

1. Urban demand in the English economy, 1300–1600

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Urban demand and the demand for urban products are usually treated as complementary phases of the circular flow of exchange that expanded in the course of economic development between the ninth and the thirteenth centuries. Discussion of the way in which rural development supported urban growth is just as prominent in historical literature as the question how urban growth encouraged rural development. The latter has arisen chiefly in the context of large cities,¹ since it has been taken for granted that many lowly market towns, barely distinguishable from the villages around them, depended for their livelihood upon the purchasing power of the neighbouring countryside. Yet recent studies of commercial expansion have given a more special significance to urban demand as an independent source of growth. In a recent study, distinguished for its directness of argument and pioneering use of neglected source materials, James Masschaele places greater stress than any earlier historian on the importance of urban markets. He presents two principal hypotheses that I intend to examine, one that the marketing structure around 1300 was chiefly geared to meeting the requirements of the largest fifty or so English towns, and secondly that by that date — indeed some decades before — the marketing structure had assumed a form that it retained for centuries.²

Masschaele rightly stresses the achievements of the twelfth and thirteenth-centuries in developing both new towns and old; this was the most formative period for the creation of new towns and markets until industrialisation was well under way in modern times, and almost every town of any significance in 1750 had been founded at least five hundred years before. The evidence that urban population grew more rapidly than total population is not strong, but it seems likely to have done so, and it would be perverse to deny to urban demand a significant role, both quantitatively and institutionally, in the economic development of thirteenth-century England.³ With so much common ground, the differences between Masschaele's emphases and the ones I prefer are hardly fundamental, but they have implications for current debate about the course of economic change, and are therefore worth airing in the context of a discussion of medieval urban markets.

¹ London, in England's case, and in particular in B. M. S. Campbell, J. A. Galloway, D. Keene, and M. Murphy, *A Medieval Capital and its Grain Supply: Agrarian Production and Distribution in the London Region c. 1300* (Historical Geography Research Series, 30, 1993).

² J. Masschaele, *Peasants, Merchants, and Markets: Inland Trade in Medieval England, 1150–1350* (New York, 1997).

³ R.H. Britnell, 'Commercialisation and economic development in England, 1000–1300', in R.H. Britnell and B.M.S. Campbell (eds.), *A Commercialising Economy: England 1086 to c. 1300* (Manchester, 1995), pp. 6–26 (pp. 9–12).

The role Masschaele ascribes to urban demand, urban institutions and urban environments is open to the objection that he overestimates the weight of urban demand in national expenditure around 1300, overstating the role of merchants in internal trade at that time, and that for these reasons his model understates changes brought about during the following centuries. That, at least, is the gist of the following observations, which divide into two main sections. The first discusses these hypotheses concerning urban demand to assess their account of the English economy around 1300. The second (and the brief third) examine the nature of the changes in marketing structures that took place between 1300 and 1600 and argue that some of the characteristics Masschaele ascribes to England in 1300 might more appropriately be postponed to 1600.

It is perhaps important to add at this point that nothing in my argument implies that local markets operated independently and in ignorance of each other. Sellers could choose between different markets, and information about prices was disseminated over large areas by estate officials, merchants and other travellers. The high quality of water communications by sea and river ensured that large quantities of grain travelled over some routes at comparatively low cost, both within Britain and across the Channel, and this trade also ensured that information about price movements over a wide area was available to those who could most benefit from it. The marketing of wool and livestock operated over such long distances that a high degree of integration is to be expected. It would be surprising if markets for grain, dairy produce, fuel and fodder were equally harmonious across England as a whole. However, recent research suggests that to describe the marketing structure of the later Middle Ages as one of regional autarchy is misconceived.⁴ A high level of integration is compatible with quite low levels of interregional trade under normal circumstances — it depends rather on the presence of the transport infrastructures and commercial initiatives needed to iron out marked inter-regional divergence in price — and is easily compatible with the institutional circumstances of local trade in the period 1300–1600 as I shall describe them, which leave ample room both for trade between regions and for extensive supply networks by water for those towns with good sea and river communications.

It would be a pity if the course of this discussion were to be complicated by semantic disagreements. I shall follow Masschaele's example in using the word 'town' or 'urban sector' to refer to all those 600 or so places that had distinctive commercial and occupational structures of an urban kind, many of them known as boroughs, and using the expressions 'larger towns' or 'regional towns' for those that Masschaele identifies as the top fifty.⁵

Urban demand in 1300

The weight that Masschaele assigns to urban demand plays down the relevance of rural demand for economic development. He ascribes to England a market structure focused on regional marketing centres — the larger towns. This emphasis on the role

⁴ J.A. Galloway, 'One economy or many? Markets, regions and the impact of London c.1300–1600' (unpublished). See also the same author's paper in this volume (below, pp. 23–42).

⁵ For the 600 or so towns, see Masschaele, *Peasants, Merchants, and Markets*, pp. 70–1, 74, and for the 50 regional towns pp. 74–83.

of larger towns as dominating the market demand for agrarian produce leaps right over the problem that started historians rethinking the importance of commerce in the 1960s — that is, the existence of large numbers of country people away from such central places who could not have produced their own food. That old problem has not gone away. If, for example, we take Nicholas Mayhew's estimates of national income in 1300 as a reasonable guess, there were about 600,000 households of cottars and labourers in the countryside as against 200,000 households of townsmen of all sorts.⁶ Whatever doubts inevitably surround the validity of these figures, this is certainly the sort of world that local English records, and past discussion of the rural economy, would endorse. The problems that confront the economic and social historian of medieval England include the discovery, central to debate in the 1960s, of widespread landlessness or near landlessness in rural areas. Postan estimated that 45 per cent of rural families were likely to be dependent on income acquired away from their own land, and this corresponds to Kosminsky's estimate from the evidence of the Hundred Rolls that 46 per cent of rural families in the Midlands had less than a quarter virgate in 1279.⁷ This meant that there was some market demand for provisions of all sorts in most larger villages and small towns.

All the most accurate observations of market dependence in its most horrifying form — famine mortality — derive from rural areas. One of the best recorded examples of what happened when marketed supplies of grain were deficient in 1315–18 is from the manor of Taunton (Somerset), which was not one of the larger towns, and where mortality was not confined to the borough.⁸ Even further down the scale of urbanity were the manors of Great Waltham, High Easter and Chatham Hall in Essex, where mortality during the great famine reached 15 per cent of the adult male population.⁹ At Halesowen, where again about 15 per cent of the male residents died during the famine, 22 of the 43 of the tenants known to have died between 1316 and 1318 were cottagers and smallholders who could not provide their own subsistence.¹⁰ In the 1960s and 1970s one of the advantages of emphasising commercial development in the thirteenth-century economy, which implied emphasising the market demand for foodstuffs and raw materials in the countryside, was that it helped to explain rural market dependence and the circumstances in which rural crises could occur. It permitted a partial answer to awkward questions in the understanding of peasant economy.

Historians who work from villages or small towns up rather than from the Exchequer down are likely to be impressed, in any part of the country, with the number of small town and village markets which were focuses of demand for foodstuffs and raw

⁶ N. Mayhew, 'Modelling medieval monetisation', in Britnell and Campbell (eds.), *Commercialising Economy*, pp. 55–77 (p. 58).

⁷ E.A. Kosminsky, *Studies in the Agrarian History of England*, trans. R. Kisch (Oxford, 1956), p. 228; Mayhew, 'Modelling', p. 58; M.M. Postan, 'Medieval agrarian society in its prime: England', in M.M. Postan (ed.), *The Cambridge Economic History of Europe, I: The Agrarian Life of the Middle Ages*, 2nd edn. (Cambridge, 1966), pp. 548–632 (p. 619).

⁸ M.M. Postan and J.Z. Titow, 'Heriots and prices on Winchester manors', *Economic History Review*, 2nd ser., 11 (1959), pp. 383–411.

⁹ L.R. Poos, *A Rural Society after the Black Death: Essex 1350–1525* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 106–7.

¹⁰ Z. Razi, *Life, Marriage and Death in a Medieval Parish: Economy, Society and Demography in Halesowen, 1270–1400* (Cambridge, 1980), p. 40.

materials.¹¹ Recently, indeed, there has been an inclination amongst historians of local trade to weaken their focus on big markets even further by downgrading the significance of all formal markets, whether urban or otherwise. A vast amount of trade in agricultural produce took place on private property out in the countryside; Christopher Dyer has analysed some later medieval instances of this type of commerce under the general heading of ‘hidden trade’.¹² Such practices were demonstrably as much a part of thirteenth-century commercial development as the growth of trade in formal markets.¹³ By 1300 trade in foodstuffs and raw materials had become one of complex social conventions, in which balances between regulation and freedom, between the open and the hidden, the legal and the illegal, are difficult to detect amidst the fragments of official documentation that survive. By contrast, a focus on the dominant role of the larger towns sweeps out of sight not only this informal trade between producers and consumers but also the majority of prescriptive and formally licensed markets, which were small and of predominantly only local concern.¹⁴

There is good reason for recommending caution in enumerating rural markets, since many of those on record in the royal charter rolls were short-lived or abortive.¹⁵ Yet the certainty that some village markets were entrepreneurial failures does not imply that they all were, either individually or in aggregate. If rural markets were designed to serve the needs of local consumers and suppliers, it is in those contexts that their importance should be judged. Yet even those markets whose vitality is conceded, those in the smaller towns for example, are recognised in Masschaele’s model not as foci of consumption for rural consumers but as nodes in a marketing network that functioned chiefly to supply the larger towns. Minor and informal markets with only a rural clientele are excised from serious consideration as having any relevance to the developing structure of agricultural trade. The effect of this model is to stress the role of provision merchants, operating between different markets, very much more than earlier historians have done, and Masschaele signals clearly that this is a shift in thinking that he wants to achieve. It is for this reason the propositions he raises need to be debated.

If in fact a substantial part of the total trade in agrarian products took place in minor market towns and villages, then a model that stresses the larger towns as agents of development will prove statistically incoherent, and that is indeed the case if some of its implications are explored further, using current perceptions of the relative size of

¹¹ R.H. Hilton, *Class Conflict and the Crisis of Feudalism* (London, 1985), pp. 175–204; R.H. Hilton, ‘Medieval market towns and simple commodity production’, *Past and Present*, 109 (1985), pp. 3–23; R.H. Hilton, ‘Low-level urbanization: the seigneurial borough of Thornbury in the middle ages’, in Z. Razi and R. Smith (eds.), *Medieval Society and the Manor Court* (Oxford, 1996), pp. 482–517.

¹² C. Dyer, ‘The hidden trade of the middle ages: evidence from the west midlands of England’, *Journal of Historical Geography*, 18 (1992), pp. 141–57.

¹³ R.H. Britnell, *The Commercialisation of English Society, 1000–1500*, 2nd edn (Manchester, 1997), pp. 97–101; R.H. Britnell, ‘Avantagium mercatoris: a custom in medieval trade’, *Nottingham Medieval Studies*, 24 (1980), pp. 37–50.

¹⁴ The importance of trade between countrymen is assessed and reaffirmed in C. Dyer, ‘Were peasants self-sufficient? English villagers and the market, 900–1350’, in E. Mornet (ed.), *Campagnes médiévales: l’homme et son espace. Études offertes à Robert Fossier* (Paris, 1995), pp. 653–66.

¹⁵ R.H. Britnell, ‘The proliferation of markets in England, 1200–1349’, *Economic History Review*, 2nd ser., 33 (1981), pp. 209–21 (pp. 219–20); J. Masschaele, ‘The multiplicity of medieval markets reconsidered’, *Journal of Historical Geography*, 20 (1994), pp. 255–71.

medieval urban populations for the purpose. Urban demand was only a part of total demand for grain, and the demand of the larger towns was only a part of urban demand. The largest fifty towns may perhaps have had as many as 0.5 m. inhabitants¹⁶ but we should probably ascribe at least somewhere between 0.3 and 0.6 m. to the remaining 550 towns (allowing them each somewhere between 500 and 1,000 inhabitants on average). The largest fifty towns, in other words, may have accounted for only somewhere between 45 and 63 per cent of the grain consumed in all 600 towns. If rural demand is then taken into account it is inconceivable that the largest towns consumed as much as half the grain marketed. The question can be looked at another way. By 1300 probably about 30–40 per cent of all the grain grown in southern England (by value) was made available for sale. This estimate is based on the assumption that some 6–8 per cent of the kingdom's total harvest was sold by parish rectors out of parochial tithes, that 12 per cent was sold by demesne officials from demesne lands and that 12–20 per cent was sold by peasant households from their family holdings.¹⁷ However, no one has ever suggested that 30–40 per cent of the population was urban, let alone that 30–40 per cent of the population lived in the fifty largest towns. We may generously allow the largest fifty towns 10 per cent of the population of England, but unless we assume that townsmen in larger towns consumed on average three or four times as much grain per head as countrymen we may reasonably doubt whether they consumed more than a quarter to a third of all grain sold.

Demand for agricultural produce was not restricted to grain, and a balanced account of the English marketing structure will need to take account of pastoral farming and the supply of woodland products. In these trades the draw of larger towns was perhaps greater than in the case of grain since the demand for purchased meat and leather amongst the poorer rural households was likely to be very restricted. Cattle markets were more likely than grain markets to achieve regional dominance, even if livestock once sold were dispersed to smaller centres of consumption, since the ease with which livestock could be moved favoured trade over distances that would have been prohibitively expensive for grain. From Wales cattle arrived in large numbers at fairs in the west Midlands, as at Winchcomb or Chipping Norton, and at the urban markets of Worcester and Birmingham.¹⁸ North-western England was another exporter of pastoral products to more densely populated parts of the island.¹⁹ Nevertheless, the same distribution of population that suggests caution in allocating a dominant role to the grain consumption of fifty larger towns argues against too town-centred a view of the consumption of pastoral produce. Only occasionally can the sale of meat be demonstrated by the activities of butchers in villages without markets;²⁰ farming families presumably supplied themselves and their neighbours with meat without the need for

¹⁶ Britnell, 'Commercialisation and economic development', p. 10n.

¹⁷ R.H. Britnell, 'La commercializzazione dei cereali in Inghilterra (1250–1350)', *Quaderni Storici*, 96 (1997), pp. 631–61 (p. 639).

¹⁸ D.L. Farmer, 'Marketing the produce of the countryside, 1200–1500', in E. Miller (ed.), *The Agrarian History of England and Wales, III: 1348–1500* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 324–430 (pp. 378–80).

¹⁹ Farmer, 'Marketing', pp. 378–9.

²⁰ E.B. DeWindt, *Land and People in Holywell-cum-Needingworth: Structures of Tenure and Patterns of Social Organization in an East Midlands Village, 1252–1457* (Toronto, 1972), p. 235.

a butcher as intermediary. But all over England men who engaged in retailing meat (described as butchers, fleshhewers or *carnifices*) were to be found in village markets and small towns like Marlow (Bucks.), Kimbolton (Hunts.), Corbridge and Alnwick (Northumberland), Witham (Essex), Halesowen (Salop), Thornbury (Gloucs.), and Farnham (Hants.).²¹ The bishop of Winchester's livestock from his manors in Somerset and Wiltshire were sent to be slaughtered at local markets in Taunton, Hindon and Downton, none of which were towns in the top fifty.²² If the meat was being butchered in these places it was being sold to local consumers, not to supply larger towns. Since the number of butchers in larger towns was often modest — no more than twenty-one even at the peak of Colchester's prosperity in the early fifteenth century, and probably half that a century earlier — it is likely that the number of butchers in the fifty larger towns was exceeded by the number in smaller towns and villages. Much of the inland trade in livestock, too, was for rural use by peasants and landlords who wanted new oxen and horses for traction, or to make up unplanned losses of other stock by purchase from other producers, and such buyers made use of numerous centres of trade outside the larger towns, like Newmarket and Haverhill in Suffolk, or Great Bardfield, Castle Hedingham and Hadstock in Essex.²³

Enough has been said to suggest the importance for any town-country model of maintaining a tight quantitative control over the magnitudes of different types of settlement, and not allowing the dimensions of the larger towns to become exaggerated. London is, of course, a case apart, and its impact on producers was felt over an extensive portion of southern England. But London was not the only centre of market demand in the London supply region, which also supplied Ipswich, Colchester, Oxford, Guildford, Reading, Kingston, St Albans, Ware, Canterbury, Rochester, Maidstone, as well as smaller market towns and some very populous villages.²⁴ Even accepting the larger estimates for English urban populations that have been proposed by Derek Keene in recent years, a model that focuses on London and the larger towns and ignores the heavy consumption of marketed produce within smaller towns and villages is unrealistic. It has the further unfortunate consequence that it attaches a greater significance to mercantile enterprise and networks around 1300 than the evidence warrants. David Farmer commented that 'markets in the larger towns left better records, but the local markets and the communities round them were the more important outlets for the produce of the countryside', and there are good reasons for supposing that he was right.²⁵

²¹ *Rotuli Hundredorum*, ed. W. Illingworth, 2 vols, Record Commission (London, 1812–18), II, pp. 354, 621–2; *The Northumberland Lay Subsidy Roll of 1296*, ed. C.M. Fraser (Newcastle upon Tyne, 1968), pp. 48, 96; R.H. Britnell, 'The making of Witham', *History Studies*, 1 (1968), pp. 13–21 (p. 18); R.H. Hilton, 'Small town society in England before the Black Death', *Past and Present*, 105 (1984), pp. 53–78 (p. 64); idem, 'Low-level urbanization', pp. 499, 507–10; E. Robo, *Medieval Farnham: Everyday Life in an Episcopal Manor* (Farnham, 1939), pp. 61, 187.

²² Farmer, 'Marketing', p. 386.

²³ Farmer, 'Marketing', p. 384.

²⁴ D. Keene, 'Small towns and the metropolis: the experience of medieval England', in J.-M. Duvosquel and E. Thoen (eds.), *Peasants and Townsmen in Medieval Europe: Studia in Honorem Adriaan Verhulst* (Gent, 1995), pp. 223–38 (p. 227)

²⁵ Farmer, 'Marketing', p. 329.

The problems thrown up by emphasis on larger towns can be illustrated from an examination of particular regions. Colchester, for example, cannot have dominated supplies of marketed grain even within its own normal marketing region — that is, even within a radius of eight to ten miles overland. The borough had only about one tenth of the number of taxpayers in this radius, which included a number of locally significant centres of consumption such as Manningtree, West Mersea, Brightlingsea and Coggeshall.²⁶ Yet Colchester is one of Masschaele's regional towns, and so ought on his reckoning to be much more important than this. Only two towns in Essex are classified in this way in his survey — Colchester and the even smaller Maldon. In 1317, at the height of the most severe famine of the Middle Ages, a Colchester jury complained of markets supposedly injurious to the borough at St. Osyth, Manningtree, Earl's Colne, Coggeshall and Salcott.²⁷ They were not complaining of the days on which of these markets were held, but of their very existence. All of them were beyond what lawyers generally considered 'neighbouring' in this context, but all were within striking distance, and well within the region that would have supplied Colchester under famine conditions. Could it be that the burgesses of Colchester saw these markets as taking grain away from them rather than as markets that supplied them? Is there any explanation of Colchester's complaint to the crown consistent with the supposition that these markets were a recognised channel for its supply of food or raw materials?

This argument is undoubtedly most forceful with respect to the marketing of cereals. If we suppose that Colchester and Maldon each normally drew most of their grain from a radius of eight or ten miles around the town, as various lines of argument would suggest,²⁸ they did not need the services of any other markets in the county to supply them. What happened to all the grain grown and marketed elsewhere in Essex? It surely did not normally go to London, for even if London was taking only half the disposable grain from Essex and other neighbouring counties it would not need to depend upon supplies beyond Chelmsford, and the city probably drew much more from the east coast and the Thames estuary than from the centre and north of the county.²⁹ The chances are that it was mostly consumed in small towns and villages within the county. Outside Colchester³⁰ and Maldon,³¹ the sheriffs' accounts for Essex between 1323 and 1357 record the purchase of grain in markets at Chelmsford,³² Witham,³³ Braintree,³⁴ Dunmow,³⁵ Halstead,³⁶ Coggeshall,³⁷ Castle Hedingham,³⁸

²⁶ R.H. Britnell, *Growth and Decline in Colchester, 1300–1525* (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 46–7.

²⁷ Essex Record Office, Colchester Branch, Red Paper Book, f. 56r.

²⁸ Britnell, *Growth and Decline*, pp. 41–7.

²⁹ Campbell, Galloway, Keene and Murphy, *Medieval Capital*, pp. 60–3, 75–6.

³⁰ Public Record Office (P.R.O.), E.101/556/10, 19A, 23.

³¹ P.R.O., E.101/556/12, 34; E.101/557/5, 6.

³² P.R.O., E.101/556/17, 27, 34, 46, 48, 49, 50, 53; E.101/557/5, 6.

³³ P.R.O., E.101/556/23, 49, 50; E.101/557/6.

³⁴ P.R.O., E.101/556/23, 34, 37, 39, 49, 50; E.101/557/6.

³⁵ P.R.O., E.101/556/32, 34, 49; E.101/557/6.

³⁶ P.R.O., E.101/556/46; E.101/557/6.

³⁷ P.R.O., E.101/556/50.

³⁸ P.R.O., E.101/557/6.

Waltham Holy Cross,³⁹ Hatfield Regis,⁴⁰ Brentwood,⁴¹ Billericay,⁴² Stock,⁴³ Ingatestone,⁴⁴ Pleshey,⁴⁵ Writtle,⁴⁶ Romford,⁴⁷ Harlow⁴⁸ and Ongar.⁴⁹ It takes little imagination to suppose that the combined population of these eighteen market towns alone exceeded the 5,000 or so that may reasonably be ascribed to Colchester and Maldon on the eve of the Black Death. Many of them had small communities of grain purchasers living round them. Even where there is no such direct evidence of this, as there is at Chelmsford and Witham,⁵⁰ these marketing centres are frequently associated both with free landless plots akin to burgage tenures and with an exceptional number of resident artisans.⁵¹ The same is true of other marketing centres that do not occur in the sheriffs' accounts, like Manningtree and Harwich, two of the most successful new ports on the Essex coast. The reality of a market at the former is demonstrable from the receipt of 40s. in tolls by the canonesses of Canonsleigh in 1279. Manningtree was also a borough, and a survey of 1323 records tenements in 'Cornhillestrete', 'Pleysaunteland' and 'Chapellestrete' all held for money rents.⁵² Harwich, too, was known as a borough by 1274, when William Fraunk was described as a burgess; a borough charter was obtained from Edward II in 1318.⁵³ Another such centre of consumption, not noted as a market in the sheriffs' accounts, was Great Bardfield. Its market, licensed by Gilbert of Clare, definitely functioned for many years because its stallage was valued at 13s. 4d. in 1296 and at £1 6s. 8d. in 1314, and the market place there was the focus of a small borough community.⁵⁴ There is no reason to suppose that any of these places were primarily supplying other towns either before 1300 or later. The fourteenth-century court rolls of Colchester do not show the sort of pattern of debt that would indicate

³⁹ P.R.O., E.101/556/32.

⁴⁰ P.R.O., E.101/556/32.

⁴¹ P.R.O., E.101/556/48, 49.

⁴² P.R.O., E.101/556/48, 49.

⁴³ P.R.O., E.101/556/48, 49.

⁴⁴ P.R.O., E.101/556/48, 49.

⁴⁵ P.R.O., E.101/556/48, 49.

⁴⁶ P.R.O., E.101/556/48, 49, 52.

⁴⁷ P.R.O., E.101/556/52.

⁴⁸ P.R.O., E.101/557/5, 6.

⁴⁹ P.R.O., E.101/557/5.

⁵⁰ M. Beresford, *New Towns of the Middle Ages: Town Plantation in England, Wales and Gascony* (London, 1967), pp. 434–7; Britnell, 'Making of Witham', pp. 13–21; H. Grieve, *The Sleepers and the Shadows: Chelmsford: A Town, Its People and Its Past: I, The Medieval and Tudor Story* (Chelmsford, 1988), pp. 7–26.

⁵¹ R.H. Britnell, 'Burghal characteristics of market towns in medieval England', *Durham University Journal*, new ser., 42 (1981), pp. 147–51; Poos, *Rural Society*, p. 38.

⁵² *The Cartulary of Canonsleigh Abbey (Harleian MS. No. 3660): A Calendar* (Devon and Cornwall Record Society, new ser., 8: Torquay, 1965), pp. 77, 85, 87; B.L., Harley Ms. 3660, fos. 154 ff.

⁵³ *Rotuli Hundredorum*, I, p. 140; *Calendar of Patent Rolls, 1317–21*, p. 380.

⁵⁴ *Curia Regis Rolls*, 11, no. 2805, p. 564; *Calendar of Inquisitions post Mortem*, III, p. 237; P.R.O., C.134/42, no. 3; G.A. Holmes, *The Estates of the Higher Nobility in Fourteenth-Century England* (Cambridge, 1957), p. 144. A thirteenth-century charter (before 1281) granted the monks of St John the Baptist of Colchester 2s. of annual rent from a messuage 'in Berdefield iuxta forum ville, quod videlicet tenementum se extendit de magna placea fori versus orientem usque ad vivarium domini comitis', and the witnesses included Ralph the tailor and Warin the merchant: Essex Record Office, Colchester Branch, St. John's Abbey Cartulary, fo. 113.

regular trade with these other Essex markets. Even at Romford, that demonstrably did act as a source of supply for London, the trade of local craftsmen and tradespeople from Havering was central to the market's activities.⁵⁵ Quite apart from these numerous small commercial centres, we should also take seriously the demand for produce in populous villages without formal markets like Great Waltham, where in 1328 193 out of 284 tenancies were of less than ten acres,⁵⁶ or in the textile villages of northern Essex discussed by David Gervers.⁵⁷ There was some market demand for grain even in very small villages like Langenhoe.⁵⁸

A contrast is to be observed between the English wool trade, which involved some of Europe's wealthiest and most sophisticated mercantile enterprises, and the English grain trade, which did not. This difference did not, however, swing the balance towards the marketing institutions of the larger English towns, even if those of Flanders would loom large in any account of the demand for wool. Large quantities of wool were bought privately from producers and exported from eastern and southern ports without ever passing through any English urban market of any kind.⁵⁹ The marketing of wool for domestic use is less well documented, but since all the emphasis of the literature on the English textile industry stresses the failure of urban industries and the development of clothmaking in rural areas, there can be little argument for the central importance of urban markets in this the most commercialised branch of agricultural produce.⁶⁰

The course of change, c. 1300–1520

The second part of this paper discusses changes that occurred between 1300 and 1520. This analysis examines the proposition that the market economy in place in 1300 was a robust, integrated and durable system, and that the following centuries saw merely its consolidation. Though the later Middle Ages indeed saw nothing to compare with the construction of new towns between 1050 and 1250, economic history knows many forms of urban and commercial restructuring other than the multiplication of urban sites. Existing towns may grow and decline at different rates, and the least fortunate towns can disappear or lose all their urban characteristics. However formative the twelfth and thirteenth centuries may have been as a period of urban development, the possibility of continuing change and development needs investigation. A structure of trade had indeed come into existence in 1300, maybe a sophisticated structure, but that was not necessarily the structure that was to be seen three hundred years later.

Commercial and institutional stability are notions that do not fit well with the known statistical history of the late Middle Ages. Most interpretations of the period see it not

⁵⁵ M.K. McIntosh, *Autonomy and Community: The Royal Manor of Havering, 1200–1500* (Cambridge, 1986), p. 156.

⁵⁶ Poos, *Rural Society*, p. 16.

⁵⁷ M. Gervers, 'The textile industry in Essex in the late 12th and 13th centuries: a study based on occupational names in charter sources', *Essex Archaeology and History*, 20 (1989), pp. 34–73.

⁵⁸ Britnell, *Commercialisation*, p. 98.

⁵⁹ Farmer, 'Marketing', pp. 395–400; T.H. Lloyd, *The Movement of Wool Prices in Medieval England* (Economic History Review supplement, 6: Cambridge, 1973), pp. 5–10.

⁶⁰ E. Miller and J. Hatcher, *Medieval England: Towns, Commerce and Crafts, 1086–1348* (London, 1995), pp. 107–21.

as one of stability or institutional consolidation, but rather as one of social transformation under the impact of changes in the composition of internal and external pressures. It is perhaps appropriate, where marketing institutions are concerned, to think in terms of the survival of the fittest, but only on condition that — as in biological usage — account is taken of environmental changes that affected the capacity of individuals with different endowments to survive and function. It is not enough to say that some individuals are fitter than others without reference to the changing context to which they were fitted. In looking at the institutions that survived the late Middle Ages, it needs to be questioned whether those most fit to survive into the sixteenth century were those that had been fittest to serve the needs of trade in 1300. The decay of east coast ports, like Hull, Grimsby and Boston, which had grown vigorously in the twelfth and thirteenth century demonstrates that fitness depended upon circumstances that changed over time.⁶¹ So do the changing fortunes of cloth towns like York, Colchester and Coventry, that were wonders of accumulating wealth in the later fourteenth century only to fall upon hard times in the fifteenth and early sixteenth.⁶² The frustrating debate about urban decline, whatever it has failed to achieve, has at least revealed the risks of assuming structural stability. Urban studies of the fifteenth century have brought to light wide varieties of experience — grim survival in the face of difficulties, brash innovation and enterprise to meet new commercial circumstances, the destruction of institutions no longer required in the changed environment.

The eventfulness of late medieval urban history can be well illustrated from the tables of urban rank prepared and refined by Alan Dyer.⁶³ There was continuity amongst the principal urban sites between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries in the limited sense that no major new town was founded in the three intervening centuries. The best sites were occupied long before 1300. However, the degree of stability in the marketing system that this implies is easily exaggerated. Of the twenty leading towns in 1524, half had changed rank position by ten places or more, seven by twenty places or more and four by thirty places or more since 1334. Some towns — Lavenham, Maidstone, Totnes — had come up from almost nowhere into the top twenty, and others — Colchester, Reading, Worcester, Exeter — had very significantly leapt ahead relative to others. Some of the leaders in 1334 had meanwhile disappeared from the top twenty — notably Boston and Lincoln. Great Yarmouth had dropped from seventh to twentieth in this top league. Behind this turmoil are changes in marketing structures that had clearly benefited some towns more than others, even at the expense of others. Volatile fortunes were not, of course, a characteristic only of larger towns. The vicissitudes of smaller marketing centres in England during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries

⁶¹ C. Phythian-Adams, 'Urban decay in late medieval England', in P. Abrams and E.A. Wrigley (eds.), *Towns in Societies: Essays in Economic History and Historical Sociology* (Cambridge, 1978), pp. 159–85 (p. 168); S.H. Rigby, *Medieval Grimsby: Growth and Decline* (Hull, 1993), pp. 113–46.

⁶² J.N. Bartlett, 'The expansion and decline of York in the later middle ages', *Economic History Review*, 2nd ser., 12 (1959), pp. 17–33; Britnell, *Growth and Decline*, pp. 262–4; C. Phythian-Adams, *Desolation of a City: Coventry and the Urban Crisis of the Late Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1979), pp. 33–67, 281–90.

⁶³ Cf. A. Dyer, *Decline and Growth in English Towns, 1400–1640* (London, 1991), pp. 70–1. Dyer has modified the tables for D.M. Palliser (ed.), *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain*, I (forthcoming), and it is these revised rankings that are cited in what follows.

have been widely observed. Some came up in the world, but it was common for formal markets of all sorts to register losses of income from tolls and stallage rents.⁶⁴

To concentrate on markets that disappeared is to concentrate on part of a much broader issue, but it is worth spending a moment on the topic if only to argue that real changes were occurring. To suppose that market centres disappeared because they were unfit to survive is a useful circular argument, but it does not follow that they were unfit to fulfil their founder's plans at the time they were first set up. Not every landlord who acquired a market charter established a market in fact, and there are well recorded instances of abortive attempts.⁶⁵ Yet it really is unlikely that all those later charters meant nothing, and that the hundreds of landlords who acquired market charters for new sites between 1250 and 1350 were all wasting their money without realising it. Most of them, as they intended, probably founded small markets that were appropriate to a context in which the countryside was full of cottagers and other smallholders, but which ceased to be appropriate when the number of such households fell steeply.⁶⁶ All over the country there are well recorded instances of markets that established themselves, lasted a number of generations, and then languished and vanished, following a course of rise and decline that indicates changes in the structure of local trade — Chirk in Denbighshire,⁶⁷ Greystoke in Cumberland,⁶⁸ Salehurst in Sussex,⁶⁹ Steeple Ashton in Wiltshire,⁷⁰ Walsham-le Willows in Suffolk,⁷¹ Yarlinton in Somerset.⁷² The same is true of many of the fairs established during the thirteenth century.⁷³

The extent of such abandonment is difficult to gauge without intensive local research, and even then the information is always imperfect, but some idea of it may be suggested from Essex sources. Of the twenty markets listed earlier from the sheriffs' accounts, which had been sufficiently real to attract royal purveyors in the mid fourteenth century, Stock, Ingatestone, Ongar, Pleshey and Writtle had all ceased to be counted as market towns by the sixteenth century; a quarter of the county's leading market centres had apparently ceased trading.⁷⁴ So had the market at Great Bardfield, formerly the centre

⁶⁴ M. Bailey, *A Marginal Economy: East Anglian Breckland in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 304–6; Britnell, *Commercialisation*, pp. 156–60; M. Mate, 'The rise and fall of markets in southeast England', *Canadian Journal of History*, 21 (1996), pp. 59–85.

⁶⁵ Masschaele, 'Multiplicity of medieval markets', pp. 255–71.

⁶⁶ Britnell, 'Proliferation', pp. 220–1.

⁶⁷ D. Pratt, 'The medieval borough of Chirk', *Transactions of Denbighshire Historical Society*, 46 (1997), pp. 26–51

⁶⁸ A.J. Winchester, *Landscape and Society in Medieval Cumbria* (Edinburgh, 1987), p. 122. Survivors and non-survivors in this and the following paragraph are identified from A. Everitt, 'The marketing of agricultural produce', in J. Thirsk (ed.), *The Agrarian History of England and Wales, IV: 1500–1640* (Cambridge, 1967), pp. 466–592 (pp. 468–75).

⁶⁹ N. Saul, *Scenes from Provincial Life: Knightly Families in Sussex, 1280–1400* (Oxford, 1986), p. 164.

⁷⁰ *VCH Wilts.*, VIII, p. 210.

⁷¹ R.M. Smith, 'A periodic market and its impact on a manorial community: Botesdale, Suffolk, and the manor of Redgrave, 1280–1300', in Razi and Smith (eds.), *Medieval Society*, pp. 450–81 (p. 463).

⁷² Farmer, 'Marketing', p. 383.

⁷³ E.g. Embsay (Yorks.): I. Kershaw, *Bolton Priory: The Economy of a Northern Monastery, 1286–1325* (London, 1973), p. 29; Clare (Suffolk): Britnell, *Growth and Decline*, p. 190.

⁷⁴ For Writtle, which had been a well-established market, see E. Clark, 'Debt litigation in a late medieval English vill', in J.A. Raftis (ed.), *Pathways to Medieval Peasants* (Toronto, 1981), pp. 247–79; K.C. Newton, *The Manor of Writtle* (Chichester, 1970), p. 17.

of a borough. Of the five markets sufficiently real to be a nuisance to Colchester in 1317, only Manningtree and Coggeshall survived to the sixteenth century — St. Osyth, Earl's Colne and Salcott had lost their marketing role. The Colchester jury of 1317 had not complained of another market at Elmstead, perhaps because it had already ceased to function, but it had been sufficiently well established at one time to leave a perpetual memorial in the place-name Elmstead Market on the main road from Colchester to Harwich, still to be seen on the Ordnance Survey map.⁷⁵

These observations alone suggest that the internal trading patterns of the late Middle Ages were far from fixed, that the changes to the structure after 1300 were substantial, and that the challenge of maintaining a recognised commercial status quo was common to marketing centres of all sizes. Independently of any questions concerning urban decline and prosperity, it is therefore worth exploring how far we can answer questions about changing patterns of internal trade, and then discuss how any changes of pattern would have challenged or reinforced the institutional inheritance from the thirteenth century.

One category of changes in the structure of market demand for food and raw materials derived from the severe reduction in the proportion of the population who might be classified as cotters or labourers. In around 1300, according to Mayhew's guesstimate, cotters, labourers and servants counted for over one-half of all English households. In 1524, according to Cornwall's calculations, the poorer families that constituted the wage-earning class were only a third of the population.⁷⁶ The same point has been made by Christopher Dyer in writing about cottages as a type of rural housing.⁷⁷ This decline in the number of cottagers and smallholders corresponded to the substitution of pasture farming for arable farming on large estates, which in a period of rising wages was attractive partly because of the lower labour inputs required. Declining numbers of rural wage-earners also accompanied the breaking up of many demesnes, which had constituted one of the main sources of regular employment in the thirteenth-century countryside. Wherever demesnes were leased in smaller portions the extent of family farms expanded at the expense of large units dependent on employed servants.⁷⁸

A second category of changes in market structure derives from the well-attested rising standard of living in rural society, as well as in towns, between 1349 and the mid fifteenth century, both amongst wage-earners and among tenant farmers.⁷⁹ This had the effect of altering the composition of demand in rural society, and in particular it

⁷⁵ In 1333 John Martel of Ardleigh granted to William the hayward of Elmstead the reversion of a plot of enclosed land with buildings on it 'in villa de Elmstede apud Elmesstedemarchat inter tenementum Rogeri Austin ex una parte versus orientem et fabricam quondam Simonis de Elmessted ex altera parte versus orientem': Essex Record Office, D/DU/23/35.

⁷⁶ J.C.K. Cornwall, *Wealth and Society in Early Sixteenth-Century England* (London, 1988), pp. 213–14.

⁷⁷ C. Dyer, 'History and vernacular architecture', *Vernacular Architecture*, 28 (1997), pp. 1–8 (p. 2).

⁷⁸ Britnell, *Commercialisation*, pp. 199–201, and the references cited there.

⁷⁹ C. Dyer, *Standards of Living in the Later Middle Ages: Social Change in England, c.1200–1520* (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 140–50, 158–60, 204–7; C. Dyer, 'English diet in the later middle ages', in T.H. Aston, P.R. Coss, C. Dyer and J. Thirsk (eds.), *Social Relations and Ideas: Essays in Honour of R.H. Hilton* (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 191–216; J. Hatcher, 'England in the aftermath of the Black Death', *Past and Present*, 144 (1994), pp. 1–35.

meant an increased demand for merchant wares at the expense of local manufactures. To some extent, no doubt, improvements in real wages were taken up in improved diet, but there can be little doubt that the elasticity of rural demand for manufactures was higher than that for grain or pastoral produce. Not all the growing manufacture of higher-quality cloth in Salisbury, Coventry, York, Norwich and Colchester during the later fourteenth century was destined for sale abroad. The expansion of these industries represented at least in part the substitution of town cloth for country cloth on the part of rural consumers.⁸⁰ Apart from clothing of better merchantable quality, rural consumers also bought increasing amounts of other cheap specialised goods, like beads, badges, buckles and personal adornments of other kinds. Such commodities were generally the product of concentrated industries, whether urban or rural. Metalwares of various kinds were more affordable, and it is probably for this reason that metalworking became more marked as a feature of London's industry between c. 1350 and 1450.⁸¹ In York, and some other cities, there was a surge in the number of pewterers over the same period, continuing till later in the fifteenth century.⁸² In the later fifteenth century the making of caps developed as an urban specialisation in a number of towns, presumably for local markets.⁸³ The history of the internal pottery industry confirms this interpretation of what was happening to internal market structures. Local pottery traditions were being superseded by a more standard range of pottery styles of superior manufacture. Coarse wares were in retreat, wheel-turned pottery became universal, and the range of different types of vessel increased. A smaller number of potteries was supplying wares over distances characteristically wider than that of most earlier potteries. Grenville Astill has recorded his impression 'that by the early fifteenth century pottery production was becoming based in grouped workshops located in the vicinity of towns', and he relates this to the larger scale of enterprises and the greater involvement of mercantile entrepreneurs.⁸⁴ The implications of these and similar changes for marketing patterns have still to be researched in any detail, but it seems likely that they brought about new patterns of involvement of trade between industrial towns and villages in more rural markets and fairs, building up patterns of interdependence that were stronger than they had been before.

A third category of change in marketing patterns between 1300 and 1520 derived from the increasing propensity of consumers to buy goods from abroad. Imported goods characteristically came through the towns and were supplied by townsmen. This development is again apparent from the archaeological evidence of pottery finds. Through trade with the Low Countries, in particular, pottery was being imported and penetrating the interior of the country on an unprecedented scale during the fifteenth century. Astill has described this as 'evidence for a dramatic change in the nature of

⁸⁰ Dyer, *Standards of Living*, p. 176–7.

⁸¹ D. Keene, 'Metalworking in medieval London: an historical survey', *Historical Metallurgy*, 30 (1996), pp. 95–102.

⁸² H. Swanson, *Medieval Artisans: An Urban Class in Late Medieval England* (Oxford, 1989), p. 77; D. Keene, *Survey of Medieval Winchester* (Oxford, 1985), p. 282.

⁸³ R.H. Britnell, 'The English economy and the government, 1450–1550', in J.L. Watts (ed.), *The End of the Middle Ages?* (Stroud, 1998), pp. 89–116 (p. 99).

⁸⁴ G.G. Astill, 'Economic change in later medieval England: an archaeological review', in Aston, Coss, Dyer and Thirsk (eds.), *Social Relations and Ideas*, pp. 217–47 (pp. 225–9).

the market' as a result of which 'local, regional and international trade were much more integrated than previously'.⁸⁵ Pottery was not, however, the only imported commodity to be strengthening the links between rural consumption and urban enterprise in this way. Although England was exporting woollen broadcloth and worsted in large quantities, there was an expansion of imports of other categories of cloth, notably linen.⁸⁶ A growing dependence of the London merchants on rural customers is suggested by the mercers' need to meet competition from the haberdashers. In the mid fifteenth century they prohibited their members from trading in rural fairs, a prohibition that made some sense if it could be maintained, since it imposed the transaction costs of acquiring mercery on the provincial merchants who had to come to London for the purpose. In 1477 the policy had to be abandoned, reluctantly, because it could not be maintained without loss to the mercers. 'All or the most part of all fellowships in this city,' it was said, 'be at their liberty and many of them accustomed and greatly use fairs and markets out of this city'.⁸⁷ Since linen had become an important component in the trade of the London mercers, it was probably one of the principal components of their sales in the rural hinterland.⁸⁸

A fourth category of change, and the last to be addressed here, was the increasing importance of exported manufactures for English employment and national income. From the 1330s English cloth production was increasingly co-ordinated by English merchants, first for supplying the home market, and after 1350 to satisfy a growing export demand, and this encouraged a restructuring of the industry towards particular towns and textile regions.⁸⁹ In the first significant phase of export growth between 1350 and 1400 the chief beneficiaries were older towns such as Coventry, Salisbury, York, Norwich, Colchester. In the second main phase from the 1470s the chief beneficiaries were the rural or small-town industries of western Wiltshire, Devon and elsewhere.⁹⁰

These changes in marketing patterns, all severally well attested, seem to point in a single direction in their implications for marketing structures. The demand for food and raw materials was becoming less diffused through the countryside, and both sales and purchases by rural producers were becoming more focused on a narrower range of mercantile centres served by a new structure of mercantile networking. The debate about urban growth and urban decay is in this context a distraction that draws attention from this more important underlying pattern. The distinctions between town and

⁸⁵ Astill, 'Economic change', pp. 223–4; L. Blackmore, 'Pottery, the port and the populace: the imported pottery of London, 1300–1600 (part 1)', *Medieval Ceramics*, 18 (1994), pp. 29–44.

⁸⁶ H.S. Cobb, 'Textile imports in the fifteenth century: the evidence of the customs accounts', *Costume*, 29 (1995), pp. 1–11.

⁸⁷ E.M. Carus-Wilson, 'The grocers of London: a study of distributive trade', in E. Power and M.M. Postan (eds.), *Studies in English Trade in the Fifteenth Century* (London, 1933), pp. 274–5.

⁸⁸ A.F. Sutton, 'Mercery through four centuries, 1130s–c.1500', *Nottingham Medieval Studies*, 41 (1997), pp. 100–25.

⁸⁹ E.M. Carus-Wilson, 'Trends in the export of English woollens in the fourteenth century', reprinted in E.M. Carus-Wilson, *Medieval Merchant Venturers*, 2nd edn (London, 1967), pp. 239–64 (pp. 242–8, 254–6).

⁹⁰ Britnell, 'English economy', pp. 95–7; R.H. Britnell, 'The economy of British towns, 1300–1540', in Palliser, *Cambridge Urban History* (forthcoming).

country that are difficult in 1300 do not become any easier. The inherent ambiguity of the distinction is to be seen in the decision by urban historians in search of an optimistic world view to adopt as evidence for urban growth those settlements, like Lavenham (Suffolk) that not so long ago represented the growth of rural industry.⁹¹ Urban or rural, Lavenham became more important as a local marketing centre for the consumption of foodstuffs and industrial raw materials over the decades from 1300 to 1520 at a time when other local marketing centres, like the borough of Clare, had no such luck.⁹²

The reduction in the number of cottars and smallholders in medieval villages had the effect of removing from many villages the most apparent source of market demand for foodstuffs and, maybe, raw materials as well. Meanwhile the growing importance of mercantile handling of consumer goods, both for the home market and for export, meant that employment in the manufacturing and commercial sector concentrated more in particular towns and villages. The simultaneous contraction in the number of food buyers and higher interdependence of those that remained must have implications for the fortunes of marketing institutions, and will help to explain why many small markets ceased to function, and why in a period that was unfavourable to most small market towns, some like Newbury (Berks.) were the focus of regional migration, and industrial growth.⁹³ Where smallholders remained numerous, as in some of the more industrialised parts of the country, they concentrated more than before in particular places and regions — the mining regions, or the textile regions, for example. Whereas the thirteenth century had seen the widely scattered proliferation of centres of consumption, later medieval commercial development led in the reverse direction. If the pattern of trade between the agricultural and the industrial sectors became more focused on a smaller range of centres, as these arguments imply, then the direction of change between 1300 and 1520, insofar as it concentrated trade in fewer places, was towards the sort of world envisaged by Masschaele in which more easily identifiable central places dominated the demand for food and raw materials.⁹⁴

In one commodity at least the proposition that demand was becoming more concentrated in English towns and ‘towns’, and that trade involved a chain of native merchants, is easily argued. In 1300 the major English export was wool; that wool trade largely by-passed urban markets, and much of it was in the hands of foreign merchants who traded extensively with producers and bought in bulk.⁹⁵ From the 1330s, however, the increasing mercantile organisation of cloth making, and the increasing use of wool for the domestic industry rather than for export, meant that a growing share of it was going into centres of domestic manufacture. By the mid sixteenth century wool exports were of very subordinate importance as a component

⁹¹ E. Lipson, *The Economic History of England, I: The Middle Ages*, 12th edn. (London, 1959), pp. 501–7.

⁹² Britnell, *Growth and Decline*, pp. 190–2; D. Dymond and A. Betterton, *Lavenham: 700 Years of Textile Making* (Woodbridge, 1982), pp. 3–8.

⁹³ M. Yates, ‘Continuity and change in rural society, c. 1400–1600: West Hanney and Shaw (Berkshire) and their region’ (unpublished D.Phil. thesis, University of Oxford, 1997), pp. 61–2.

⁹⁴ C.G.A. Clay, *Economic Expansion and Social Change: England, 1500–1700*, 2 parts (Cambridge, 1984), I, p. 69.

⁹⁵ Lloyd, *Movement of Wool Prices*, pp. 6–8.

of demand.⁹⁶ Urban wool markets acquired more business; Colchester, for one, reorganised its wool market in 1373.⁹⁷ Even when wool was not initially sold by the producer in an urban market it was commonly sold to an English merchant for the domestic woollen manufacture, and that implied that the range of likely destinations was more limited than in the thirteenth century.⁹⁸ Dependence on English urban enterprise is well illustrated by the late fifteenth-century wool sales from the Townshend estates in Norfolk. In 1495, 120 stone went to Hadleigh and 360 stone to Lavenham, both of which were prominent Suffolk cloth towns or villages. The wool to Lavenham went by way of an intermediary from Norwich.⁹⁹

It seems likely that, by these arguments, urban consumers and native mercantile intermediaries were increasingly affecting the composition of agricultural trade. The shift towards foods of higher quality in the internal trade of the kingdom is well attested during the later fourteenth century. Rye sales declined and barley sales increased, as consumers were able to afford ale of higher quality.¹⁰⁰ Trade in meat soared to unprecedented levels, and seems to have been the chief counter to low agricultural prices in the early fifteenth century, even to the extent of making some recovery possible from the agrarian recession of the 1390s.¹⁰¹ These changes had implications for the institutional structure of rural trade, some of which have been already observed and explored. Barley production in the London area demonstrably became more commercialised; barley was now more likely to be malted before sale rather than in London and the economic and social importance of maltmen increased.¹⁰² The demand for barley probably also strengthened the commercial links between London and Norfolk, where barley was a principle source of income in the fifteenth century.¹⁰³ The marketing structures that the expanding meat trade brought into being are as yet little understood, but they are likely to have meant new networks of supply over long distances. Maryanne Kowaleski's outstandingly full account of the Exeter meat trade in the late fourteenth century emphasises the importance of urban demand for the development of cattle rearing, and illustrates the long distances over which animals

⁹⁶ E.M. Carus-Wilson and O. Coleman, *England's Export Trade, 1275–1547* (Oxford, 1963), pp. 74, 122–3.

⁹⁷ Britnell, *Growth and Decline*, pp. 72–3.

⁹⁸ J. Kermode, *Medieval Merchants: York, Beverley and Hull in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1998), p. 199.

⁹⁹ C.E. Moreton, *The Townshends and their World: Gentry, Law and Land in Norfolk, c.1450–1551* (Oxford, 1992), p. 173.

¹⁰⁰ B.M.S. Campbell, 'Matching supply to demand: crop production and disposal by English demesnes in the century of the Black Death', *Journal of Economic History*, 57 (1997), pp. 827–58.

¹⁰¹ A.J. Pollard, *North-Eastern England during the Wars of the Roses* (Oxford, 1990), pp. 49–50; D. Stone, 'The management of resources on the demesne farm of Wisbech Barton, 1314–1430' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Cambridge, 1998), pp. 221, 231–5.

¹⁰² J.A. Galloway, 'London's grain supply: changes in production, distribution and consumption during the fourteenth century', *Franco-British Studies*, 20 (1995), pp. 23–34; J.A. Galloway, 'Driven by drink? Ale consumption and the agrarian economy of the London region, c.1300–1400', in M. Carlin and J.L. Rosenthal (eds.), *Food and Eating in Medieval Europe* (London and Rio Grande, 1998), pp. 87–100 (pp. 96–100).

¹⁰³ R.H. Britnell, 'The occupation of the land: eastern England', in Miller (ed.), *Agrarian History of England and Wales*, III, pp. 53–67 (pp. 62–5).

were brought.¹⁰⁴ It is difficult to believe that the exceptionally vigorous development of cattle-rearing in the west midlands was governed simply by demand in local towns, and its growth must have implied the development of an institutional structure to accommodate a new network of contacts between rural graziers and urban butchers. One effect was the selective promotion of some cattle fairs, such as that at Crediton, Lydford and Chudleigh (Devon),¹⁰⁵ which consequently increased in business during the later fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries at a time when many other fairs were struggling to survive. In Exeter's case, the development of urban demand for meat had the secondary effect of stimulating the town as a centre of livestock trade, so that outside butchers came to Exeter to buy livestock.¹⁰⁶ It is this selective pattern of flourishing — the growth of those institutions best adapted to, or specially created for, a new environment — that has defied the possibility of easy generalisations about towns, markets and fairs in the late Middle Ages.

A further implication of the growing preponderance of demand from a narrower range of commercial centres is that the countryside after 1350 became more vulnerable to fluctuations in urban prosperity. As a result of the growing importance of manufactured exports, in some contexts urban demand for rural produce became more sensitive to the international environment from the 1330s onward. The recession of the late 1330s and early 1340s is attributable to the decline of purchasing power in England, associated with high taxation and the export of bullion abroad.¹⁰⁷ By contrast, recessions from the 1370s onwards are more directly linked to problems of mercantile investment in raw materials and employment in export industries.¹⁰⁸ Contemporaries no doubt exaggerated this relationship because of their fixation on the export of precious metals as the chief reason for contractions of demand. Modern analysis on the whole favours a more cautious assessment of the role of foreign trade as a determinant of national income levels in this period. Even the modern monetarist explanation, which might be supposed to favour an international perspective, has swung to emphasising hoarding, rather than the drain of bullion away from western European markets, as the chief reason for declining monetary circulation.¹⁰⁹ Arguments from demography are even more likely to stress local conditions, given the likelihood that in detail different regions of the country had different population histories.¹¹⁰ Even so, the collapse of continental demand for English woollen cloth, and maybe for other English exports, had an impact on urban prosperity in England, and that impact fed back into the countryside through reduced

¹⁰⁴ M. Kowaleski, *Local Markets and Regional Trade in Medieval Exeter* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 293–300.

¹⁰⁵ Kowaleski, *Local Markets*, p. 294.

¹⁰⁶ Kowaleski, *Local Markets*, p. 298.

¹⁰⁷ N.J. Mayhew, 'Numismatic evidence and falling prices in the fourteenth century', *Economic History Review*, 2nd ser., 27 (1974), pp. 1–15; M.C. Prestwich, 'Currency and the economy in early fourteenth-century England', in N.J. Mayhew (ed.), *Edwardian Monetary Affairs (1279–1344)* (British Archaeological Reports, 36: Oxford, 1977), pp. 45–58.

¹⁰⁸ Britnell, *Commercialisation*, pp. 182–3.

¹⁰⁹ P. Nightingale, 'England and the European depression of the mid-fifteenth century', *Journal of European Economic History*, 26 (1997), pp. 631–58; N. Sussman, 'The late medieval bullion famine reconsidered', *Journal of Economic History*, 58 (1998), pp. 126–54.

¹¹⁰ E.g. A.J. Pollard, 'The north-eastern economy and the agrarian crisis of 1438–40', *Northern History*, 25 (1989), pp. 88–105.

sales and reduced profits, particularly in the south.¹¹¹ It is significant that textile workers were among the most vociferous supporters of Cade's rebellion in 1450.¹¹² It is not necessary to cast the fifteenth century in the image of the nineteenth to suppose that in some limited contexts urban demand had come to weigh more heavily in determining the fortunes of countrymen, partly because of the English economy's increased dependence upon urban products in overseas markets.

The restructuring of internal trade to parallel a reduction in the number of significant centres of demand is easily compatible with the proposition, which monetary evidence would also support, that there were prolonged reductions in the level of total internal trade, particularly between the 1380s and the mid fifteenth century. Because it took place in the context of — and partly resulted from — declining numbers of food buyers, movement to the world of a polarised town-country relationship was associated with a move away from the high-pressure world of thirteenth-century agrarian expansion. Although London's prominence in the market for agricultural produce is likely to have increased over the late Middle Ages, the activities of merchants in supplying the city with grain became less lucrative, to judge from the waning prominence of the London bladers.¹¹³ The importance of the city's principal institutional suppliers of grain temporarily diminished, and London's trade along the Thames declined in the course of the fifteenth century.¹¹⁴ Over the country as a whole, as demand for grain contracted during the fourteenth century demesnes tended to become less committed to marketing, and specialisation became less pronounced.¹¹⁵ It is more difficult to generalise about trends in other agrarian produce though there can be little doubt that some restructuring occurred in the context of the deep recessions in agricultural trade of the late fourteenth century and during the middle decades of the fifteenth century.¹¹⁶

If this analysis has any value, then it challenges hypotheses that polarise town and country in 1300 and then fossilise that structure as one of lasting significance. It also to some extent weakens the significance of the debate about urban decline. It is perhaps worth asking, in the present context, why urban decline has become viewed as a particular problem. The debate has largely been about description rather than causation, and it has hampered historians trying to grasp changes in the economy as a whole.

¹¹¹ J. Hatcher, 'The great slump of the mid-fifteenth century', in R.H. Britnell and J. Hatcher (eds.), *Progress and Problems in Medieval England: Essays in Honour of Edward Miller* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 237–72 (pp. 241–3, 266–70).

¹¹² J.N. Hare, 'The Wiltshire rising of 1450: politics and discontent in mid fifteenth-century England', *Southern History*, 4 (1982), pp. 13–31 (pp. 16–19); I.M.W. Harvey, *Jack Cade's Rebellion of 1450* (Oxford, 1991), pp. 17, 118–19, 121–2, 127, 173–4.

¹¹³ Campbell, Galloway, Keene and Murphy, *Medieval Capital*, p. 82.

¹¹⁴ R.B. Peberdy, 'Navigation on the River Thames between London and Oxford in the late middle ages: a reconsideration', *Oxoniensia*, 61 (1996), pp. 311–40.

¹¹⁵ B.M.S. Campbell, 'Matching supply to demand: crop production and disposal by English demesnes in the century of the Black Death', *Journal of Economic History*, 57 (1997), pp. 827–58.

¹¹⁶ The first of these badly needs a general survey, but see for example D.L. Farmer, 'Prices and wages, 1350–1500', in Miller (ed.), *Agrarian History of England and Wales*, III, pp. 431–525 (pp. 434, 462); G.A. Holmes, *The Estates of the Higher Nobility in Fourteenth-Century England* (Cambridge, 1957), pp. 115–20. The mid fifteenth-century recession in agriculture is discussed by R.H. Britnell, 'The economic context', in A.J. Pollard (ed.), *The Wars of the Roses* (London, 1995), pp. 41–64 (pp. 47–56) and more extensively in Hatcher, 'Great slump', pp. 248–63.

None of the features that have been identified as prime witnesses to fifteenth and sixteenth-century urban decline — depopulation, abandoned houses, falling rents, contracting markets of the traditional sort, reluctance to assume office — was in fact a distinctly urban phenomenon. They were all also widespread features of village life. The rising living standards that townsmen enjoyed were also a feature of the countryside. Towns pose no special problem, except in terms of a theoretical construct that polarises town and country in the analysis of economic development. Analysis of these problems would get further by easing up on concern for the urban sector as an independent and particular one, bothering less about urban fortunes as if they were peculiarly homogeneous and distinctive, in favour of investigating how the volume, structure, location and organisation of internal trade was changing relationships both between towns and between townsmen and their rural suppliers.

Urban demand in the sixteenth century

The sixteenth century is often thought of as a cyclical analogue of the thirteenth, and so in many ways it was. There is no doubt that both agricultural output and population increased between 1520 and 1600 — the former more rapidly, according to Mark Overton's figures, than at any other period before the nineteenth century. In this later period there is no doubt that urban population was growing faster than total population, and in this respect too there are probably similarities with the thirteenth century; London grew more than threefold, as it may have done during the thirteenth century.¹¹⁷ Meanwhile, as in the thirteenth century, the number of food buyers in country areas grew once more; the number of small-holdings increased, and there was a marked increase of those dependent on wage-earning or non-agricultural activities. If England's population increased from 2.3 m. in 1520 to 4.1 m. in 1600, the bulk of that increase was probably in the ranks of smallholders, cottagers and landless wage-dependents.¹¹⁸ As this happened, the proportion of the population dependent on marketed foodstuffs, vulnerable to dearth, and so sensitive to the quality of marketing institutions, increased, even if institutional provision for countering the effects of harvest fluctuation was more adequate than it had been in the early fourteenth century.¹¹⁹ Population figures may not have reached levels as high as those of the later thirteenth century, but it is unlikely that the volume of trade was lower. It might reasonably be expected, then, that marketing institutions would proliferate as in the thirteenth century.

This did not happen. Alan Everitt identifies a few new markets that were founded in the sixteenth century, like Ketsby (Lincs.) in 1524, and he identifies the revival in the early seventeenth century of the market at Westerham that was founded in 1337 but had foundered in the interval.¹²⁰ Yet this sixteenth-century activity will bear no

¹¹⁷ M. Overton, *Agricultural Revolution in England: The Transformation of the Agrarian Economy, 1500–1850* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 85, 138.

¹¹⁸ J. Yelling, 'Agriculture, 1500–1730', in R.A. Dodgshon and R.A. Butlin (eds.), *An Historical Geography of England and Wales*, 2nd edn (London, 1990), pp. 181–98 (p. 188).

¹¹⁹ J. Walter, 'The social economy of dearth in early modern England', in J. Walter and R. Schofield (eds.), *Famine, Disease and the Social Order in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 75–128.

¹²⁰ Everitt, 'Marketing', pp. 475–7.

comparison with that of the century before the Black Death. An appeal to the development of private marketing is not satisfactory in explaining this, at least without considerable clarification of the argument, since there had been plenty of private marketing in the Middle Ages.¹²¹ The supply of large towns with food and raw materials had been served in some measure by the private market all through the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Regulated public markets were used in the Middle Ages not under compulsion, but because they were a convenient and cost-reducing institution for buyers and sellers alike. Commentators on sixteenth-century local trade seem to agree that in fact local urban markets were still of primary importance as sources of food and raw materials retailed to individual households.¹²² If the formal markets of the sixteenth century, as of the thirteenth, were chiefly concerned with supplying retailed commodities to individual householders, and if they were chiefly serving the resident communities of those who lived around them, then it is relevant to ask how rural food-buyers obtained their food without incurring higher costs than their thirteenth-century forebears given the reduction in the number of marketing facilities, and why the proliferation of markets that occurred in the thirteenth century did not recur in the sixteenth.

There is unlikely to be a single answer. The perception of what constituted a market — which was never given legal definition, even when it mattered most, in the days of Quo Warranto proceedings — had perhaps narrowed over the years to exclude trading institutions that would have needed a license in the thirteenth century, so that the differences are more apparent than real. But perhaps one part of the answer lies in some of those changes in the marketing structure that we have observed during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. One of them, leading to the focusing of demand in particular places, had been the development of mercantile networks that made it advantageous for artisans to live in particular towns and industrial villages, especially if they were producing goods in demand over considerable distances. Local trade between village weaver and village tanner had given way, in part, to trade over longer distances with merchant intermediaries. This development continued during the sixteenth century, maintaining a characteristically more specialised distribution of industrial employment than that of the thirteenth century. Even self-employed craftsmen benefited from residence in a particular commercial centre if this gave them easier access to the mercantile networks through which their goods might be distributed. To this persistent pattern of a tendency for industry to locate itself by reference to mercantile enterprise, was added the tendency for the direct dependence of craftsmen upon merchants as employers to increase.¹²³ A type of organisation, the putting-out system, that had already come to involve several thousands of textile workers by 1520 spread considerably over the following decades.¹²⁴

¹²¹ Britnell, *Commercialisation*, pp. 97–101, 161–4.

¹²² Clay, *Economic Expansion*, I, p. 173; Everitt, 'Marketing', p. 553; A. Everitt, 'Farm Labourers', in Thirsk (ed.), *Agrarian History of England and Wales*, IV, pp. 396–465 (pp. 450–1); D.C. Coleman, *The Economy of England, 1450–1750* (Oxford, 1977), p. 25.

¹²³ G. Unwin, *Studies in Economic History* (London, 1927), pp. 266–73.

¹²⁴ R.H. Britnell, 'Commerce and capitalism in late medieval England: problems of description and theory', *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 6 (1993), pp. 359–76 (pp. 367–9).

In these ways non-agricultural activity grew in rural areas, but it was characteristically more merchant-dependent than in the thirteenth century, with features sometimes described as proto-industrial.¹²⁵ This meant a more volatile industrial rural sector than that of the thirteenth century, both because of the greater dependence upon overseas markets, and because of the element of mercantile calculation that determined just where labour or other factors of production were cheapest at any given moment.¹²⁶

Conclusion

In conclusion, then, medieval historians should perhaps pay the same sort of attention that modern historians do to the slow steps by which commercialisation and economic development take place, and become more alert to the way in which economic institutions constantly adapt to a changing environment in the course of time. Institutional maturity is a mirage. The market environment of 1300 was the outcome of several centuries of development, but it was no stopping point, and it was considerably changed under the challenges of the following three centuries. We have more work to do in charting and interpreting the developments that took place, and there is much relevant research already under way. Changing mercantile networks and structures of credit have received and are receiving expert attention. Marketing institutions are being explored at close quarters. The role of London in the English economy is being scrutinised and redefined. One of the good things that is likely to come out of all this is not simply a better understanding of the late Middle Ages but a better appreciation of the vast length of time it has taken to create the complex and rapidly-developing modern market economy.

¹²⁵ Clay, *Economic Expansion*, II, pp. 87–98; P.D. Glennie, 'Industry and towns, 1500–1730', in Dodgshon and Butlin, *Historical Geography*, pp. 205–9.

¹²⁶ A. Kussmaul, *A General View of the Rural Economy of England, 1538–1840* (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 126–45.

