

Metropolitan market networks: London's economic hinterland in the later Middle Ages

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SUMMARY

It is now widely accepted that medieval London was supported by a large agrarian hinterland. Within south-east and southern England the economic influence of medieval London was pervasive; London also supplied high value goods and extended credit to this area, and to a wider distribution hinterland encompassing much of England.

INTRODUCTION

Detailed investigation of the interaction between medieval London and its hinterland began in the late 1980s. Prior to this, it had generally been assumed that it was only from the later 16th-century onwards that a significant impact of the capital upon its region could be detected. The profound influence which early modern London exerted upon the economy of its immediate hinterland, and ultimately of England as a whole, had been demonstrated in a series of important studies (Fisher 1935; Wrigley 1967; Chartres 1986). The capital's rapid growth in the 16th and 17th centuries stimulated an increased spatial division of labour, promoting the development of local and regional specialisms in agriculture, and the emergence of specialised systems of marketing and distribution. For the American economic historian N.S.B. Gras this was the period when London began to emerge as the focus of a 'metropolitan economy', which he defined as one where the needs of producers and consumers across an extensive territory are supplied 'by a system of exchange concentrated in a large city

which is the focus of local trade and the center through which normal economic relations with the outside are established and maintained' (Gras 1922, 186). By the later 17th century, London's size and its primacy within urban and commercial networks may have been crucial factors in the emergence of spatially extensive integrated markets for cereals (Chartres 1995, 129–30).

Attempts to trace the beginnings of this dominance back into the pre-1550 period have been stimulated by revised estimates of London's size, allied to a greater appreciation of the flexibility and degree of commercialisation of medieval agrarian systems (Galloway & Murphy 1991). London was once thought to have contained no more than 40,000–45,000 people before the Black Death, but estimates for c.1300 now fall in the range of 60,000–100,000 (Keene 1986; Keene 1989, 101; Nightingale 1996, 96–8). At least as significant as the absolute level of the capital's population, was its degree of primacy within England's urban system and trade networks. That primacy, already marked in 1300, in so far as it can be measured, appears to have grown during the later middle ages. Although London's population had declined to some 45,000–50,000 people by the later 14th century, following the famine of 1315–17 and the repeated outbreaks of plague from 1349 onwards, its relative dominance of the urban system of southern England, and of the country as a whole, was undiminished and may, indeed, have increased. At the time of the 1377 poll tax, London was between three and four times as populous as York and Bristol, the largest of

England's provincial cities, and eight to nine times the size of Colchester and Canterbury, the biggest towns within a radius of 120km of the capital (Baker 1976, 191–2; Dyer 1991, 64).

By the early 16th century London's primacy was even more marked – its taxed wealth was ten times greater than the second wealthiest city (Norwich), and it may have been five times as populous. The gap between the capital and the principal towns of its more immediate hinterland had similarly widened. Other measures confirm this growing dominance during a period of national demographic decline, followed by stagnation. London's share of English overseas trade had stood at around 35% in both 1300 and 1400, but by 1500 it had soared to 68%, and would peak at an extraordinary 85% in 1540 (Keene 1989, 99). This striking growth reflects both the extent to which the capital had succeeded in taking business from the provincial ports during the economic recession which characterised much of the 15th century, and which was particularly marked in the period from c.1440 to c.1470, and the degree to which English trade had become focused upon the Low Countries, and in particular upon the Antwerp market (Nightingale 1996, 103–4; Ramsay 1963, 53–7).

In some ways, then, London's grip upon the economy of England was stronger at the close of the middle ages than it became in later centuries, when the capital itself was vastly larger in population terms. This dominance as a market, as a centre of consumption, and as a focus for credit and exchange, manifested itself in a variety of ways which have left their mark in the documentary record. Although smaller medieval towns may have influenced – surely did influence – the economic environment of their hinterlands to some degree, it is only in the case of London that, to date, evidence of a capacity extensively to structure those hinterlands has emerged. Biases towards the production of particular commodities at particular locations have been identified through systematic investigation of records relating to land-use and agriculture in the counties surrounding 14th-century London, explicable at least in part by cost-distance from the London market along the lines predicted by the von Thünen model – that is, specialisation in bulky or lower-valued products close to the dominant market and in higher-valued more transportable commodities further away (Galloway & Murphy 1991, 4–5).

Associated with these productive specialisms were specialised systems of supply and distribution, linking producers and consumers, and linking the economies of smaller towns and their hinterlands into wider regional associations. The capital's supply networks involved both Londoners and non-Londoners, and employed a variety of modes of transport and mechanisms of exchange, making use of the formal institution of the regulated urban market-place for some types and scales of transaction, bypassing it for others. Free commercial exchange was however the means by which the great bulk of the capital's supplies were acquired. London had to provide for itself without the extensive political control over a rural *contado* enjoyed by the cities of Italy and many other parts of continental Europe. This was made possible by the highly commercialised nature of English society, within which even the peasantry had regular need for and access to money and market places by the 13th century (Britnell 1993, 102–15), and by those features of England's centralised political structure – standardisation of weights and measures, a relatively stable currency, relative security for travellers and traders, the absence of significant internal political or fiscal barriers to trade and the existence of reliable means for the enforcement of contracts and the settlement of disputes – which, in the jargon of the economists, tended to reduce transaction costs.

WOOD PRODUCTS

The tendency for the production and marketing of bulky, low-valued goods to concentrate in areas close or easily accessible to the London market is most clearly illustrated by the example of wood, required as a building material and as fuel in the form of bavons, faggots and other types of prepared firewood, for use in fireplaces, to fuel ovens and kilns, and as charcoal used in ironworking and other industrial processes, or burnt in braziers for domestic heating. The dilemma for medieval London, and for other pre-industrial cities, lay less in an absolute scarcity of wood resources than in the cost and difficulty of exploiting them. Firewood and timber were transported to London by cart and by boat, and often bypassed formal market-places, woodmongers and other purchasers commonly contracting with land-owners for supplies to be brought directly from the woods.

The commercial production of firewood for the London market was strongly concentrated in parts of Middlesex and Surrey, and those parts of adjoining counties which were close to London or to navigable water. Overland carriage of firewood appears to have been economically viable over distances of up to 18 or 20km in the early 14th century, but somewhat less after the Black Death as wages and carriage costs rose steeply (Galloway, Keene & Murphy 1996).

The importance of river-transport to the activities of the 90 or so London woodmongers who have been identified during the period 1275–1375 is clearly evident in the geographical pattern of their interests, places such as Kingston and Ham on the Thames emerging as centres where wood supplies were stock-piled before transport to the capital in those large river-boats known as shouts. Charcoal, by contrast, seems normally to have been carried into London by packhorses, each of which carried two sacks. The so-called 'colliers', who brought, or organised the bringing of the charcoal into London, and who may also have organised its production, appear frequently in London sources charged with using sacks of non-standard size, the penalty for which was to stand in the pillory and have the offending sack burnt beneath them. As charcoal is very much more valuable than firewood relative to its bulk, it could profitably be carried further overland, and the residences of the colliers indicate a supply radius in excess of 40km in the 14th century, taking in a range of market towns including Cheshunt and Hatfield in Hertfordshire, Hatfield Broadoak in Essex and – the most important centre of the trade – Croydon in Surrey (Murphy 1995, 87–8, 94).

GRAIN

Within the grain sector the influence of distance from the London market can be seen in the tendency for manorial demesnes to concentrate upon bulky, lower-valued crops, such as oats, in areas close to the capital, while higher-valued wheat predominated at a greater distance. The Thames linked wheat-producing areas in Oxfordshire and Berkshire to the London market via the important entrepôt of Henley, while Faversham played a similar role with respect to the rich agricultural region of north-eastern Kent. The centrality of the Thames is once again evident in the pattern of the documented

activities of London's cornmongers during the period 1270–1365, although the area within which they were most active was considerably more extensive than that of the woodmongers, and extended further inland. Contrary to earlier assumptions, East Anglia was not a regular source of grain for the capital c.1300. Instead, the contacts between London cornmongers and the ports of Norfolk seem to have been characteristic principally of years of scarcity and above average prices, when the capital's grain supply networks, which were normally heavily focused upon the Thames valley and estuary, were extended coastwise, sometimes as far as the Humber or beyond (Campbell *et al* 1993, 46–53, 69–71). London seems in these high-price years to have been drawing on a pool of grain which in other years may have been orientated more towards the markets of the Low Countries, as close or closer to East Anglia as was London in cost-distance terms. A similar situation is indicated for the later 14th century, when licences to ship grain from Yarmouth and Lynn were granted principally in years of shortage, although by that date barley and malt may have become a more important element in the apparently sporadic coastal trade (*eg* CPR 1370–74, 22, 54). The later 16th-century Port Book figures cited by Fisher suggest that the same conditions applied, with shipments from Norfolk correlating closely with price movements, and it thus seems that it was not until after 1600 that East Anglia became a routine part of the capital's grain supply zone (Fisher 1935, 47).

The specialised land-use regimes that had emerged by 1300 in response to concentrated patterns of demand were dynamic. As relative prices shifted in response to changes in the scale and structure of demand, in turn reflecting changes in living standards as the balance between population and resources altered, particular specialisms might emerge or strengthen while others declined, or became spatially more restricted. This is most clearly observable in the aftermath of the demographic collapse of the mid 14th century. Plague in 1348–9, 1361–2 and subsequent outbreaks, following on from the famine of 1315–18, saw the population of England halve over the course of the 14th century. Overall, the intensity of cropping systems tended to decline with the fall in the aggregate demand for food (Campbell 1997, 832). However, real standards of living were rising, and the surviving population was in a position to consume

more per head, and to afford better-quality foodstuffs, drink and manufactures, prompting reconfigurations in the agrarian landscape. Ale-drinking increased, stimulating an expansion in barley production across England, a phenomenon particularly marked in those counties to the north and north-west of London, which supplied the capital with barley and increasingly with malt, by overland carriage (Galloway 1998). Although barley is less valuable than wheat relative to its bulk, and thus can economically be carried less far, malting barley reverses the relationship, and an increase in malting close to the point of production seems to be associated with the expansion of barley cultivation near or beyond the limit of the capital's normal wheat supply zone (Galloway 1995, 32). A range of small and medium-sized market towns was involved in this overland traffic – including Watford, Barnet and Enfield – and are the stated residences of 'maltmen' who come to prominence in documentary sources at this period. The malt supply of London in the early modern period seems essentially to have followed this pattern, established in the decades after the Black Death. Some specialisms were more volatile, however; a strong emphasis upon cultivation of the cheaper bread grains based upon rye was evident in 1300 in areas close to the Thames, but greatly weakened after the Black Death, as consumers, both in London and the countryside, increasingly demanded wheaten bread (Galloway 1995, 31; Campbell 1997, 833–5).

MEAT

In addition to the restructuring of the grain sector after the Black Death, an important change took place in the balance between arable and pastoral land-uses. Once again the presence of concentrated metropolitan demand influenced the geographical articulation of a general trend. While the overall demand for grain shrank, consumption of meat per head, and perhaps in aggregate, was growing with the rise in living standards (Dyer 1989, 158–9). At the same time domestic textile production was expanding, more than offsetting a decline in demand for English wool in continental markets. The result was a contraction in the acreage under crop and an expansion of mixed-farming systems, a trend which is particularly evident in parts of the Midlands and the South (Campbell, Bartley &

Power 1996, 134–5, 177). These areas were geographically well-placed to respond to the changing demands of London, as well as the numerous closer urban markets. Grassland became increasingly important in Warwickshire between the mid 14th and the later 15th centuries, both in areas which were strongly arable-orientated at the earlier date and in parts of the county where other land-uses were already prominent, such as the more wooded Arden region. Birmingham and Coventry's roles as cattle-marketing centres become increasingly prominent over the same period, catering both to local demand and to the requirements of the drovers who brought Welsh cattle into the region for fattening and selling-on to the South-East. Regular droving contacts had been established between these towns and north Wales and Cheshire, and with the metropolitan market (Dyer 1981, 20).

London-based drovers had similarly established links with husbandmen and urban traders in Warwickshire by c.1400, and perhaps much earlier, while the neighbouring county of Northamptonshire emerges as having a strong concentration of drover residences at the same period, some of the identifiable individuals being involved in debt litigation with London butchers.¹ The inhabitants of small towns in Bedfordshire, Buckinghamshire and Hertfordshire participated in commercial networks linking the south midlands with the capital. One such was John Shepherd of Ampthill (Beds) who crops up in the Plea Roll of the Court of Common Pleas for Michaelmas 1424.² Shepherd's occupation is not stated, but he may have been a grazier, and certainly appears to have been active in several branches of the trade in livestock. He was owed money by husbandmen from St Albans and Aldenham (Herts), and Newport Pagnell (Bucks), by a drover from Colgrave in Northamptonshire, butchers from Newport Pagnell and Hanslope (also Bucks), a tanner from Little Linford (Bucks) and by Robert Hungerford, a citizen and skinner of London. A number of strategically-located fairs within the metropolitan region, including those held at Kingston, Uxbridge, and Stortford, also acted as important loci for the sale and purchase of cattle and sheep in the later middle ages, were visited by Londoners, and may have played a key role in inter-regional traffic. It is thus highly likely that at least some of the meat available for purchase by humbler Londoners in City markets c.1400 had come from quite distant

areas, including north Wales and Cheshire, which were already long-established as sources of supply for royal and aristocratic households (Hewitt 1967, 30–4).

Livestock linkages thus characteristically extended over greater distances overland than those of the routine grain-supply system, which in turn was geographically more extensive than the wood-supply system. The area with which medieval London had regular economic contacts was wider than that covered by any of these supply systems, however.

DISTRIBUTION

As a capital, a major port, and the hub of an emerging metropolitan economy, London played the central role in the distribution of high-value imported goods and manufactures to a large part of England, and in the marketing and export of domestically manufactured cloth. Some reflection of that centrality, and some impression of the geographical area with which London regularly traded, can be gained from sampling the voluminous records of debt contained in England's central courts. Debt and credit were pervasive features of medieval English society, and debt litigation was both a routine means of enforcing payment of money owed for commercial transactions and a *de facto* method of registering loans (Clark 1981; Kowaleski 1995, 202ff, 349). The residences of parties answering debt pleas brought by Londoners in a sample of Court of Common Pleas cases from around 1400 thus gives a valuable insight into the routine pattern of economic contacts between the capital and the rest of the country (see Fig 29).³ In the sample, 1,717 of these men and women who owed money to Londoners are ascribed a county of residence; they inhabited every part of England, from Cornwall to the Scottish border (plus a small number who lived in Wales, Ireland and further afield) but there are strong variations in the intensity of contacts indicated by these cases. The exercise highlights an area of intense interaction, stretching from Kent and Essex through Middlesex and Hertfordshire and into the middle Thames valley. This forms the core of a coherent block of territory within which Londoners had frequent commercial and financial dealings, running from the Severn estuary to Suffolk, and which extended further to the north than to the south of the capital.

Much of the trade conducted within this zone was distributive, Londoners supplying imported and manufactured goods, including spices, dye-stuffs and textiles, to provincial retailers, or directly to consumers. 'Chapmen', including some merchants of substance, provided one important form of commercial linkage, travelling from large and small towns to London to collect goods for re-sale, such as the imported linen cloth for which William Dancastre of Dartford was alleged to owe the London mercer Richard Coventry £8 7s 1d in 1424.⁴ These chapmen may often have brought with them quantities of domestically manufactured cloth, hides and other commodities required in London or for export (*cf* Shaw 1993, 92–3). To the north-west of a line running roughly from the Severn to the Humber, interaction with London falls away steadily, reaching very low levels in the most northerly and north-western counties of England, although strong links are evidenced with York, England's second city in 1377. Other towns which occur most frequently in connection with London include major trading and manufacturing centres, such as Salisbury, Coventry and Bristol. We only occasionally know the precise details of these linkages, but it is clear that many involved the internal distribution of high-value imports, and a reciprocal trade in domestically-manufactured cloth. Thus, many of the debts between Londoners and inhabitants of Salisbury and Coventry entailed grocers in the capital claiming money from dyers, and woad is specifically mentioned in one of these cases.⁵ Towns occurring slightly less frequently in connection with the capital include some of the largest centres within 120km of London – Colchester, Canterbury, Northampton, and to a lesser degree Oxford – as well as important ports like Sandwich and slightly more distant regional centres such as Norwich. Among the smaller town names which occur frequently is Maidstone which, located at the effective head of navigation on the river Medway, acted as a focus for the trade of central Kent, and is known to have engaged in a reciprocal trade with London in hides and tanned leather, among other products, around 1400 (Holt 1995, 29–30); also Bridgwater, a marketing centre for the Somerset textile industry.

London's wider economic hinterland, the area across which it distributed high-value goods and to which it extended credit, was thus extensive by 1400, but perhaps not yet truly national. Within the South-East and the Midlands its

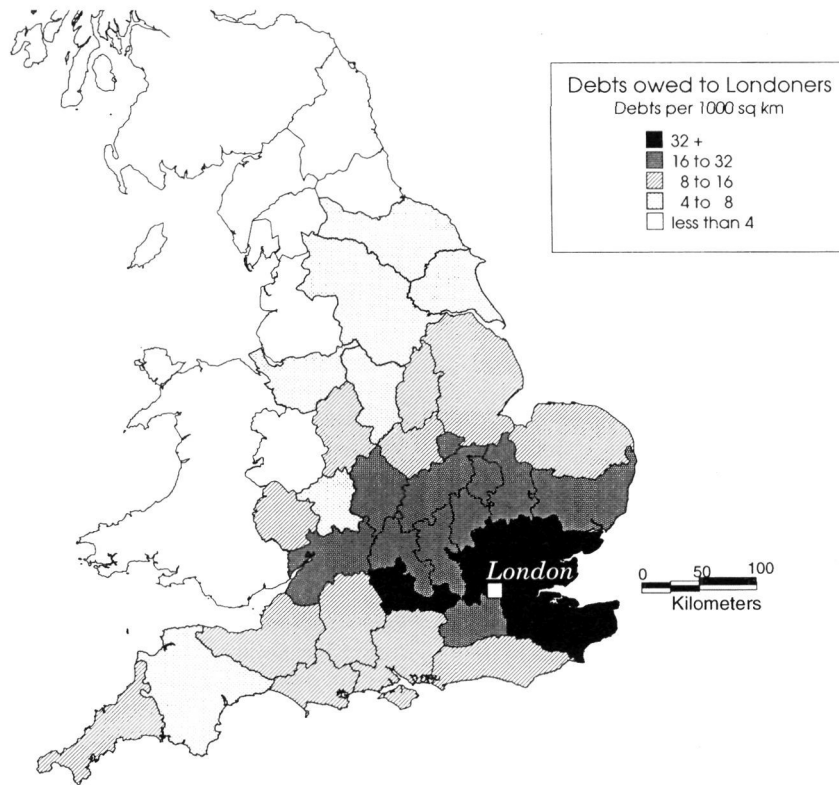


Fig 29. Map of England illustrating the distribution of debts owed to Londoners c.1400, adjusted by area of county in sample of 1,717. Note that the values plotted derive from this sample and thus have a relative but not an absolute significance

influence was pervasive, and was beginning to resemble the model of an economic metropolis; although other ports, and to a lesser extent inland towns, retained direct links with the wider world, London's control over overseas trade and the distribution of imports was strong and growing stronger. The behaviour of agrarian producers over an extensive area was influenced by the presence of London's concentrated demands, and local price levels for some commodities were being influenced by cost-distance from the capital. Regional industrial development was in part moulded by channels of reciprocal trade with the capital, and sometimes intertwined, as in the case of the leather industry, with the capital's provisioning requirements. The degree to which these developments display a continuity between medieval and early modern is unclear, however, as is the impact of the 15th-century recession upon metropolitan market networks. Research in progress aims to trace change in the geographical extent of London's supply networks and of the

wider economic hinterland that contained them, over the course of the three centuries from c.1300–1600. This promises to shed light not simply on the ways in which London obtained its necessary supplies of food and fuel over an extended period, but also upon the role of the capital in promoting the emergence of integrated supra-regional markets, a process which may have been well advanced by the close of the middle ages.

NOTES

¹ 'Market networks c.1400' project, Common Pleas database – see note 3 below.

² Public Record office, CP40/655mm. 176d, 263.

³ The map and the argument in this paragraph derive from analysis of a database compiled from the Common Plea rolls for Michelmas Term 1384, 1403 and 1424 during the course of the research project 'Market networks in the London region c.1400' (see 'Acknowledgements'). Details of debts which were attributed to London and ten surrounding counties

were collected. The data gives a 'national' picture of Londoners' activities, however, as London plaintiffs very rarely 'laid' cases in distant countries in the decades around 1400. This source and its analysis will be fully discussed in a book on metropolitan market networks c.1400, currently in preparation. The data have been mapped at county level, and weighted by area. They are plotted using a base-map of historic (pre-1974) county boundaries (see 'Acknowledgements'); these boundaries are approximate only.

⁴ PRO CP40/655m.544.

⁵ PRO CP40/655m.343d.

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