

Review

Medieval Town Plans, by Brian Paul Hindle. Shire Publications Ltd: Shire Archaeology 62. 1990. 64pp. £3.50. ISBN 0 7478 0065 0

'Traditionally, historians have not used either maps or feet enough' stated Susan Reynolds in her *Introduction to the history of English medieval towns*, published in 1977 (and, significantly, not mentioned in the bibliography of the book under review). They have neglected the topography of towns, in other words, the physical appearance of places and their layout, excusing themselves by saying that they are historians of documentary sources, not archaeologists or architects. Difficult as the subject is, and however intractable in its sources the more remote the period of history under study, excuses are now not enough; any urban historian worth his or her salt cannot ignore the practicalities of urban life, the access problems to the city centre, the congestion of the market and the streets leading into it, the redevelopment problems caused by corporate bodies, the nuisance and pollution of certain trades and many more such issues. None of these are foreign to town dwellers today; our preoccupations are those of our medieval predecessors in Leicester, or in any other medieval town for that matter, and this conclusion has only been reinforced by recent documentary research on towns. So it is that a whole crop of recent studies of medieval towns have carried chapters or whole sections on topography, and historians have been forced to acknowledge the value of related disciplines (principally urban archaeology, but also historical geography and place name studies, to name but three) to supplement their own documentary work. Furthermore, they have discovered the necessity of illustrating their work by using maps and plans, which has led to a re-examination of the accuracy and the contribution made by cartographers in plotting the outlines of urban areas.

This recent offering from Shire Publications is another contribution to the growing interest in non-documentary sources for urban history. In it, the author sets out clearly and concisely the main elements for a comprehensive topographical study of a town, discussing the nature of a town's site, the general layout of its plan and then the features which go to make up this plan: the streets, the defences, the market, churches, suburbs and property boundaries. He ends with a case study of Ludlow, in which the components of the town plan all come together in a successful analysis. The section on 'Site' (pp.18-20) does suffer somewhat from a confusion between location and urban growth; the siting of a settlement was merely a base from which it might, or might not, grow. A site was chosen, if anything so positive can be said about the genesis of a place, for a variety of reasons, and the author's preoccupation with commerce tends to blind him to other factors which were of equal, or even greater importance, when the town came into existence. In particular, he undervalues the importance of defence as a consideration which led some towns to be located in apparently unsuitable places. But he also underestimates the ability of townsmen and their overlords to overcome fearsome geographical or topographical handicaps in their efforts to make their towns 'successful'. He cites some examples of road diversions and bridge-building which helped to make such places more accessible to the surrounding countryside and to attract traders to their markets, but barely touches on the whole area of urban privileges which could be employed by an overlord as a weapon in the war for trade. A more straightforward analysis of types of sites related to the period of foundation might have helped to make this section of Hindle's booklet more perceptive.

Where the booklet seems at its weakest is in the 'Introduction' (pp.6-10), which is a pity, since it is here that the reader's interest will be captured, or more likely, lost. This

section consists of a very general historical account of the foundation and growth of towns. It lacks any coherent chronological sense (all too often the author is reduced to using such phrases as 'At first most urban growth' or '... in the earlier years', which are unhelpful) so that the reader is often at a loss to know quite what the 'period under discussion' is. The main thrust of the book, 'Armed with a large-scale map, and whatever historical and archaeological evidence can be found, ... to piece together the history of the town's growth' (p.6) is somewhat obscured in a section which never quite succeeds in convincing the reader about the reasons for urban growth, or indeed the need to explore what was a 'medieval town'. This reader would have preferred the 'Introduction' to be cut dramatically in favour of a plunge straight into the next section, 'Sources' (pp.11-15), with a far greater discussion of the less familiar archaeological and cartographical evidence - in other words, to live up to the title of the booklet. The author is on more familiar ground in the second section, as the excellent section on 'Maps and Assembling the Evidence' demonstrates.

Despite these reservations, the booklet serves a useful purpose, in introducing the new student of urban history or the keen amateur local historian to the sources and techniques of urban topography. Apart from its 'Introduction', it is a clear synthesis of recent work in this field. It is well illustrated, especially in its use of maps and plans, and it has a good, up-to-date short bibliography which will point the reader in the right direction for further study.

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