

THE URBANIZING OF STAFFORDSHIRE: THE FIRST PHASES(1)

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This series of annual lectures, generously funded by Jack Leighton, has been used skilfully over the years to encourage scholars who are not specialists in Staffordshire history to devote some attention to the county's past. In this case an outsider's comparative perspective is being focussed on Staffordshire's early towns, with the purpose of assessing their importance in terms of the numbers of towns and their inhabitants, and in making some judgement of the changes associated with their growth.

Reading Staffordshire's early history is a rather depressing experience. We are often told that this poor, thinly-populated and backward county was restricted by poor communications, infertile farming land and forest law. Its people are often seen as resisting change, and preserving archaic customs, such as horn dances and bull running. Until the eighteenth century it was overwhelmingly rural. (2) This bleak landscape and conservative rural society was transformed, it is said, by the modern growth of the two great conurbations of the north and south, the Potteries and the Black Country which turned the county into one of the most urban and industrial in England. It apparently went from one extreme to another.

The aim of this lecture is to highlight the significant phases of urbanization in Staffordshire before 1550, and to show that the county had a capacity for change long before the age of Wedgwood and the ironmasters. We should recognize the achievements of the town planners of the period 900-1300, and of the traders and artisans who populated the early towns. The network of towns that had developed by the fourteenth century is one important indication that Staffordshire was not a backward county, but one with a greater capacity for enterprise and innovation than some other parts of the country. This was proved by the towns' resilience in the episode of 'urban decline' in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

A positive message about Staffordshire's early towns requires some revision of the received wisdom among the county's historians, who have tended to dwell on its lack of a really large urban centre. They make much of the county town's inability to match the growth of its counterparts at Chester, Leicester, Shrewsbury and Worcester. The south and east of the county seem overshadowed firstly by the growth of Coventry as a provincial capital, and in the early modern period by the emergence of Birmingham. When the nineteen boroughs founded in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries are considered, it is often said that many of them were mere pretenders, which remained agricultural communities, or which 'lapsed', and therefore failed to fulfil the ambitions of their over-optimistic founders. .

This lecture will not be able to unveil some hitherto undiscovered metropolis hidden under the fields, woods or moors of Staffordshire. It will however show that systematic research into the written records and material remains of well-known small towns, interpreted in the light of modern approaches to early urbanism, can reveal livelier and more active communities than has been previously realised. (3) We should attempt to understand the past in its own context, and avoid taking a superior modern view, which scornfully demands why these places were so small, or why communications were so slow. A market town with a few hundred inhabitants had a vigour of its own, and it could have a leavening impact on its rural surroundings. For example, Brewood in about 1400 was a small place, but it contained a busy, even rather fractious group of traders and craftsmen, and some remarkably forceful women. It had probably not existed as a town in the twelfth century, and therefore its formation represents a significant change in the economy and society of the locality.

The early phases of Staffordshire's towns have left plenty of evidence. In the early stages of preparation for this lecture, the gloomier historians could offer assurances that this would not be a long task, as they believed that the sources are so meagre. There are many documents in print, thanks to the endeavours of General Wrottesley and his successors. Manuscript materials include court rolls from

boroughs and manors relating to eleven towns, six of them having quite long series : few counties could boast so many. (4) The bulk of documents means that the larger collections have been sampled in sufficient quantity, it is hoped, to support the generalizations that are offered here. There is also a quantity of archaeological and architectural evidence, from small-scale excavations and valuable studies of individual buildings.

A definition of a town must be established before proceeding further. A town cannot be recognized just by its privileges. Acquiring borough status (by which property was held by burgage tenure, for a fixed cash rent and with free disposal of the land) helped a place to become a town, but it was not essential. Nor must a town have had a minimum population of 2,000 or 5,000. Rather a town is distinguished by its concentration of people pursuing a range of non-agrarian occupations. These would mostly be trades and crafts, but included those providing services of all kinds, such as musicians, doctors, clergy and administrators. The town would serve the needs of a rural hinterland, not just as a point of commercial exchange, but as a focus for social, religious and cultural life. Towns often had a distinctive plan and appearance, with rows of houses ranged closely and regularly along streets and market places.(5)

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In the first phase of urbanization, in the Roman period,. the strip of country around the valley of the upper Trent which later became Staffordshire lay between the important civitas capitals of Wroxeter to the west and Leicester to the east. It contained four places with a claim to be described as small towns, Chesterton and Rocester to the north, and Letocetum (Wall) and Pennocrucium (Penkridge) in the south. (6) They influenced later developments. The medieval towns of Newcastle, Uttoxeter, Lichfield and Penkridge were certainly not their direct lineal successors, because the commercial and industrial life of the Roman towns came to a clear end around 400. However, during the seven centuries or so which separated the demise of the Roman towns and the rise of their medieval descendants, in the case of Letocetum and

Pennocrucium, the Roman units of government were perpetuated by secular rulers in the fifth and sixth centuries. After c. 650 minster churches were established to serve their territories, in each case two miles from the abandoned Roman sites.(7) After some centuries towns developed around these rich and important churches. This four-stage transition from Roman town to secular estate centre to minster church and then to medieval town has been convincingly demonstrated at Lichfield, and can be readily perceived at Penkridge. The survival of elements of their Roman names supports the idea that these two places persisted as important centres at the time when the English language was introduced. The possibility of some transfer of functions at the county's two northern Roman towns needs further investigation. At Eccleshall the name (from a British word equivalent to the modern Welsh *eglwys*) implies that a church, presumably of Roman or British origin, survived to become the minster church with a large parish in which the medieval town was founded.(8)

The first phase of medieval urbanization belongs to the three centuries before the Norman Conquest. The circuit of fortifications at Tamworth, probably of the eighth or ninth century, and the burhs at Tamworth and Stafford built in 913 each probably enclosed more than 50 acres, a sizeable area available for occupation. Within these defences were structures of high status dating from before 913, consisting of a church at each place, and a royal residence at Tamworth. The presence of people who were neither priests nor kings can be judged from the buildings and pottery kilns found at Stafford, and the ninth-century mill at Tamworth. (9) Domesday's incomplete and inadequate description of both places in 1086 has been taken as evidence of their stunted size, appropriate for a poverty stricken county.

Domesday deals with three places which can be regarded as towns. Stafford had more than a hundred households, perhaps 146 if we accept one interpretation of an ambiguous entry; Tutbury had forty-two men living only by trade; and twenty-two burgesses were said to be attached to Tamworth.(10) Even if we took these figures at face value, and assumed that each household consisted of five persons, they would imply that about a thousand people lived in towns, or 6 per cent

of the whole population of Staffordshire. We cannot however accept these numbers without reservations. We know that the Domesday enquiry did not set out to provide a census of town dwellers, and in the case of Gloucester and Winchcombe near contemporary surveys give much higher figures. (11) By analogy with other towns Stafford's street plan, with its axial High Street, now Greengate Street, is likely to have been laid out at an early date, and there was room along the streets for many more than 150 houses. The size of the settlement is suggested by the finds of pottery of the tenth and eleventh centuries (Stafford ware) at a number of sites on either side of the main street. Tamworth was in effect missed out of Domesday, and we are told only of the burgesses who happened to be connected with nearby villages. It would be hard to believe that this old centre, important enough to have a mint in the tenth century, was smaller than newly-grown Tutbury.

The estimate of the combined total of households of the three towns could be revised upward to 280, allowing that half of Tamworth's population belonged to Warwickshire, as the county boundary ran through the town. The resulting total of 1,400 people would represent about 9 per cent of the inhabitants of Staffordshire, which exceeds the figures for both Nottinghamshire and Warwickshire, though it would be a lower proportion than would be found in some eastern counties in 1086.(12) Critics of these speculative calculations might note that we know that Staffordshire's rural population was undercounted in Domesday, which would reduce the percentage of town dwellers, but the comparison with other counties remains valid, as country people were omitted over the whole of England. (13)

Tamworth is named in Domesday, but not described. Newcastle does not appear at all, and Dr Studd suggests that it was hidden in the strange double entry for Trentham.(14) Walsall is another candidate for early development as a town, as it does not appear in Domesday, yet it had an important church, and was already a borough before it received its first charter in the early thirteenth century.(15)

Burton-on-Trent, like two other midland monastic towns, Coventry and Peterborough, escaped mention in Domesday.(16) The place name of Burton

suggests a fortified place, perhaps set up by Mercian kings. The early church was upgraded to become a wealthy monastery in 1002, which would have acted as a gathering point for servants, traders and craftsmen. The early twelfth-century survey of the abbey's estates reveals a concentration at Burton of smallholders paying rents in cash, and tenants with occupational names, including a cook and a dyer, who could have been there for some time. Analysis of the town plan suggests that the second phase was laid out in c.1190 making it possible that the first phase began in the early twelfth century, or even before 1100. If Burton had not become a town by 1086, it was certainly growing soon after that date.(17)

In addition to the existing and emerging towns, trading places would have helped to fill the gaps. Markets or fairs are likely to have been held near minster churches, which served large parishes. At places such as Eccleshall, Gnosall, Hanbury, Penkridge, Tettenhall and Wolverhampton we can imagine the inhabitants of scattered hamlets and farmsteads gathering on Sundays for services, and trading in the churchyard afterwards. By no coincidence, both Eccleshall and Wolverhampton are known to have had Sunday markets in the twelfth century, which were probably continuing older trading arrangements. Penkridge's charter came in 1244, but it may still have been giving official recognition to a functioning commercial event.(18)

Facilities for exchange and trade were needed by the inhabitants of the thinly-populated Staffordshire countryside who in many cases lived by pastoral husbandry. They had surpluses of cheese, wool and livestock, and had access to building materials and fuel from the woodlands. In the earliest medieval centuries the people of the valleys fetched their own supplies of wood and timber, and drove their animals to remote grazing lands. As more people settled in the woods and pastures, their crafts and farming became more specialized, and they needed to buy grain. Markets and towns provided meeting points for people with different and complementary products.

A developing exchange economy in the tenth and eleventh centuries is implied by the distribution of the distinctive pottery made at Stafford, not just to

towns such as Worcester and Hereford, but also to rural settlements like Sandon in Staffordshire and Barton Blount in Derbyshire.(19) Cash was in use by the early twelfth century for paying rents by a wide range of tenants on the Burton estate, implying that agricultural produce was being sold, and the potential income of lords from rents and marketing is suggested by Domesday's valuations of manors – for example, 100 shillings per annum at King's Bromley, or 30 shillings at Madeley. (20)

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Tutbury and Burton represent the first of a series of new town creations, which began in the late eleventh century, and continued through the next two centuries (see Fig. 1). By 1300 about twenty had been founded by lords with extensive lands in the county: the bishops of Coventry and Lichfield, the Ferrers earls of Derby, barons like the Audleys, and some lesser aristocrats like the Rous family at Walsall. It was once argued that some of these places were 'new towns', while others experienced 'organic' growth. Now almost all towns can be seen to have benefited from some degree of planning, though it was sometimes piecemeal and less systematic than in the case of Lichfield.

This episode of borough foundation has been examined already by a number of historians.(21) The founders granted the inhabitants the privileges of burgage tenure, together with free access to a market and fair, and settlers were provided with streets and measured plots on which to build their houses. The lords aimed to profit directly from rents, tolls and court profits, and indirectly when their rural tenants gained access to markets. We are concerned here with urbanization, that is with the experiences of the tenants, not their lords. The borough was designed to provide a legal and tenurial framework within which a town could grow, and we must see if this result was achieved. Historians have tended to dismiss many of these borough foundations. Because Betley, Colton and Church Eaton are not important towns now, the assumption is made that they were failures from the beginning.

In fact the movement to found new towns in Staffordshire is remarkable for its successes. Lichfield and Newcastle were both mid-twelfth-century foundations,

or at least places where small settlements were transformed by laying out new streets. Both grew to equal the county town, Newcastle only temporarily, but Lichfield became the largest town in Staffordshire until modern times. Bishop Clinton gave Lichfield an ambitious, even an audacious plan, with a grid of streets on a rectilinear lay out which was designed to provide a fitting 'city' to be associated with a cathedral, but which also worked as a commercial centre. It was enhanced with a causeway at the western end of the Minster Pool in the early fourteenth century. The success of the town in attracting tenants can be demonstrated by the archaeological evidence for settlement in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, even on the fringes of the planned town. (22)

At Burton-on- Trent successive abbots laid out new streets through the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Five stages can be identified from the monastic records and the town plan itself, of which only the last failed to attract permanent settlers.(23) At its height in the early fourteenth century the town's population could have reached a thousand, similar to the much older town of Tamworth.(24) Wolverhampton, promoted by the dean of its large church, also probably attained a thousand inhabitants, and Walsall, which received two grants of privileges, and which judging from its plan grew in at least four phases, cannot have been far short of that total towards the end of the middle ages. (25)

The lords of these places and their officials must be given credit for their skilful choice of site, and their efforts in planning a new settlement. Even in the case of the failed borough of Alrewas, which must always have been a risky venture because it lay very near to Lichfield, Tamworth and Burton, the lords (the Somerville family) went to the trouble of providing a new street for the burgesses next to the existing village street.(26) Lords also gave encouragement to the townspeople by awarding them the privileges that encouraged settlers. The burgesses of Walsall, for example, achieved an unusual degree of self government, and in 1309 were allowed to vet new candidates for the tenancy of burgages. (27) The town founders often succeeded because the general economic climate favoured the growth of towns. In

the countryside land was being cleared and new tenants taking land. Lords were developing their estates, both their arable lands and their woodland resources. They received an increasing proportion of their rents in the form of cash, which was possible because tenants were selling produce. The many free holders paid quite low money rents, and the servile or customary peasants were not as heavily burdened as in other parts of the country, which meant that after paying their rent the better-off tenants had some cash to spend. Peasants made maximum use of pastures and woodland, and the small-holders, who were numerous, became involved in crafts that took advantage of the timber and fuel of the woods.(28)

Burton, Lichfield, Newcastle, Walsall and Wolverhampton can be regarded as success stories, in addition to the earlier foundations which flourished at Stafford and Tamworth. Tutbury, which was developing in 1086, grew in the twelfth century when the lord granted another 182 burgage holdings. Other towns in the county did not sink into obscurity in the same fashion as Alrewas. Betley seems to have made a good start, even if this was not sustained. In 1298 twenty-nine and a half burgages appear in a survey, which seems much smaller than the hundred or two hundred found in other boroughs. But there were also twenty-six messuages (houses) which did not have much land attached to any of them, so the number of households which are likely to have gained much of their living from non-agricultural activities exceeded fifty, and the surnames of the tenants suggest a range of occupations, from shoemaker to goldsmith, which were appropriate for a small town. (29)

Brewood had a long and consistent urban history. It has been underrated because the bishop of Coventry and Lichfield's survey of 1298 lists twenty-nine people holding a mere twenty-four and three-quarters burgages, which makes it look very small. This was, however, only part of the town. The dean of Lichfield Cathedral had a separate manor, with burgesses among the tenants. It was by no means unusual for a town to have more than one lord, and in a very similar situation in Wolverhampton the boundary between the church manor and the royal manor cut through the town centre. At Brewood, according to court rolls of the mid-fifteenth

century, the dean had at least twenty burgages, which are likely to date back to the thirteenth century. Perhaps when the borough was founded in the thirteenth century (this could have been in 1221, when the market charter was granted, and it had certainly occurred by 1280) the bishop and dean agreed to cooperate in the new venture, or perhaps one of them took the initiative and the other followed. Taking the two parts of the town together, it could well have contained fifty burgages, and the 1298 survey also records twenty cottages, a 'chamber' and a seld (stall, or row of shops), which suggests a population in excess of 250. The community achieved a critical mass sufficient to provide employment for a wide range of crafts, including a smith, dyer and shoemaker in 1298. The 1381 poll tax records nineteen separate non-agricultural occupations in Brewood, and the court rolls of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries leave us in no doubt of the special character of the settlement. The courts dealt with a concentration of brewers and food traders, as well as craftsmen who caused a nuisance by polluting the stream. Excavations on the edge of the town show that a timber and stone platform built near the stream was apparently being used for tanning and processing hemp. (30)

Eccleshall, a borough founded in the twelfth century, might be seen as mainly agricultural in its economy, because its burgesses are known to have cleared parcels of new land in the thirteenth century, and in 1298 they collectively rented a field from their lord, the bishop of Coventry and Lichfield.(31) Traders and craftsmen could easily work pieces of land part-time, or hold land as an investment or in order to sublet it for cash rents, and they continued to do this for centuries. The fields attached to Cambridge or Nottingham would not lead us to deny that these were quite important towns. Eccleshall, with nearly sixty burgages, appears to have been larger than either Brewood or Betley, and judging from the surnames deriving from occupations in the lay subsidy of 1327 (when the borough was taxed separately from the large rural area in which it lay), it had quite a developed economy, because in addition to the usual tanner, smith, glover and wheelwright, two tax payers took their name from the mercer's trade, and 'barber' appears also as a surname. Near to this

time, in 1321, the crown gave permission for funds to be collected for paving Eccleshall's streets, a privilege also granted to Lichfield, Newcastle, Stafford and Tamworth.⁽³²⁾ Therefore in terms both of its economy and its public works, Eccleshall had an urban character. It comes as no surprise to find that the town in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was full of artisans, especially clothmakers; the diversity of craft activity dated back two or three centuries.

Penkridge had less non-agricultural occupations than Brewood in the 1381 poll tax - eleven compared with nineteen - yet this suggests that it was a livelier centre of commercial life than the villages of its vicinity, most of which were credited with no more than four such occupations. When the royal household passed through the county in 1327-8, and the clerk of the market exercised his usual role of regulating the local traders, the brewers and bakers of Penkridge were fined the substantial sum of 26s.8d., the same as those of Uttoxeter, and more than those of Walsall (10s.) and Brewood (13s.4d.).⁽³³⁾ Church Eaton, which in its early days brought its lord some impressive sums of money, such as £7 in 1275, two centuries later in 1476 still served as a small-scale market centre for foodstuffs, judging from the enforcement of the various regulations on four brewers, two butchers, two fishmongers and a baker. Only four occupations are recorded in the 1381 poll tax, however.⁽³⁴⁾

Kinver was never a large place, with its twenty-two burgage tenants in 1293, and twenty-seven and a half burgages held by twenty-nine tenants in 1387, together with a forge and a few cottages.⁽³⁵⁾ The borough courts at Kinver in the fifteenth century dealt with numerous food and drink traders, in October 1423, for example, when nine brewers, eleven retailers of ale, a butcher and a baker were mentioned. The bakers were occasionally brought to court for breaking the assize of bread, which meant selling loaves of low weight, not just for the ordinary wheat loaves, but also for the more expensive speciality breads, *simnel* and *wastel*. A handful of craftsmen are also mentioned - a weaver, tailor and glover - and an accusation of stealing alum would be unusual in a rural settlement.⁽³⁶⁾ Tenants at Leek in the thirteenth century occupied more than eighty burgages, and courts in the

early fourteenth century, although they made no formal distinction between the borough and the surrounding countryside, dealt with tenants with surnames referring to twenty-one separate occupations.⁽³⁷⁾ Uttoxeter appears in the records of its lords in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries as a place with 138 burgage tenements, a quite busy food and drink trade, and a market place containing numerous shops and selds.⁽³⁸⁾

For some boroughs there is little sign of urbanization. They were planned as towns, and the tenants received the appropriate privileges, but there is no clear evidence of the occupational diversity which is such an essential sign of an urban way of life. If we remove from our list of potential towns Alrewas, Alton, Cheadle, Colton and Newborough, and regard Betley, Church Eaton and Penkridge as only temporarily urbanized, this still leaves fifteen boroughs which merit being called towns at some time between 1270 and 1525. In addition at least one town developed without the help of burgage tenure, at Rugeley. The lord, the bishop of Coventry and Lichfield, founded a market there in 1259, but apparently gave the place no other direct encouragement. Its uncoordinated plan, without much sign of coherent rows of plots, suggests that it grew up piecemeal.⁽³⁹⁾ In the fourteenth century Rugeley eclipsed the nearby borough of Colton, and in 1381 nineteen separate non-agricultural occupations were recorded there. In the next century the courts record the combination of numerous ale and food sellers, and the fractious and quarrelsome behaviour which tended to be a feature of town society.⁽⁴⁰⁾

The sixteen places in Staffordshire that can be identified as having functioned as towns at some time in the middle ages can be compared with the total of about ten towns each in Leicestershire and Northamptonshire, counties which are smaller in area, but were more densely populated. Another comparison is based on calculating the percentage of town dwellers in the total population of the county. This is a difficult exercise, because so many towns were assessed for tax purposes with their rural surroundings. At the time of the poll taxes (1377-81) Lichfield's total can be estimated at 2,100, and Burton, Newcastle, Stafford and Wolverhampton must

each have contained about 900. Walsall and Tutbury lay not far behind, with about 500 each. If we allow for an average of 300 in nine other places, the total of 9,400 represents 22 per cent of the population of the whole county. This is comparable with other west midland counties, but 7-8 per cent higher than in either Leicestershire or Northamptonshire.(41)

A further method of judging the sophistication of an urban system is to assess it as a network and a hierarchy. Staffordshire's network achieved a virtually complete coverage, so that by the late thirteenth century almost everyone in the countryside lived within six miles of a town, particularly if the towns in adjacent counties, such as Dudley in Worcestershire, Newport and Market Drayton in Shropshire, Congleton in Cheshire and Ashbourne in Derbyshire are taken into account (see Fig.1). The only rural areas that were not covered were thinly populated parts of the northern uplands and the centre of Cannock Chase. Even these remote places could have been served by markets and fairs which were not located in boroughs or towns, for which charters were granted at more than twenty places between 1220 and 1355. In the south-east the towns crowded one another, with Wolverhampton and Walsall sited near to Birmingham, Dudley and Halesowen, later to be joined by Stourbridge. In this matter of urbanization the different characteristics of the northern and southern ends of the county were well established by the thirteenth century. (42)

While the towns of Staffordshire cast their commercial net over the county, it cannot be said that they formed a very developed hierarchy. (see Fig. 2) They were mostly small, and the ranking order was constantly shifting. Stafford's original position as the largest town was challenged in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries by Newcastle, and then by Lichfield. Burton rose in the thirteenth century, and Wolverhampton and Walsall had apparently increased in size by the early sixteenth century. Lichfield from the fourteenth century functioned as a 'higher order' centre, providing specialist services and goods, containing a range of institutions such as hospitals and a friary as well as the cathedral, and attracting the local gentry as

visitors. In the whole of England it ranked thirty-ninth in 1377 and thirty-fifth in 1524-5. (43) For really large-scale merchants and the facilities of a great city, Staffordshire looked to Coventry, and to a lesser extent to Chester, which together with Bristol connected the county to the sea. The wealthier Staffordshire landowners, such as the bishops, the larger religious houses, and the superior gentry, bought luxury goods in London. The small towns satisfied the modest requirements of those who lived nearby. They were also needed by large cities such as Coventry and London for the distribution of goods such as spices or dyestuffs, and as points of collection for the food and raw materials that they consumed, manufactured or traded. The small towns therefore played a subordinate role. The rural markets, such as those founded at Cannock, Longnor and Yoxall, also occupied a lowly position in the commercial system, and we do not always know if they were the scenes of much buying and selling.

To sum up, Staffordshire's early phases of town growth were not episodes of failure, but of modest success. By the fourteenth century the county had more towns, and a higher proportion of townspeople, than nearby counties which are often thought to have been more commercially advanced. While the Staffordshire countryside had ample provision of market towns, they did not form a very well defined hierarchy, and were inferior to large towns outside the county.

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The growth of towns changed the lives of everyone, but especially those who moved into them. The remainder of this lecture will attempt to recapture the experiences of the individuals involved, and to make some assessment of the consequences of urbanization.

The flow of migrants into towns can be traced in the period when surnames were being formed in the thirteenth century. A locative name like William de Elford, which is recorded at Tamworth in 1295, shows that the bearer of the name, or his father, had moved from the village 4 miles to the north of the town. When all of the Tamworth names for the period 1284 - 1310 are mapped (Fig. 3) the bulk of the

immigrants can be seen to have come from villages and hamlets within 10 miles of the town. Those who travelled further afield sometimes had lived in other towns, such as Burton, Lichfield, Walsall, Birmingham and Market Bosworth. Similarly the names recorded in the Burton rental of 1319 suggest that most townspeople (or their immediate forbears) originated in villages within 12 miles, on both sides of the Trent, but they also include Derby and Coventry.(44)

This evidence conflates a number of different patterns of movement. Some migrants were poor, often young people, who were driven to move by limited opportunities in the countryside. Some were vagrants, beggars and casual workers. Many of the better-off migrants whose names are recorded in tax lists or rentals had served as apprentices, or had invested in urban property and businesses after accumulating capital as rural landholders. Some even moved into Staffordshire towns after living in such large places as Leicester and Coventry.

The urban population was constantly renewed by fresh migration, which was still essential after the wave of new town foundations had ceased, and the onset of plague and economic problems after the Black Death of 1349 threatened to reduce the size of both rural and urban settlements. Lists of serfs who had left the manor of Patteringham in 1372 and 1390 show that in addition to destinations in nearby villages, they were going to Wolverhampton, Eccleshall, Bridgnorth and Kidderminster. (45)

Towns brought people together from varied backgrounds. In a place on a frontier like Tutbury, newcomers and visitors from the scattered hamlets of the woodland and pastures of Needwood Chase mingled with those originating in the corn-growing nucleated villages of Derbyshire across the Dove.(46) In all towns there would be old established families, or those who had moved from another town, together with new arrivals from a peasant background. The most recognizable group from further afield were the Welsh, who appear everywhere but caused particular resentment at Tamworth : in 1347 an order was made in the borough court that no-one should receive Welshmen.(47) They were perhaps perceived to be a problem because

the town lay so close to Watling Street, one of the main routes from Wales into central England.

Antipathy towards migrants generally was expressed most forcibly at Tamworth. The authorities punished townspeople for receiving strangers: they ordered a woman and her son to leave in 1303 'because they are not worthy to live within the liberty', and when William de Billeye was grudgingly accepted as a resident in the same year he was forced to swear an oath that he would accept expulsion 'if he is a rebel'.(48) Other towns collected substantial sums of money from those wishing to enjoy full privileges of membership of the community : 2s., 3s.4d. or 6s.8d. at Walsall and often between 6s.8d. and 20s. at Newcastle.(49) Attitudes to immigration were typically ambiguous. On the one hand towns discouraged those who might cause disorder, or who could compete with the established traders. On the other hand they needed labour, especially after the Black Death. Even the hostility to the Welsh did not prevent them settling, as can be glimpsed from the scatter of names such as Pugh and Jones in Staffordshire towns, and the number of tax payers called Walshmon in Lichfield in 1381. (50)

The availability of work attracted the immigrants, and even small towns contained people pursuing twenty occupations. These were mainly to provide nearby country dwellers, and the other townspeople, with basic and everyday goods and services. So the occupational surnames at Tutbury in the early fourteenth century reflect the town's prime function to supply mundane products : baker, barker (tanner), brewster, chandler (candlemaker), dauber, fisher, glover, pelterer, potter, shearman, shoemaker, smith, tailor, tinker and wright (carpenter). In addition a goldsmith and orfrever (jeweller) served a wealthier clientele.(51) In choosing to identify someone with an occupational surname, or when officials described people by their trade, a complex reality was being simplified. Individuals might have more than one source of income, from holding land, for example, as well as from their craft. Members of the same household would have different trades: an artisan's wife would often brew and sell ale.(52) Few traders were called 'cornmongers' yet many people dealt in

grain, whilst another sideline is revealed in 1366-7 when a Walsall man treated a sick horse.(53) At Lichfield excavations reveal bone working, a necessary contribution to knife manufacture which is not usually mentioned in written sources. At Brewood a timber and stone platform of the thirteenth century remained in industrial use for another two centuries. Finds of scraps of leather and bark can be linked to documents referring to tanning in the town, but residues from the retting of hemp reveal an otherwise unrecorded process.(54)

The food trades figured prominently among urban occupations. At Brewood eleven brewers, eight butchers, nine fishmongers, and five transters who sold 'bread, oats and other victuals' were all fined at a single court session in 1401 for infringing the regulations. Ostlers and cooks appear in such lists in other towns.(55) Most towns would also contain building workers, makers of cloth and clothing, leather processors, and those who worked in metal. In larger towns more specialized and luxury products were made and traded. Bell founders and vintners were to be found in Lichfield, the largest town in the county. When the church wardens of Walsall in 1465 were having the church clock repaired, they brought in a lockier, a craftsman experienced in dealing with intricate mechanisms, presumably from their own town. When they felt the need eight years later for the specialist services of a clock maker they had to import one from Lichfield.(56) In a court session in Lichfield in 1413 goods were mentioned because they were subject to disputes, or had been stolen, or seized in distraint. They reflect both mundane activities, and the specialized and sometimes luxurious nature of some of Lichfield's trades and crafts: 6 dozen bow strings; woad; hose; a sack and a stool; a sword belt; 42 squirrel skins and 4 yards of blanket.(57) In a rather lower key the Brewood records mention in similar circumstances agricultural products, foodstuffs and some ordinary manufactured goods: oats, barley, herring, 10 yards of woollen cloth, sheets, a bedspread and a pair of combs (for preparing wool for spinning).(58)

An incomplete record of occupations in the county's towns is contained within the plea rolls of the royal courts after the Statute of Additions in 1413 required

those involved in legal processes to be identified by their 'estate, mystery or degree'. The occupation ('mystery') of artisans and traders was henceforth recorded, and those associated with eighteen towns and boroughs between 1414 and 1485 are given in Fig. 4.(59) The legal records are unsystematic: some crafts were mentioned more often because they were more prone to disorder and dispute than others, and some towns appear more frequently in court proceedings. Nonetheless, any information about occupations is valuable in a period when evidence is scarce. It suggests a hierarchy headed by Lichfield with 35 occupations, followed by Wolverhampton with 27, Walsall (16), Stafford (13), and Newcastle (11). The next four towns have 7 each. The most frequently mentioned occupation was that of the tailors, whose skills were much in demand from a wide spectrum of society at this time (the age of the doublet) when making clothes required considerable time and skill. Butchers were mentioned in association with ten towns, indicative perhaps of the county's pastoral economy, and the high level of meat consumption in the period after 1349.(60) After these the most frequently mentioned crafts included cloth makers, those trading in cloth and leather, and smiths, carpenters and bakers. Some Staffordshire crafts used woodland resources, notably the makers of bows and arrows (bowyers, fletchers and arrowsmiths), and glassmakers. The dealers in luxury food and drink, spicers and vintners, are recorded only in Lichfield. Most of the drapers and mercers, who would have tended to handle cloth in some quantity, and sometimes from distant sources, are found in the first five towns in the hierarchy. A shop in Lichfield in 1424 contained a range of stock demonstrating that in the county's largest town goods of high value and in some quantity were offered to sale, including 100 yards of linen cloth, 20 yards of fustian, 6 lbs of pepper, 6lbs of cummin, 4 lbs of ginger, and 6 gross of belts and straps.(61)

The analysis of occupations given so far is as expected. Everywhere the number of crafts and trades varied with the size of the town, and the merchants and dealers in luxuries were concentrated in the larger places. As none of Staffordshire's towns were really large, there were few important merchants. Staffordshire's towns

offer an unusual feature – a degree of specialization. Most small towns provided the customers in their immediate locality with the opportunity to buy all of their regular requirements, but a few developed a special product which enabled them to trade over a much larger area than the 40 square miles of the average hinterland.

At Walsall limestone, some of it quarried near to the town centre, was burnt for lime, using coal mined nearby. The combination of limestone and coal was not unique to Walsall, but its traders had developed their reputation in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, supplying places 20 miles distant in north Warwickshire and Worcestershire.(62) Walsall, however, was most widely celebrated for its lorimers, who made horse bits and other iron work associated with horse harness. They appear frequently in the town after 1400, and by 1542 their products were carried to Bristol and Exeter; in the fifteenth century this long distance trade explains their dealings with people from Bristol and Chester. (63) Rugeley specialized in knife manufacture, with eleven cutlers named in the 1381 poll tax.(64) Glass was made near Rugeley in the fifteenth century, and in the vicinity of Abbot's Bromley glassmen or glassmakers are recorded from 1289. The towns may have played a part in distributing the finished product. Staffordshire glass was used in 1349 in St Stephen's chapel in the palace of Westminster, and in the fifteenth century at Tattershall in Lincolnshire and in York minster. (65) The mining of alabaster in the east of the county gave the local towns the opportunity to manufacture the images and effigies which were in wide demand both in England and abroad. Burton had become a centre by at least the late fourteenth century, and a workshop at Tutbury is suggested by a reference to a painter there in 1456.(66) Burton's beer brewing may have begun in the late fifteenth century. Cloth manufacture was clearly highly developed in Wolverhampton in the fifteenth century, and Lichfield kerseys were being traded to Lancashire in the early sixteenth century. (67)

The importance of these specialisms lay in their ability to generate employment, and Staffordshire was therefore able to support more towns, and towns above the minimum size, than its rather thinly spread and not very wealthy rural

population would justify. In this respect it can be compared with a county such as Devon, which boasted an even greater number of towns, partly because it produced tin, fish, cattle, roofing slates and cloth which were consumed beyond the county's boundaries.

Every town depended primarily on buying and selling within its hinterland. The contacts between towns and people in the surrounding countryside are revealed when a debt was unpaid and resulted in legal action. So in 1375 Walter Heuster of Tutbury admitted owing money to John Diaper from Barton-under-Needwood, perhaps as the result of a sale, or loan, or of an employment contract or partnership.(68) Although none of the Staffordshire towns have sufficiently numerous records of debt to enable a hinterland to be fully reconstructed, the recruitment of migrants into Tamworth (fig.3) and of fraternity members at Walsall (fig.5) suggest a pattern of local connections which probably coincided with those towns' trading areas. We can envisage the whole county divided into 'spheres of influence', of irregular shape, overlapping, and of varied size, but with an inner core with an average radius of 6 or 7 miles.

Townspeople were also drawn into interregional or longer distance trading connections. Many towns stood on the frontiers of *pays*, that is districts with distinctive landscapes and agrarian systems. So a number of Staffordshire towns, such as Wolverhampton, Walsall, Lichfield, and Tutbury, were sited near the edge of extensive woodlands. The inhabitants would export their timber, charcoal, ropes and other products through the towns' markets, and buy grain, especially wheat. Northern towns, notably Leek, presumably performed a similar function for the moorlands.

There were many links between towns within Staffordshire. John Chapman from Uttoxeter owed attendance at Tutbury court in 1338; a Leek man held land in Uttoxeter in 1413; Newcastle attracted a Stafford trader to sell wool in 1280; John Yate sued his 'leech' (doctor) of Rugeley in 1430, after he had broken his arm in an accident at Walsall; and in 1304 a Lichfield townsman held property in Tamworth.(69) The Staffordshire townspeople could supply their customers with the

range of goods that they demanded only by bringing them into the county from a distance. Walsall received grain from south Warwickshire in 1401. Fishmongers from Lichfield, Rugeley, Stafford, Stone, Walsall and Wolverhampton obtained sea fish from Chester in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. A debt of £6 12s. 0d. owed by a Tutbury chapman to a London grocer in 1424 was likely to be the result of a purchase of a substantial quantity of imported goods, such as spices or dyestuffs. A shoemaker from Burton owed money to a Nottingham man, perhaps for leather bought from him, and a Newcastle dealer bought five horses at Macclesfield fair in 1416. (70) Staffordshire, as we have seen, sent its lime, horse bits, carved alabaster, knives, cloth and glass out of the county. In the special circumstances of the famine of 1438 malt went from Tamworth to Nottingham. We suspect from the scale of the cattle trade, and the references to drovers, that beasts were being sold to the butchers in towns further south in the midlands or even in London. Fairs attracted more distant customers. The Lichfield Ash Wednesday fair gave wealthier consumers an opportunity to stock up with fish for Lent, and it was patronized by Halesowen Abbey in 1367 and the Duke of Buckingham (whose household stayed at Maxstoke in north Warwickshire) in 1453. (71)

The urban way of life depended on travel by people and the transport of goods for both short and long distances. Our towns depended on roads, though bulky goods were carried by river where possible, like the barrels of wine which were brought up the Severn as far as Bridgnorth or Shrewsbury. Bridges, like those at Burton, Tamworth, Stone and Tutbury, helped to focus traffic on these market centres. Occasionally we glimpse the long journeys that were made out of the county, like the Lichfield tailor who was said in 1474 to have ridden to Chester, or the Stafford yeoman who borrowed a horse in 1458 to go to Bristol and back. In both cases we know of the journeys because the owners of the horses claimed that the animals had been ill treated and had lost value. (72) Thoroughfare towns lay astride major roads, providing accommodation in inns, and food for carters and their horses. Lichfield, where four important roads met according to the Gough map (drawn in the

1360s), no less than eight inns are recorded in the 1490s. At least three ostlers were living in 1401-2 in Wolverhampton.(73)

Once visitors entered a medieval town, they would have been impressed by the number of structures and houses packed into a small space. In Staffordshire the towns would have stood out because most rural settlements were small hamlets and scattered farms. The concentration of buildings partly reflected the needs of traders to gain direct access to the market places and main streets where the customers would be congregated. The original town plans assigned to each tenant plots of a quarter or half acre, with a street frontage which could be as wide as 66 feet (4 perches) in part of Burton.(74) In the more successful towns, especially on the busier streets, plots were subdivided into halves, thirds and quarters. This went to extremes in Walsall, where some plots were divided into fifths, tenths and even twelfths, which implied narrow strips of land only 5 or 6 feet wide, giving room only for a small shop on the street.(75) The market places were filled by shops, stalls, selds (rows of stalls or booths) and other retail premises. A vivid picture of the struggle for space in the market place at Uttoxeter emerges from transfers of land in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Here among the selds, shops, a 'drapery' where cloth was sold, and a common oven, transfers of strips of land as small as 2 ¼ yards by 5 yards suggest readjustment of boundaries as tenants jockeyed for the best selling pitch.(76)

Property values reflected the profits that could be made from urban land. When lords founded boroughs they typically charged a rent of 12d. for a quarter acre plot, three or four times greater than the value of the plot had it been rented for agricultural use. After the growth of the town the burgage tenant still paid the fixed rent of 12d. to the lord, but he could rent the plot out for a much higher sum, such as the 8s. per annum charged for a house at Walsall in the early sixteenth century. The best returns came from the market places. A plot for a stall 12 feet by 12 feet in Brewood, near the 'great cross' and therefore at the centre of the market, was rented for 12d. annually in 1340, the same amount of money as would have been paid for 2

acres of arable land. In Tutbury in 1322 three 'windows' in the building 'where flour was sold' were each rented for 12d. (77)

Surviving medieval houses in Staffordshire towns, and the excavated remains of others, show how styles of building were adapted to restricted space and the needs of those pursuing crafts and trades. An open hall at Brewood of about 1350, now known as 'The Old Smithy', which was built parallel to the street, reflects the relatively unpressured space of a small market town. In Horninglow Street in Burton, on the other hand, and also Churchfields House at Abbot's Bromley, and 17-21, Greenhill in Lichfield open halls were combined with two-storey chamber blocks and jettied upper floors reflecting the economical use of space in an urban environment. The good quality timbers and elaborate carpentry of the roofs of the surviving buildings suggest the wealth of those for whom these houses were built in the late fourteenth century and later.(78)

No public buildings of the middle ages survive in Staffordshire towns, though we know that a number of guildhalls were built, and we hear of a 'hall of pleas' (court house) at both Tutbury and Uttoxeter. The large and impressive churches with substantial amounts of medieval masonry standing in the towns today reflect in some cases their origins as minsters or royal chapels, to which extensive rural parishes were attached. Nonetheless civic pride and urban wealth made some contribution to their rebuilding, and we can note that nine of the churches still bear traces of substantial renewal of fabric in the thirteenth century, at the same time that the towns were growing. (79)

The congestion of people and buildings in a successful medieval town brought environmental hazards. Streets were partly blocked with heaps of wood and dunghills. The 'dunghill at the well' in Tutbury in 1416 was recognized as a nuisance, as was pollution of the stream at Brewood with tanners' and butchers' wastes in 1424. At Tamworth in 1294 the makers of 'tripes' washed entrails in the river, and in 1303 they were said to have dumped filth at the doors of their houses 'to the abomination of passers by'.(80) The combination of domestic hearths and industrial kilns and

furnaces must have made the air unbreathable at times – one thinks of fifteenth-century Walsall with its combined specialisms of lime burning and iron working, both using coal. Towns with closely packed timber buildings, some with thatched roofs, were devastated by fires, as at Burton in 1254, Stone in 1264, Lichfield in 1291, Leek in 1297, and Tamworth in 1345.(81)

Townpeople were aware of the discomfort and danger of the environment that they had created, and made efforts to control their problems. Bye-laws against pollution were followed up with fines, though they must have been effective only in reducing rather than eliminating the nuisances, judging from the constant repetition of the regulations. More positive measures included gaining access at Lichfield to the piped water supply originally constructed for the cathedral close. (82)

Did the people who lived in towns inhabit a distinct mental and social world ? Earlier generations of historians advocated that view, and with some justice. They could point to the special status of towns, with burgage tenure which guaranteed freedom from the burdens associated with servile peasants. Towns also enjoyed separate government, which enabled Newcastle and Stafford to become islands of independent rule under the crown, with councils, financial control, and their own courts. The burgesses of Walsall achieved similar independence under their lords.(83) It could also be said that the participation of many people in ruling towns marked major differences from the hereditary privileges and private powers of feudal society. The guilds and fraternities that grew up in many towns, like the merchant guild in Newcastle and the fraternities in a number of other places, notably Lichfield and Walsall, were associations of equals, in which brotherly love and mutual self help were the guiding principles. These contrasted with the vertical ties characteristic of feudal relationships.

Towns are sometimes said to have been subversive, rebellious and violent societies, which threatened the feudal order. They fought against aristocratic privileges, and defended their own liberties. In support of this idea, there was a

dispute over Lichfield market tolls with the bishop in 1338, and two Walsall men who were quarrelling in 1525 with Robert Acton over tenancy and accusations of trespass in the park boasted that they could raise an army in the town, who they called 'Bayard and his colts'.⁽⁸⁴⁾ Some burgesses had cause to resent the limited freedom that they enjoyed. At Brewood, Kinver, Tutbury and Uttoxeter burgage plots were transferred in the lord's court by surrender for the use of the succeeding tenant, just like customary holdings, and nominal heriots and entry fines were being paid. Burton Abbey, a particularly conservative lord, is recorded in the thirteenth century expelling a tenant who had misbehaved. Tenants negotiated for concessions, just like peasants dealing with a manorial lord – in 1406 the Tutbury brewers alleged that they did not have to pay amercements (fines) for breaking the assize of ale over the Christmas period, and later sought a similar relaxation during the time of the town's fair.⁽⁸⁵⁾

It would be difficult to argue that towns were at constant loggerheads with the established order, whether in Staffordshire or in other parts of the country. The self-governing boroughs were mainly concerned with their internal affairs, and with defending their interests against rival towns, as when Stafford people objected to the trade monopoly in cloth claimed by the guild merchant of Newcastle.⁽⁸⁶⁾ Most of the towns in Staffordshire, as in the rest of England, were seigniorial boroughs, the lords of which attempted to avoid antagonizing their tenants by involving them in the government of their own towns as bailiffs, jurors and ale tasters in the government of their own towns. Moreover townspeople displayed deference towards the aristocracy when the fraternities of Lichfield and Walsall welcomed aristocratic members.⁽⁸⁷⁾ The affinities of the local gentry included urban recruits ; in 1413 an investigation showed that Hugh Erdeswick, William Newport, Thomas Stanley, Edmund Ferrers of Chartley and others were giving liveries to Lichfield men.⁽⁸⁸⁾ The tone of urban government was scarcely egalitarian, with its emphasis on oligarchy, as represented at Newcastle by the council of twenty-four. The restrictions on those entering into full membership of the civic community in such towns as Newcastle and Walsall suggest elites anxious to keep privileges for themselves.

We can see the townspeople ingeniously developing institutions which served as shadow, alternative administrations. For example at Lichfield the fraternity which was established in 1387, basing itself on earlier associations of townspeople, gradually took on the management of the town, setting up its own courts, and at the Reformation it was secularized to become the governing corporation. (89) Everyday initiatives by townspeople ensured the unity of communities that were divided between two lords – at Brewood and Wolverhampton, for example. Even if they paid rents to different lords, the townspeople attended the same church, and contributed to common facilities and obligations. This is true of the community of Tamworth, which though divided by a county as well as a manorial boundary, had a sense of common purpose.(90)

A town's inhabitants had to live together in a confined space, and it was in their interests to work for the common good. Their commerce required a degree of mutual trust. In 1338 at Tamworth John de Cosseby complained that when he was defamed by John de Yarkedich he 'lost credit', a reference to the normal procedure in trade that payments for goods could be delayed – a trader who gained a reputation for failing to honour his debts would lose his livelihood. (91) The other side of urban relationships is reflected in the pleas of debt and trespass, and the records of bloodshed, rescues of distrained goods, and the raising of the hue and cry, in greater number than is found in adjacent rural communities. For example at Brewood in 1341 seven accusations of assault resulting in the shedding of blood, and four cases of hue and cry, were reported in one court session, which seems a large number for a community of about 300 people. We can sometimes savour the bad language, insults and malicious gossip, such as the accusation in 1304 that Henry son of Gilbert le Chapman at Tamworth blasphemed against Robert de Rothwell in the market place and called him a robber, a ribald 'and other enormities'. Gilbert was accusing Robert of not paying his rent, and chose the most public place to expose the debtor. At Tutbury in 1424 a bye law stated that 'no-one may invent dishonest stories, nor scandalize their neighbours', which must have been difficult to enforce.(92) The

quarrelsome and disputatious character of the town must be related to crowded space, the need to keep a good name, the precariousness of commerce, and the complex web of credit.

Urban culture could be coarse and brutal. The regular practice of bull-baiting was elaborated at Tutbury into an annual ceremony, and by the late fourteenth century a group calling themselves minstrels held a court, chased a bull round the town, captured it, baited it with dogs and killed it. In the late eighteenth century (when it was discontinued) the ritual was said to be accompanied by ruffianly and drunken behaviour. In earlier centuries the behaviour was no doubt just as uncouth, but was tolerated by those in authority.(93)

A more refined civic culture is apparent in the efforts by the town authorities to control disorder and promote morality. The fraternities encouraged peace and harmony. The borough courts prohibited unlawful games, and ordered people to be at home by nine in winter, or by ten in summer. The respectable leaders of Lichfield society waged unsuccessful campaigns against prostitution. Attempts were made to protect consumers from rotten meat, putrid fish and excessively high prices. A puritanical tone is apparent in public life, like the regulation that persistent adulterers should be removed from membership of the Lichfield fraternity.(94)

Town life gave women scope to play a role in many spheres. Widows took over their husbands' houses, and sometimes their businesses. One in seven of the tenants in Burton in 1319 were women. As wives as well as widows, and occasionally as single women before marriage, they ran their own businesses as brewers and sellers of ale. After 1349, the shortage of labour helped to make women more independent. Women paid to gain the liberty of Newcastle in the late fourteenth century, presumably in order to trade, and at Lichfield and Walsall they joined fraternities, not just as wives, but in their own right.(95) Many of them no doubt traded successfully, though we tend to hear only about those who encountered difficulties. In 1468 Amice Bowghey (a widow) was trading as a fishmonger in Stafford and owed the substantial sum of £9 6s. 8d. Anne Mitton, who as a femme sole was held responsible

for her own debts, in 1467 bought forty-two oxen at Walsall for which she made a down payment of £4 13s. 4d., but then failed to hand over the remaining £28 13s. 4d. This was no petty transaction, and suggests that she was pursuing a business as a stock dealer on an ambitious scale.(96)

Towns provided the offspring of the better-off inhabitants with the opportunity of an education. Schools were founded, not just in the centres with collegiate churches and monasteries, such as Lichfield, Burton, Stafford, Tamworth and Wolverhampton, but also in Newcastle and Rugeley where chantry priests apparently set up schools. Laymen presumably acquired some literacy in these establishments, and the more committed pupils who attracted the right patronage went on to careers in the church.(97) Towns were channels for social mobility, where laymen acquired skills through apprenticeship and experience. The most ambitious would move to larger towns which offered better opportunities, like Richard de Walsall, a wealthy Coventry merchant active at the beginning of the fourteenth century.(98)

* * *

Finally, what was the influence of towns on their rural surroundings ? Town and country were not divorced from one another. Many townspeople held agricultural land, and kept animals. The late fourteenth-century courts in Stafford heard a number of pleas showing that townspeople had agricultural interests - they quarrelled over such matters as animals destroying crops - but craftsmen and traders were clearly combining urban occupations with agriculture, as when a tailor was accused of obstructing the street with his dunghill.(99) Many townspeople had come recently from the countryside, and no doubt kept in touch with their families. And of course the urban economy was based on the trade in agricultural produce and the supply of goods and services to the rural population.

The impact of the town on the countryside is demonstrated by archaeological work at Stone. An excavation near the town centre revealed that in the twelfth century, before urban growth, aquatic flora and fauna had flourished in a

stream and on its banks – remains of sedge, and pond weed were found, with the wing cases of water beetles. After the town had developed, this limited and homogeneous environment was transformed. Now the fauna included beetles that lived in houses, and weevils from granaries. The deposits left by the town dwellers contained fragments of vegetation from corn fields (both cereal plants and the weeds that grew on arable land), grassland, woods and heaths (bracken). Urban activity created a demand for the products of many habitats, and grain, hay, firewood, building timber, wild fruits and bracken for litter were carried in to satisfy the needs of the town's population, and for trade with other places. The town gathered and coordinated the complementary resources of the surrounding countryside.(100)

Urban demand encouraged rural specialization. The duke of Buckingham's manor just outside Stafford in 1437-8 grew a very large acreage of barley, presumably destined for urban brewing, and at Elford, between Burton and Tamworth, a great quantity of peas were grown in 1355-6, which were used to fatten pigs for sale.(101) On a smaller scale elsewhere, hemp and flax were grown as industrial crops, and horticulture flourished on the outskirts of towns – Wolverhampton was apparently ringed with gardens and fruit trees in the fifteenth century.(102) As Staffordshire sat strategically on the droving roads, local graziers were able to buy young animals, fatten them, and sell them at a good profit. Grazing on the edge of Walsall, for example, in 1388-9 were fifty-five bullocks which had been bought for 8s.10d. each, and then sold within the year for 10s. (103)

Country people looked to towns as a source of goods, such as clothing, shoes and iron ware. They also bought grain and food, as the town had an important role as a point of exchange between rural producers and consumers.(104) In addition towns meant much to them as centres of religious and social life. We cannot easily disentangle the web of motives that led people to join a fraternity like that at Walsall. They wanted the spiritual benefits of the masses celebrated by the guild priests; they derived satisfaction from the ceremonies and religious services that brothers and sisters attended; they gained social status as the entry fine ensured its exclusive

reputation; and at gatherings they could make business deals and form partnerships with other members. The map of places from which members were recruited shows that its influence was most intense within a radius of 5 miles, in villages like Bloxwich, Shenstone and Barr (see Fig. 5). Members joined from further afield, such as Coventry, and from places along the roads to the west, into Shropshire; one couple came from Caernarfon. (105)

Historians talk of the decline of towns in the period after the Black Death of 1349, and especially in the fifteenth century. In Staffordshire houses and plots of land in towns lacked tenants, like the eight and a half burgages lying 'in the lord's hand' at Tutbury in 1423. Buildings fell down - shops at Uttoxeter needed repair in 1423 - and holdings of land were amalgamated, like the plot containing seven and a half previously separate burgages held by a single tenant at Uttoxeter in 1471. In 1472-3 buildings on a burgage tenement at Eccleshall were repaired at the lord's expense. As building costs were normally met by the tenant, this suggests that the lord was taking unusual measures in difficult circumstances. (106)

At this time the population of the countryside generally declined, so the towns' relative position did not change very much. The rural markets had virtually ceased to function by the sixteenth century, leaving trade focussed on the towns.(107) The smaller number of potential customers in the countryside, and the reduction in overall rural production, should have cut the quantity of goods entering the urban markets and shops by 50 per cent. The survivors of the Black Death, however, and especially their descendants who adapted to an underpopulated countryside in the fifteenth century, as individuals were enjoying greater prosperity. The peasants held larger acreages, and they switched from arable to pasture in order to profit from better prices and reduced labour costs. Unskilled wage earners were being paid 4d. per day instead of 1d.-2d. before the Black Death. These country people could afford better food, and especially quantities of meat, which helps to explain the large numbers of fifteenth-century butchers. They replaced their clothes more often, which was good news for the clothmakers of Lichfield and Wolverhampton, and the tailors in every

town. More of them owned horses, on which wage workers travelled from job to job, and which peasants used in their farming, so the lorimers of Walsall were supported by a growing level of demand. One sign of rural prosperity was the rebuilding and embellishing of parish churches, which meant that churchwardens were buying more window glass and carved alabaster, two Staffordshire industries.(108)

Some Staffordshire towns show little sign of serious decline, and Walsall and Wolverhampton may have increased in size between the fourteenth and the sixteenth centuries. Nine urban churches were rebuilt or were given major alterations in the period of the perpendicular style (from c.1380 until the Reformation), ranging from Wolverhampton's nave to new towers, clerestoreys, and other expensive embellishments elsewhere.

It could be said that while a significant minority of Staffordshire people were living in towns before 1350, and while most towns were not ruined by the subsequent recession, this does not represent real continuity between the middle ages and the present day, because modern urbanization came to two former rural districts, the Potteries and the Black Country. There is indeed a marked contrast between the situation in Staffordshire and that in Suffolk or Leicestershire, where the modern towns are essentially the same as those in the fourteenth century. However, the rural industrialization of Staffordshire was a medieval phenomenon. Many industries depended on raw materials such as timber, iron ore and clay, and they needed fuel – wood, charcoal and mineral coal. It made sense to base extraction and manufacture in the country where these bulky products were close at hand. Labour was also available, for example among peasants whose pastoral farming did not keep them fully occupied. So in the late fourteenth century near Walsall bloomeries produced iron, and when the lord's officials bought wooden shingles they went to Bloxwich, and ceramic roof tiles came from Darlaston. The fifteenth-century royal court records tell us about smiths, nailers and other iron workers in places such as Codsall, Tettenhall, Willenhall and West Bromwich. There were also artisans and traders who did not depend on the local raw materials, such as tailors and butchers.

Nor were rural crafts confined to the south of the county, as pottery manufacture is known on at least three sites near Burslem in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.(109) The spread of industrial and commercial activities in the country was far advanced by the early sixteenth century, and they should not be seen as rivalling the towns, but often complemented the urban economy. The Walsall lorimers, for example, created a demand for iron and coal from country forges and mines, and through their commercial expertise and access to a distribution network they sold their products throughout the country, to the benefit of both the town and its rural suppliers.

So even the modern phase of industrialization had medieval roots and links with old established towns. Staffordshire's urban past need not be the cause for apology or denigration. Its towns have a long and mature ancestry.

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