90.

outside the City's jurisdiction; and the Chapter annoyed the citizens by allowing non guild craftsmen to work and sell in Abbey Square. In the 1570s the Dean and Chapter successfully opposed the erection of the City's corn market on the East side of Northgate Street, near the Bishop's house. Four years after the end of the Tudor age occurred the famous clash, when one of the Prebendaries struck down the civic sword as it was being borne erect before the Mayor in procession into the Cathedral, in accordance with the City's Letters Patent of incorporation. The Mayor's right to have the sword borne upright before him, in the Cathedral as elsewhere, was upheld in the subsequent law suit in the Chester Exchequer.

There is more that could be said about Tudor Chester, but I have probably said too much for your patience already. To sum up along the lines suggested by the analyses of Dr. Patten and Professor Sjoberg on Tudor towns, Tudor Chester presents itself to me as a town of modest size, relatively unimportant by national standards of trade; a town acquiring its wealth by trade rather than by craftsmanship except, perhaps, for a reputation for leather goods; a town given enhanced importance by its old role as the headquarters of a Palatinate and its new role as a Cathedral City; a town with a complex social structure but small enough to have a close knit élite, with growing links with the Cheshire gentry; a town with a sophisticated political order of which its rulers were in many ways increasingly proud; and a town with a distinctive influence far beyond its immediate boundaries.

