

**Edward Miller, John Hatcher.** *Medieval England: Towns, Commerce and Crafts, 1086-1348*. London and New York: Longman, 1995. xvii + 469 pp. \$85.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-582-48548-8.



**Reviewed by** Derek Keene

**Published on** H-Albion (February, 1997)

This substantial volume complements the same authors' *Medieval England: Rural Society and Economic Change, 1086-1348*, published in 1978. Like its companion, it is characterised by the rehearsal of an impressive quantity of detailed evidence, accuracy (in this case literal accuracy certainly, if not always accuracy of interpretation), and a coherent organisation of its material. It is an excellent and straightforward introduction to the established theme of 'towns and trade,' although one which reflects the preoccupations, and sometimes even the factual base, of the 1970s when the volume must originally have been planned. To an extent, therefore, it is a prisoner of an ancient scheme. Adjustments have been made in response to more recent thinking (about general economic and rural rather than urban affairs), but their implications have not always been carried through. Indeed, much of the text appears to have been written in the early to mid-1980s, and while some works published later are cited, they tend to be of a general survey character (one or two of them unsatisfactory). One may detect two minds and styles operating at slightly different times in this composition, which probably ex-

plains at least some of the startling bibliographical omissions or oversights, including major works[1] as well as many significant articles.

The book is one in the textbook series *A Social and Economic History of England*, edited (but no longer introduced) by Asa Briggs. Many interesting individuals and incidents are described, some indication of urban social structures is given, and much attention is devoted to municipal development, but this is essentially an economic rather than a social history--certainly as the latter is now most commonly understood. Moreover, it is an economic history of the distinctively pragmatic and common-sense type familiar to English medieval studies. While numbers are often cited, a proper scepticism as to what one might deduce from them is frequently expressed. 'Transaction costs' are mentioned once, somewhat apologetically. Few if any models are deployed. In this reviewer's opinion, the last omission is a fault, for a little judicious modelling might have been preferable to a detailed citation, as a way of defining some of the limits of our present knowledge. And, it would have made aspects of the argument on

marketing system development and local production specialisation more comprehensible.

The book does not describe or justify the interest of the theme, in the tradition of imperial histories of England. Nor does it explicitly raise any issues concerning the understanding of towns and commerce in general. Nevertheless, the commercial and urban history of the English section of a sparsely populated European off-shore island during the Middle Ages deserves study, both as an example of the process of commercialisation in a predominantly agrarian society and as a contrast with other parts of Europe. England was relatively rich, especially in the early part of the period; its overseas trade was important, and played a significant role in shaping the internal economy and the political system; its marketing structure was highly-developed; it was, from one point of view, highly urbanised; its commercial life took place within a unified territory and under a single strong public authority, in contrast to many other regions of Europe; finally, the towns and trades of medieval England are, like its agriculture, especially well documented, and much of that material is accessible in print. Moreover, there is a long tradition of writing on this theme, though one which has been informed on the one hand more by a vision of the long-term growth of the nation's business and, on the other more by a spirit of municipal reform, civic patriotism and 'legal archaeology' than by straightforward enquiry. More recently, the emphasis has been on monographic studies of individual towns. Twenty years ago (before much of that recent work appeared in print) two good—but strikingly contrasting—books on English medieval towns were published,[2] but neither of them was especially effective in setting urban life in its commercial and industrial context. This new survey, therefore, is to be welcomed as an overview, for the most part securely grounded in the sources, of English towns, crafts and commerce during a rapid and especially formative period of growth. The strength of the book lies in its range and clarity, rather than in any

penetrating new interpretations or synthesis. It reflects a wider concern, evident in several recent publications, which address the issue of the commercialization of English society during the central Middle Ages, and comes to conclusions resembling those of Richard Britnell's recent more general study.[3] Like that work, it is distinctly stronger on the period after 1200 than on earlier years.

The book opens with a survey of its subject as revealed by Domesday Book and contemporary material. It rightly emphasises the strength of the crown, its control over the monetary system and its powers of taxation, but curiously (in view of later references to regalian right, the royal power to licence markets, and the importance of income from towns as market-places) it makes no reference to the topic of tolls, which in 1086 already had a long continuous history. This chapter includes a sketch of the period from the immediately post-Roman years (inaccurately characterised) onwards. This uncertain beginning, and the choice of formal starting date, raises a general problem of interpretation. We are presented with a rather simple picture of continuous growth from the reign of Alfred onwards, which ignores what seem to be distinct differences between regions in the degree of commercial and urban activity during the tenth century, and the likelihood that the scale and internal organisation of urban settlements again achieved levels which had prevailed in the eighth century (in the South East at least, this did not happen until after A.D. 1000). Moreover, this approach tends to conceal from view the significance of the eleventh century as a key period of savage urban growth in England. More satisfactory starting points might have been the reign of Aethelred II (which would have allowed a more balanced view of the cyclical impact of bullion imports and money supply, to which only partial justice is done in the later story) or that of Cnut (which would have allowed the discussion of trading and other relations with

Scandinavia to be placed in a more satisfactory context).

Chapter 2 surveys medieval industry, rightly stressing the extent of craft activity in the countryside and small towns, together with the scale (if not the long ancestry) of primary extractive industries. A case study of the building trades is weak, not least in asserting that the 'basic techniques probably changed very little' (p. 92), an extraordinary conclusion given the major developments in masonry, in vaulting, and in the cutting and framing of timber. The case study of the textile industry, however, provides an extremely valuable new general view of the thirteenth century, to an extent updating Miller's earlier work. It also includes a new presentation of important evidence, including a map and discussion of textile centres in 1202, and gives welcome attention to the expansion of the light textile industry at the end of the period, even if it does not quite comprehend recent findings concerning the expansion of that industry in at least one southern town during the later thirteenth century. Given the debt that the work in general owes to the ideas of Postan (though some adjustments in recognition of monetary factors are apparent), it is perhaps surprising that more emphasis is not placed on the contribution that industrial activity, perhaps especially fuel extraction and salt production, is likely to have made to population expansion.

Then follows a fine review of internal trade, occasionally marred by a reliance (sometimes at second hand) on unsatisfactory works from the 1960s, but perhaps only really at fault in not providing a coherent assessment of political and military factors in the evolution of structures of trade. Within the work as a whole not enough weight is given to those forces, which affected both local marketing arrangements and the long-term fortunes of major fairs and towns. The discussion of fairs might also have benefited from a greater emphasis on their role in the complex, almost countrywide, network of livestock distribution which

is otherwise well described. A single reference to 'palace merchants,' in the context of overseas trade and a phenomenon apparently outmoded by 1300, draws attention to this particular blind-spot. Yet some attention to recent writing in French on the earlier medieval economy (especially by J. P. Devroey), to works in English on the aristocracy and on the geography of royal power, and to the ways in which royal and aristocratic households organised their purchasing would have provided a more subtle and robust framework within which to give political force and patronage their due weight in the thirteenth-century English economy. More emphasis might also have been given to the development over the thirteenth century of an hierarchical system of markets, which enabled small-scale local producers (about whom little is known) to engage in wider networks of trade and provided radically different marketing opportunities for major producers. That was an important element in the mental infrastructure of trade established during the period.

'Overseas trade' (chapter 4) is the theme of another valuable and in places original discussion. Evidence from around 1230 is well used to sketch in a national picture. But even in this chapter there are problems. The traditional picture of close contacts with what we now know as parts of northern France, the Low Countries, and the Rhineland is rightly emphasised, but the evidence, noted in both recent and older publications, for close trading contacts between England and Spain and even for English dominance of the seas to the south is ignored. More seriously, the discussion of trade with Germany is confused: Henry II's grants to the citizens of Cologne of privileges in London are mis-dated (more reliable dates were published in 1920, and suggest a significant commercial and diplomatic context for the grants), and the old myth concerning the Germans' purchase of the London 'hall of the Danes' is retold without question (its source should have raised a query, and in any case a more convincing

account was published in the *Hansische Geschichtsblaetter* in 1989). This amounts to more than mere carelessness over details, for a false picture of the origins and growth of Anglo-German trade in the twelfth century is erected on these misapprehensions (pp. 188-189); indeed, reference to earlier texts would have revealed that German merchants, and perhaps more especially men from Lorraine and Cologne, enjoyed a privileged position in London by about A.D. 1000. The authors, both in this work and elsewhere, set high standards in their treatment of the evidence for later periods, but here they slip into carelessness with sources which are more common among economic historians than they should be. If advances are to be made in understanding the commercial life of the period before 1200 more acute criticism and interpretation of the material is needed, and this textbook should not be taken as a starting point.

Two chapters provide an account of towns, outlining their very wide range in character and function, their physical expansion and growth in numbers, the origin of their populations, the trades of their inhabitants, and their guilds, institutions, ruling groups and government. There is an interesting attempt at a summary comparison of the 'occupational structures' (although the difficulties of that notion are not really explored, and it includes some misleading classification) of Norwich, Winchester and York. These discussions are useful and contain much interesting incident and observation, if presenting a conventional view overall. Yet there are unsatisfactory elements: the discussion of urban topography is weak on the forces which shaped it (maps could have been more effectively used); the account of parishes fails to grasp the principles which governed their formation, and so misses important contrasts between newer and older towns in the period; the continuing debate over Henry I's charter to London has not been noted; and in the description of London's trades the best sources and discussions have not been used. On the other hand, the ac-

count of the evolution of ruling groups and municipal government is, in contrast to many earlier works, so coherently and distinctly presented (in terms of its evolution towards liberty and coherence under the influence of a merchant class) that it stimulates thought on a range of possible alternative interpretations, concerning the purpose and sources of power in town government (a question which should have been but is not asked), the early influence of merchants (surely the case that the early 'rulers' of our larger towns were more interested in rents than trade is too literal and reductionist and ignores important pieces of evidence?), the role of the *cnihtas* as mercantile civic leaders, the respective primacy of craft guilds or communes, and the erosion or otherwise of private liberties and jurisdictions.

The final chapter, providing an overview of the economy of England between 1272 and 1348, serves as a conclusion to both this and the earlier volume. It is valuably done and incorporates views from several recent publications on agrarian and more general economic history. Overall, it reveals an approach which, despite its rich citation of specific incident, is concerned less to understand the concrete experience and meaning of town life and commerce than to identify, often too readily, categories, ideal types and trends. It also reveals, perhaps unintentionally, that the main purpose of the work may be to provide a description and explanation of the notable crux in English economic history associated with the years around 1300, rather than to give a balanced account of the whole period since the eleventh century. This viewpoint introduces an element of confusion in the broader interpretation which may blur the significance of earlier episodes and imposes a picture of the continuous rise of the English economy which is sometimes misleading and lacking context. The general picture is skewed in other ways too. It is odd that in a work devoted to towns and trade so little attention is given to the physical infrastructure which was the subject of large-scale investment during the period, and of

which much has been revealed by recent investigation—bridges, quays, town walls, cellarage and an urban fabric which provided increasing protection against fire, theft and warfare. Likewise, some attention could have been given to the issue of standardisation and to discussions of medieval rationality, both of which had a significant connection with commercial development. Both subjects would have lent some weight to the brief remarks on education and the role of chaplains as estate managers. After all, William Servat, who crops up several times in lively vignettes of the alien merchant in London, during his later years entrusted his commercial affairs to his chaplain, who cheated him. Other distortions arise from too narrow a focus on England and an idea of a national economy. Geopolitical and power structures are not given sufficient weight. For much of the period England was only one of the territories of close interest to the aristocratic and royal figures whose activities had such an influence on trade and urbanization. Equally, it is impossible to explain significant elements in the pattern of urban and rural development in much of England without reference to Picardy, Ponthieu, Flanders and the region of the lower Rhine, which, with the corresponding parts of England, formed a single, autochthonous unit of intensive production and exchange spanning boundaries of public authority. It is only in that particular European context that the dominance of alien merchants in the later thirteenth century (a topic to which some useful pages are devoted) actually makes sense. Likewise, one might have hoped for some account of that wider context as part of the explanation of changes in the more general pattern of settlement (they included urbanization) of those parts of England which lay in the hinterland of the south and east from the tenth century onwards.

In some respects this has been a critical review, critical perhaps of the narrowness (in terms of subject matter, sources and ideas) of much English medieval economic history as much as of the work itself. That is not to say that the book is not

of great value. Its blind-spots, misapprehensions, and occasional failure to critically assess the value of works on which it depends deny it the 'magisterial' character proclaimed in the publisher's blurb. Yet, with rare exceptions (including sentences of theological opacity in the final chapter, e.g. p. 402, and sometimes a density of detail which makes the argument unclear), it is written in a clear and lively manner, is based on an impressive citation of sources and secondary texts covering many parts of the country, and, within its limits, is exemplary in the articulation of explanations. No other single work can match its range. It is therefore the ideal primer through which students may be introduced to the riches of the surviving written evidence for the commercial and urban history of England during the central Middle Ages and to a range of the ideas used to interpret them.

#### NOTES

[1]. Such as Mary D. Lobel (ed.), *The City of London from Prehistoric Times to c.1520* (The British Atlas of Historic Towns, vol. 3; Oxford University Press in conjunction with the Historic Towns Trust, 1989); M. Biddle (ed.), *Object and Economy in Medieval Winchester* (Winchester Studies 7.ii, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1990); John Blair and Nigel Ramsay (eds.), *English Medieval Industries: Craftsmen, Techniques, Products* (London, The Hambledon Press, 1991).

[2]. C. Platt, *The English Medieval Town* (London, 1976); S. Reynolds, *An Introduction to the History of English Medieval Towns* (Oxford University Press, 1977).

[3]. R. H. Britnell, *The Commercialisation of English Society, 1100-1500* (Cambridge University Press, 1993).

Copyright (c) 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact h-net@h-net.msu.edu

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at  
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-albion>

**Citation:** Derek Keene. Review of Miller, Edward; Hatcher, John. *Medieval England: Towns, Commerce and Crafts, 1086-1348*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. February, 1997.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=851>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.