

To what extent was the fifteenth century a period of urban decay?

Ecological, demographic, socio-economic and political factors all contributed to a period of crisis in fourteenth century England. A succession of bad harvests, post-war tax demands and bubonic plague contributed to the changes in the prosperity of England (Schofield & Vince 1998). Schofield and Vince (1998) divide the development of medieval towns in England into three general phases. The first is a period of growth between 1100 and 1300, the second a period of crisis in the early 1300's and finally a long period of decline for some towns and a rise for others from 1350 until 1500. There is one argument for growth in medieval towns in the fifteenth century, and one for general decline (with only Southampton, Bristol and London managing to avoid ruin) but both arguments are based on scant evidence, assumptions to the reasons for the evidence and its accuracy and sweeping generalisations about the state of England as a whole (Reynolds 1977).

A medieval town was very different to a town today. Populations were much smaller, with few towns having a population of more than 5000, with a majority holding 500 to 1000 people (Waugh 1991). Platt (1976) goes further and suggests that towns with a population of over 1000 people were rare, with the average population being five to six hundred. He declares that 95% of population of England were still living in rural areas as late as 1500. There are a number of factors that enable a town to be defined, but they do not all have to be present. The requirements can include having; defensive walls; civic officers including a Mayor/Alderman; a non-agricultural industrial base; a charter; guilds; markets or fairs held regularly. It is also important that a town has a wide-ranging occupational structure, enabling diversification and providing the many services a town's population demands.

The definition of 'urban decline' is based on either economic or demographic evidence, as both are inextricably linked to each other and to the fortunes of the town. To justify a period of urban decline, a comparison needs to be made with the status of towns – population and economy – in the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries.

In the 1300's England was overpopulated, and resources stretched to their limit. Failure of crops and disease in cattle led to widespread famines and high food prices, which led to the population already reducing from a peak (Schofield & Vince 1998). As the Black Death spread across England the high mortality meant that immediate labour shortages had a number of positive effects on the economy; wages were driven up, increased income allowed purchase of better food, clothes, utensil and housing; the type of farming changed from intensive high labour arable to the less intensive pastoral or mixed type of farming, coinciding with a higher demand for animal products. As the demand for labour decreased, employment was still needed for other workers, so those looking for work migrated to the towns. All these elements resulted in a consumer boom at the end of the 14th century with a short term rise in the per capita output – spending increased in the gloom of recurrent plague and uncertainty about the future, with the urban sector primarily being the recipient of this increase in consumption. In the ten years after the first wave of plague, a number of towns were showing signs of strong recovery benefiting from the post-Black death consumer boom (Hatcher 1977).

Demographic fluctuation is probably one of the most discussed elements in the urban decline argument. The Black Death caused massive losses in the medieval population, and Hatcher (1977) describes the 14th and 15th centuries as the “longest period of declining and stagnant population in recorded English history”, quoting Saltmarsh as saying “the symptoms of the 15th Century suggest a continuous fall over a long period, not simply a population that had fallen, but one which was falling progressively”. There are many studies and many arguments as to how long and how much, but most historians agree that there was a drastic drop in numbers during the 14th century, followed by a general decline during the 15th. Bean suggests that the decline had stopped by the end of the 14th century and then began to reverse, leading others to attempt to interpret the 15th century as one of prosperity and enterprise (Hatcher 1977). The generally agreed conclusion of a continual decline in population had a profound effect on the economic fortunes of urban areas in a variety of ways.

The economy in the fourteenth century was a complicated network of villages, markets and towns with all goods and services being traded back and forth constantly. Markets and fairs were the backbone of the economy and a huge number of charters for market and fairs were granted in the period up to the end of the 14th century. This proliferation of grants assisted in an increase in trading exchanges and an increase in consumption, boosting the number of markets (Schofield & Vince 1998). Some constitutional historians have attempted to analyse this granting of charters to describe medieval towns as “blooming and busy”, but this must be questioned by social historians (Hatcher 1977). The granting of charters is only one side to the analysis, further research needs to be undertaken from the income these markets generated. Permission to hold a market maybe granted, but the proximity of other (and maybe better) markets will have profound influence on the profitability, and the sustainability of any market.

The existence of defensive buildings is one of the factors that identifies a town, and can be interpreted as sources of “municipal independence and civic pride” (Dobson 1977). Borough records detailing the expenditure on maintenance and building could be used to evaluate the financial status of a town. If the records exist, an analysis of spending on refurbishment or building of new defensive – and other civic – structures could be used to establish the financial wellbeing of a town, but these displays of wealth by merchants and municipal corporations also have to be compared to the evidence of any decline. Expenditure on building doesn’t always reflect wealth; DJ Keene explains the enlargement of churches in Winchester as a sign of their great devotion rather than conspicuous displays of affluence (Reynolds 1977). Dobson quotes William Cunningham - “there is hardly any token of general prosperity on which we may rely with more confidence than the fact that many people are able and willing to expend money in building” – but this may not be a valid interpretation. Defensive structures may be a priority, but new bridges, guild halls, houses, roads, wharfs and parish church building and refurbishment also may have a connection to the prosperity of the community. It is also counter-claimed that more town churches disappeared between 1468-1550 than ever before or since (Dobson 1977), but Schofield & Vince (1998) claim that

between the 1350's to 1500, there were many "great cathedrals, beautiful parish churches [and] sturdy medieval buildings" built.

A more profitable analysis may result from an analysis of the Exchequer records listing the petitions to the Crown for a remission of the fee-farm of a borough, or its exemption from any of the parliamentary subsidies. The fee-farm would be paid from any income of the town, probably from tolls and fines, but could also be paid from any rental income. If this rent income was dwindling due to the reduction in population or the declining economy of the town during the 15th century, then the civic dignitaries could petition for remission. Whilst these petitions could provide a useful demonstration of the poverty of a town, the true reasons behind a plea of poverty from a civic official and whether it actually reflects the financial status of the town, cannot be definitively established.

War also had a profound effect on the economy of a town. Not only would the wide-spread recruitment of men from the towns reduce the population, so few are left to work, trade or hold civic office, therefore impacting on the fortunes of a town, supporting the wrong side could also have an influence. Dobson (1977) quotes the corporation of York pleading with Henry VII in 1485, attributing their "povertie, decay and ruyn", to the fact that many of the men of the city fought on the Lancastrian side at the battles of Wakefield, St Albans and Taurton, resulting in the indignation of Edward VI. Towns were expected to contribute to the war effort, and due to the 'warmongering' prevalent during the fourteenth century, they were left bankrupt in the fifteenth.

The taxation assessments at the end of the fourteenth and then at the beginning of the sixteenth centuries could provide a comparison as to the assessment of wealth of individual towns. There are limitations to using the subsidy returns as a guide to urban decay as they cannot be used to calculate a population or the wealth of the town as they only record those who are over fourteen and those who have been assessed as 'taxable'. Other factors to be wary of include the fact that urban areas and rural areas were assessed differently, so only a very careful comparison of rural and urban fortunes can be undertaken; there were also

variations in assessment by the assessors, wealth could often be undervalued or generalised, meaning the recorded amounts paid may not be accurate. The assessments can only provide a suggestion of the fluctuations in town fortunes.

Transcriptions of the lay subsidy rolls from Sussex survive for the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries, and have been used here to provide a general analysis of taxable individuals in Sussex towns. The results could be used to assess whether the towns in Sussex suffered or survived the general malaise of English towns. Comparing only the taxable population of the 1327, 1332 and 1524 lay subsidies, this could demonstrate the growth or decline of a town in population or in the relative wealth of the town, but it could also only demonstrate the fluctuations of individual urban fortunes (Appendix 1).

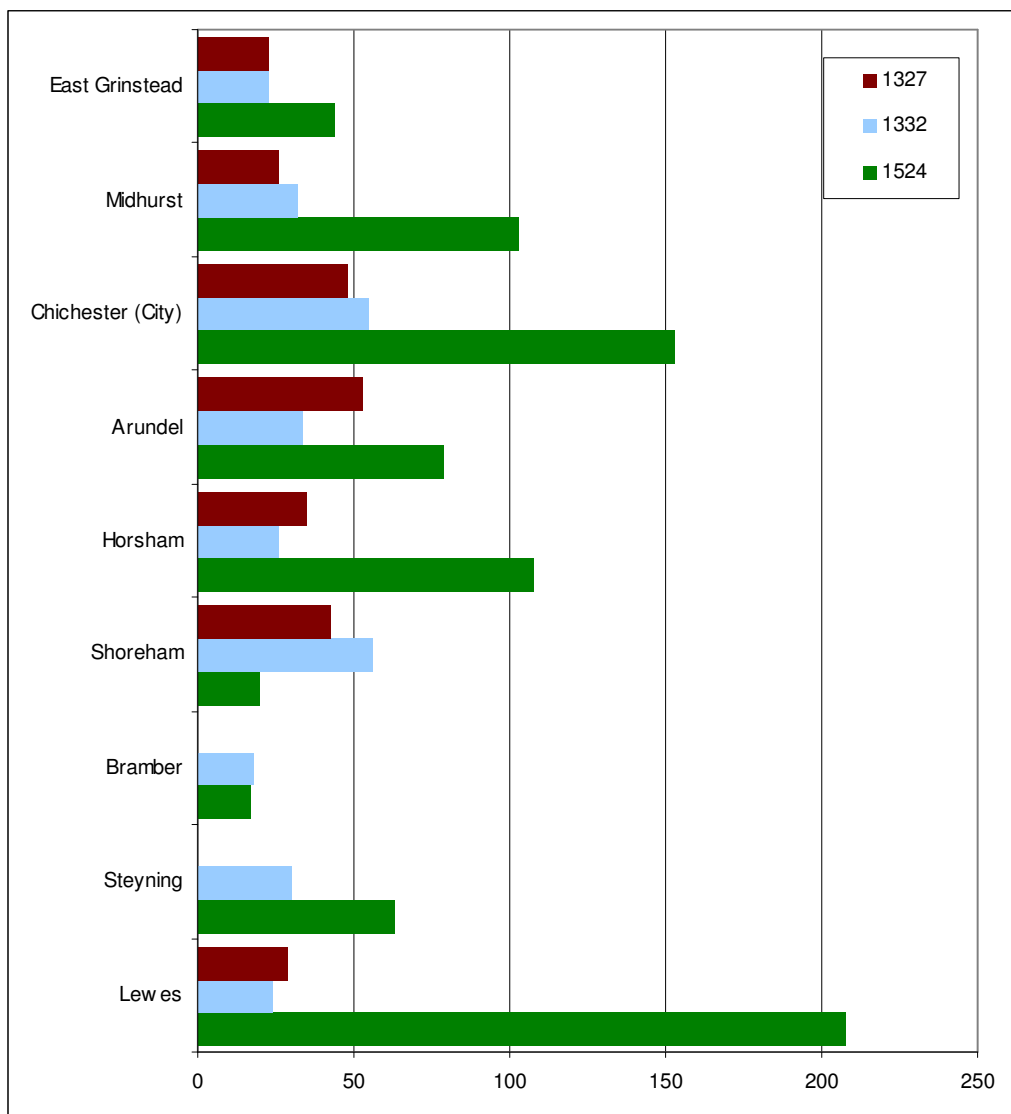


Figure 1 :: Comparison of taxable population for main Sussex towns taken from the Lay Subsidy Rolls for 1327, 1332 and 1524

This basic analysis shows that some towns declined in taxable population between 1327 and 1332, whilst some grew, and between 1332 and 1524, some declined and some grew substantially. This could be indicative of the variations in growth and decline throughout England. Tax subsidies are notoriously misleading and can cause confusion between population and wealth of a town. Examples taken from previous analyses demonstrate that in Bristol and Norwich, wealth grew, but the population of either of them had not grown proportionately since the Black Death. Also, Lavenham was the thirteenth richest town in England by 1520, but housed less than one thousand souls (Reynolds 1977). Therefore the

relationship between taxable population and urban wealth cannot be guaranteed, but can only be taken as a guide to the number of wealthy persons in a town at any one time; there is no evidence of the reasons for their wealth, or evidence of the wider population. More research is needed for the lay subsidies but this must be combined with other evidence to provide any tangible estimation of the socio-economic structure of a town, and only then can any suggestion of urban decline be established.

The barest scraps of evidence available to scholars of the medieval period suggest that an economic decline in England developed from the end of the 14th century and into the early 15th – varying from region to region – but with a majority of the country being in severe trouble by the middle 1500's. There are a number of reasons why, but a definitive answer is yet to be found. Two main reasons for this decline include the financial repercussions of war with France and Spain, and the drop in population causing an acute shortage of labour (Hatcher 1977). The first sixty to seventy years of the 15th century fit Postan's description of "recession, arrested economic development and declining national income", as the downwards trend in economic activity was general in scope and dramatic in scale all throughout England (Hatcher 1977). Even so, there were some areas of the country and industry that did experience growth and development. There were shifts in the locations of some industries – for example, the cloth industry moved from the towns to the rural areas. Areas such as Totnes, Tiverton, Lavenham and Lewes, benefited from the development of industry in the surrounding rural areas, and could be interpreted as examples of a general strengthening of the local economy (Dobson 1977).

It is generally considered that the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries saw economic activity decline, although as the population was reduced, the level of economic activity that was maintained could be considered growth (AR Bridbury in Reynolds 1977). Dobson argues that it is impossible to answer the questions of late medieval decline, he quotes FW Maitland in saying that "the town as such...is not...a useful or appropriate object of social analysis" (1977). It is impossible to use demographic analysis to assess the period of decline as the period is practically devoid of any accurate population statistics. Other documentary evidence

is scarce for the late Middle Ages, and general trends are hard to establish. The solution may be to study individual towns to explain the anomalies in economic fluctuations, rather than any similarities, but these cannot be taken in isolation and must be related to the national context. Historians tend not to agree about the consistency, accuracy or process of urban decline during the late Middle Ages. It is believed that urban decline cannot be limited to the fifteenth century alone, and that the waxing and waning of urban fortunes has occurred throughout urban history.

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