

The urban foundation of the regional economy  
*Peripheral towns in the English Midlands, c. 1550-1700*

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In post-Restoration England, the explicit growth of new industrial towns set the scene for renewed urban growth, which clearly benefited from the increased exploitation of energy resources and the expansion of overseas trade. By contrast, ancient regional centres, whose economic roles were often tied up with their administrative functions, may give the impression that they were pushed out to the periphery of new industrial regions. Notwithstanding such transformation, both large and small urban settlements in less industrialised areas required coordination in order to link up their increasingly specialised economic functions and progressive agrarian practices in the hinterlands. In this respect, the economic structure and performances of administrative centres and their influence on provincial economic society remain of historical interest, especially those which retained their dominant economic roles in the local context despite their modest demographic profiles in the national urban hierarchy. This preliminary paper explores some aspects of large incorporated boroughs in the Midlands which remained influential based on existing business networks and traditional institutions. First, we shall summarise the underlying urban structure of the local economy in which incorporated boroughs kept their positions as the centre of exchange in their localities, and then, we will explore some aspects of the civic involvement which helped sustain such positions through political processes.

I.

It is acknowledged that the availability of river navigation was one of the most significant conditions which influenced the scale of the local economy before access to mineral resources became an obvious advantage. Despite the economic strength of county towns in the Midlands, it is surprising that there were only two which were in a position to fully exploit the use of major navigable rivers by 1700. Celia Fiennes noted a pleasant water ride along the Trent to Nottingham at the beginning of the eighteenth century, but Charles Deering was certainly aware that the river had already been navigable before the Norman Conquest, and had become commercially important for the borough since then, importing materials such as iron, tin, and oil in exchange for coal,

corn, wool, and cheese from the Midland counties. Worcester's river trade along the Severn was also booming by the early eighteenth century; the leases of property along the riverside were taken up from the corporation and the cathedral by tradesmen in the Black Country, Bristol, Gloucester, and Bewdley. However, the penetration of the flow of goods to and exports from Worcester was noticeable even earlier. Whereas cloth and wool were the main items which were carried from Worcester to Bristol in exchange for imported wine in the early part of the sixteenth century, diverse materials were increasingly dispatched from the former, such as skins, leather, linen cloth, hops, wax, and cheese in addition to cloth and wool between 1580 and 1610.

By contrast, many other incorporated boroughs were not as fortunate as Nottingham and Worcester. Commenting on the condition of Derby in 1673, Richard Blome regrettably wrote, "the trade of this Town and County might be much advanced, if the River Derwent was made navigable", a view which was most likely to find an echo in the places, such as Stafford and Warwick. It is worthwhile noting, however, that some corporations did not necessarily need navigable rivers to maintain their economic resilience. Coventry was a case in point. Throughout its history before the eighteenth century, the city was isolated from the main waterways. Nevertheless, it was amongst the 10 largest provincial centres in Medieval England. Recovering from a major set-back in the later middle ages, it remained as an important centre for the cloth trade, and especially after 1700, for ribbon manufacture. Similarly, Leicester became a major industrial centre of hosiery from the late seventeenth century onwards, despite the lack of a principal river route well into the following century.

Although the economic success of Midland towns was partly dependent on access to effective communications for inter-regional trade, a much more common basis of urban wealth was closely connected with surrounding agrarian practices, since clothing and food processing made up a significant part of the urban economy even by the end of the period under consideration. For example, the growing Northampton shoe industry in the late seventeenth century was affiliated with the local leather trade, backed by rich livestock farming in the surrounding area. The growth of glove making in Worcester also had its roots in the leather industry and the local cattle trade, which took advantage of the city's location on the drove way from Wales to London. Although its economy was partly based on a successful luxury trade, the cathedral city of Lichfield also became an important food distribution centre for the newly expanding industrial towns in south Staffordshire, taking advantage of its position in a fertile agricultural area.

Furthermore, the prosperous and increasingly commercial agrarian economy stimulated the distributive function of small towns whose markets remained as a focal points of transaction by which neighbouring small towns and rural settlements were linked up with larger outlets and wider economic opportunities. Numerous nodal points

for business and consumption scattered across the prosperous agrarian economy became increasingly important as domestic commerce intensified from the late sixteenth century onwards. Small centres without an industrial basis might have been vulnerable to economic competition instigated by the concentration of economic activities in the towns which had more direct communications with larger outlets. A recent survey shows, however, that there was little change in the number of Midland market towns between the end of the sixteenth and early eighteenth centuries (except for Staffordshire), and that the rate of their growth was equal to that of a group of larger centres in the same region. This indicates that new industrial centres and the rise of economic competition did not strip away the distributive roles of the existing small towns which had been established over the centuries in each locality. The small town economy drew the attention of the contemporaries who often commented on the condition of the open market. The one in Chesterfield impressed Celia Fiennes, who described it as “a great Market like some little faire”, while Sir John Percival commented on Newark as “a pretty considerable burges town, having a good Market on fryrdays and a Market place.” Impressionistic views as they might be, the condition of the open market undoubtedly remained a realistic barometer for contemporaries in assessing an important urban function for the local economy in the absence of reliable statistical measurement.

Although it is hard to quantify the actual scale of business between large incorporated boroughs and surrounding market towns, the viable position of each urban centre in a local context can be assumed by the degree of specialisation and the varying size of each settlement. Even before the expansion of the hosiery trade in the early eighteenth century, for example, Leicestershire small towns showed some industrial characteristics, such as the concentration of fullers in Hinckley and shoemakers in Lutterworth, while Market Harborough was renowned for innholders and retailers. The distribution and consumption of agrarian products were coordinated within a hierarchy of weekly markets and fairs. In Warwickshire, for example, there was a band of intermediate towns which filled a gap between large corporations and mere market towns, such as Alcester, Atherstone, Coleshill, and Nuneaton. The role of Stratford-upon-Avon as a food supply centre was enhanced thanks to the improvement of the Avon from the 1630s onwards, which enabled the town to directly trade with the provincial capital of Bristol via the river Severn.

As the final example in Warwickshire indicates, some of these small towns consolidated, if not improved, their economic function depending on their position in relation to a large administrative centre. Eighteenth-century contemporaries, such as Treadway Russell Nash, made reference to the expansion of spinning and carding in the small towns of Worcestershire which coincided with the growth of the cloth trade in the corporate town of Worcester. In Warwickshire, the business between Coventry

merchants and Nuneaton tradesmen, which had already been established by the late middle ages, continued into the eighteenth century as the ribbon industry prospered in both centres. Those towns near a county border were naturally in a position to make the most of their links with urban networks based on a neighbouring incorporated borough. Thus, Nuneaton also attracted tradesmen from Leicester and its satellite centres, such as Hinckley, Lutterworth, and Ashby-de-la-Zouch. We also hear that mercers in Loughborough, the second largest town in Leicestershire, had frequented the Spice Chamber in Nottingham every Saturday before London's commercial influence became dominant there by the mid-eighteenth century.

## II.

That large incorporated boroughs remained significant forces in shaping the local economy implies such a process inevitably involved negotiation and governance in which the urban elite attempted to mobilise private and public wealth and maintained their authority in relation to external and internal influences. Although early public projects often resulted in varying degrees of success and failure, economic affairs in the Midlands could not be isolated from the civic culture of incorporated boroughs.

The public awareness of financial and political pressures to improve economic infrastructure was felt both inside and outside regular meetings of borough councils. The corporation of Worcester had to pay 80 pounds towards restoring new drawbridges for the city gates in 1645, even though they had claimed that the county of Worcester should also make a proportional contribution to the project considering the public benefit the new drawbridges would bring. Despite an obvious financial burden, corporations seem to have been generally cooperative with the large scale public schemes which were often introduced by progressive individuals amongst the landed elite, so long as their commercial position would not be threatened by them. For example, a group of townsmen in Leicester supported Sir. Thomas Skipwith, who promoted a plan to improve the river Soar in 1634 so that a commercial route between Leicester and the Trent would be secured. Similarly, the corporation of Warwick promoted a local project to make the Avon navigable by William Sandys of Fladbury in the 1630s despite stiff opposition from the owners of the mills along the river.

Actions taken by the civic elite made an impact not only on the structure of the borough economy but also on the condition of local commerce and industries. The management of trade entitlements was a common practice by the civic government, often involving deregulation as much as regulation in local trading practices. Typical was the construction of a new shamble to accommodate a growing number of 'foreign' butchers in the market, but in 1634, Leicester went further to extend their civic franchise to a group of country butchers who were admitted to the freedom of the

corporation on market day. In Worcester in 1624, bakers were allowed to sell bread in more convenient places other than outside their own shops in the market place. Leadership of the local economy also required persistent negotiation and political actions against external authorities. Thus, the corporation of Leicester petitioned to become one of the staple markets in the early seventeenth century reflecting a new momentum for the civic elite who won royal recognition as a corporation at the end of the previous century. By contrast, Worcester's ambition to influence the river trade along the Severn was hampered by the enforcement of free trade, which prohibited any corporations from levying tolls along the river. Furthermore, commercial disputes often illuminate the determination of corporations to keep their central position in the local economy. The corporation of Nottingham, for instance, deliberately blocked the westward improvement of the river Trent in order to preserve its monopoly over the river trades despite protests by a number of towns including Lichfield, Derby, Stafford and Coventry.

It has been argued that the existence of strong trade regulations in incorporate boroughs discouraged business ingenuity and hampered new types of industries from growing. In fact, examples in the Midlands suggest that urban industries were often preceded by, or even derived from different commercial and craft sectors, and therefore broadly specialised industries were found in incorporated towns as well as in rural settlements. In 1701, for example, Percival found shoe and stocking industries in Northampton, silk stockings, earthen-ware, and glass manufactures in Nottingham, and woollen cap manufacture even in the industrially modest city of Lichfield. Deering boasted of the quality of stocking in Nottingham in comparison with the product from Leicester in the mid-eighteenth century, but the hosiery trade in these two corporations had already been developing a century earlier. In Worcester, we hear that around 5,000 workers were employed by the glove industry, which replaced the successful cloth trade. Underlying these transitions of urban manufactures was a reservoir of skills, knowledge, and finance which were applied to the dual- and multiple occupations commonly held by freemen. In Leicester, for example, the production of knitted stocking was often carried out as a sideline to the freemen's main business before the civil war, but by the end of the seventeenth century, hosier had become an established occupation officially admitted to the freedom of the corporation.

## Conclusion

While mineral-based industrial regions presented an eye-catching expansion, as with the case of the Black Country, a significant part of the urban foundation of the Midlands economy was formed around the traditional functions of large incorporated boroughs supported by networks of small market towns. These administrative centres continued to

exploit their unrivalled communication networks together with natural links with prosperous agrarian settlements. Underling such an advantage was the management of the local economy. Continuity in the central role of populous incorporated boroughs indicates that urbanization in the Midlands was socio-political as well as an economic process with the involvement of the civic elite who constituted a self-governing body. With a growing volume of trade and traffic, the upkeep of effective communications and distribution often required administrative attention and large financial resources, and therefore corporations often found themselves in a process of negotiation and dispute over these issues both inside and outside their privileged territories. No less important was the informal dimension of the urban economy. Despite the remaining power of occupational guilds, the economy of corporations seems to have been flexible enough to allow the development of new industrial and commercial arrangements, often accompanying a substructure in which skills and wealth were informally applied. Consequently, the management and culture of the urban economy remained an important part of political processes in which different forms of civic actions were implemented in order to keep an influential position in a local urban system.

Highlighting the persisting influences of administrative centres, their institutions, business networks and skilled workers, this paper suggests that the pattern of a successful local economy can also be examined on the basis of continuity as much as the rapid transformation of a local urban system. Moderate economic success based on traditional urban structure and business networks were by no means unique to the Midlands. Recent surveys have shown, for example, that the economic stability of East Anglia and the West Country went hand in hand with steady urbanization based on their traditional urban system. And yet, the incorporated boroughs discussed here were far from stagnant, adjusting their economic structure to the expansion of the internal market even prior to the age of canal construction, and leaving significant traces of economic clout as part of civic culture in the provinces.

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