

Desolation of a City

*Coventry and the Urban Crisis of
the Late Middle Ages*

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Contents

Frontispiece	page	iv
List of tables		xi
List of illustrations		xiii
Preface		xv
Abbreviations		xix
Introduction		1
<i>Part I: An urban panorama</i>		5
<i>Part II: Desolation of a city</i>		31
1 The tempo of decline		33
2 The hastening of decline		40
3 Crisis 1518–25		51
<i>Part III: Anatomy of a city</i>		69
4 Introductory		71
5 The working context		74
6 Formal groups (i) The household		80
7 Formal groups (ii) The craft fellowship		99
8 Formal groups (iii) Guilds and councils		118
9 Formal groups and the citizen's life-cycle		125
10 Informal groupings (i) Social stratification		128
11 Justifications of obedience		137
12 Social mobility		142
13 Informal groupings (ii) The extended family		148
14 Informal groupings (iii) Social topography		158
15 Mirrors of a community		170
16 Conclusion on social structure		180
<i>Part IV: An anatomy deformed</i>		185
17 Introductory		187

x *Contents*

	<i>(A) A penury of people</i>	189
18	The depopulation of households 1520–3	189
19	The distribution of the people	199
20	Servants and the economy	204
21	Children and the future	221
22	Coventry and the size of the late medieval urban household	238
	<i>(B) The distortion of the social structure</i>	249
23	Violence and structural stress 1520–5	249
24	Matters for reform: the 1530s	258
25	Institutional and social change	269
26	Medieval mirrors shattered	275
	<i>Part V: Coventry and the urban crisis of the late middle ages</i>	279
	<i>Appendices</i>	291
1	The 1523 enumeration	291
2	The ward listings of 1520 and 1523: the problems of analysis	295
3	Various overall distributions of persons and households by wards in 1523	306
4	Suggested adjustments and estimated revisions	321
5	A note on the topography of late medieval Coventry as shown on map 1	323
	Bibliography of sources cited	325
	Index	339

Tables

1	Numbers of families in 25 small towns in 1563	<i>page</i> 8
2	Numbers of families in eight small county towns in 1563	9
3	The largest towns in late medieval England	12
4	Numbers of references to various places in different statute merchant transactions at Coventry	27
5	Numbers of persons for whom mortuary payments are recorded 1517–27	53
6	'Harvest' prices 1516–24	56
7	Comparative figures for the membership of masters in select crafts	103
8	The career-cycle of the successful citizen through the formal institutions of the city	126
9	The social stratification of Coventry <i>c.</i> 1520	131
10	Crude results by wards for populations and population changes 1520–3; and for households and vacant houses in 1523	190
11	Occupations of 'dislodged' householders: 1522–3	192
12	Measures of vulnerability	194
13	Sex ratios (M per 100 F)	200
14	Proportions of householders by marital status	202
15	Household composition by marital statuses of heads	203
16	Percentages of servant-keeping households with 1 or 4+ servants	205
17	Servants according to ward ranking	206
18	Servants by occupational categories	208
19	Servants: sex and replacement ratios by occupational categories and some specific trades within them	210
20	Quinquennial totals of apprentices indentured to the Carpenters' Craft	215
21	Percentages of 'children' and servants in populations: select European and English communities	221
22	'Children' and servants as percentages of each ward's population	222
23	'Children': factors affecting distributions and sizes of groups	224

xii *List of tables*

24	Percentage distributions and mean sizes of 'sibling' groups by occupational categories and some specific trades	227
25	Number of 'adult' males in Gosford Street ward 1523-34	230
26	'Reproduction' ratios by wards	232
27	Percentages of households containing numbers of children: Rheims and Coventry	233
28	Percentages of children in groups: Coventry and 100 English communities	233
29	Sizes and composition of households by rental categories etc.	239
30	Sizes and composition of households by categories of goods	241
31	Sizes of households by wealth of occupational categories	242
32	Comparative distributions of households by numbers of persons in medieval Europe and 'pre-industrial' England	246

Tables in the appendices

33	Crude population figures and percentage changes by wards 1520-3 (before and after adjustments to the 1523 figures)	298
34	Estimated turnover of households between 1520 and 1523 compared with the evidence for vacant housing	301
35	Turnover of households in four wards 1522-3	303
36	Distributions of persons by household status, and proportions contributed to every category by each ward	306
37	Distributions of households and persons according to household size (Coventry and 91 later communities)	308
38	Distributions of occupational categories and specific trades by wards	311
39	Overall occupational structure by householders successfully labelled	316
40	Distributions of rental categories etc. by wards from conflation with the 1522 assessment	316

41	Distributions of goods categories by wards from conflation with the 1522 assessment and the 1524 subsidy return	318
42	Proportions of children and servants as a cross-check on suggested population adjustments	321

Illustrations

Maps

1	Late medieval Coventry	<i>page</i> xxii
2	The position of Coventry in relation to all Midland towns containing 200 or more families in 1523–63	23

Figures

1	Rent lost by the Corpus Christi Gild from 'void & unset' tenements, expressed (to the nearest shilling) as a percentage of the total possible rental for each year from Dec. 1487/8 to Dec. 1526/7	37
2	Ward-ranking by proportions of householders in each ward paying specific categories of rents in 1522–3	164
3	Ratios of persons by wards, in 1520 and 1523, to every inhabited house, whether freehold or valued at <i>over</i> 12s. rent <i>p.a.</i> in 1522	297

Plates

I	Substantial housing in Bailey Lane	70
II	Modest houses inside Cook Street Gate	186

Introduction

There are a number of ways in which social historians delimit their subjects. One is to concentrate on a 'class' of society and to look at it over time in a regional or national context. Another is to take a specific theme like literacy, criminality or sexual *mores*, and to investigate that, often in predominantly quantitative terms. A third, and perhaps the longest established approach, that nevertheless still seems to lack the lustre of fashionable respectability which both 'class' and topical investigations attract, is that of the local historian in his study of a particular community. An anthropologist may spend six months or a year on one Pacific island and much of a career writing about it; a new breed of 'urban' historian may devote himself to the analysis of a single nineteenth-century city; but there is still a residual suspicion in some quarters that a detailed historical study of one 'pre-industrial' English community bears a somewhat pedestrian, even amateur taint, and is valuable essentially only insofar as it is a source for wider and hence more 'significant' generalisation.

This book is written, however unsuccessfully, in a contrary spirit. It seems to me that investigations of particular 'classes' or themes, valuable as they undoubtedly are, invariably concentrate on only one facet of society. By definition they have to view society selectively and hence to some extent from without. A community study too will inevitably be selective but far less so, and it also provides the opportunities at least both to examine a society from within and to identify its local peculiarity. Above all, it permits the investigation of as many facets of life and society as the evidence allows. It thus becomes possible to evaluate the inter-action of both separate social themes and of differing social groups through a more objective perspective. If the concept of 'total history' is unrealisable, there is, nevertheless, a need for studies which examine communities as 'wholes' – a rather different proposition.

That need is becoming ever more marked in the field of urban history. Over the last few years, Mr Peter Clark and Dr Paul Slack have between them laid the foundations of a typology of English towns in the period 1500–1700, which characterises 'the urban

2 Introduction

hierarchy' in terms of differing functions and sizes.¹ This valuable preliminary exercise now requires testing at the level of specific studies for the different types of town concerned. In particular we need to know more about both late medieval urban social organisation and also the manner in which towns emerged economically and socially out of the middle ages, into the era of the 'pre-industrial' town.

It is indeed remarkable that with the partial exception of Sylvia Thrupp's masterpiece on *The Merchant Class of Medieval London*,² there exists in print not one close study of an English urban *society* as a whole at the end of the middle ages. There are essentially municipal histories of medieval towns, and there are important modern studies in the round of individual sixteenth-century towns. In the latter, however, attempts to characterise *pre*-Reformation urban society tend to be limited, on the one hand, to analyses of the distribution of wealth in the 1520s, and especially urban elites and the poor in that regard; and, on the other, to occupational structures as derived from the evidence of freemen's admissions.

A major, but not wholly convincing, explanation for this state of affairs, might be that auxiliary documentation is lacking. For a small, but significant number of key towns, however, and amongst which Coventry is only one, this is in fact untrue. Nevertheless, if for no other reason, the unusually informative series of records with which Coventry is endowed does make it an appropriate object of study during the crucial years of the early sixteenth century when its social organisation may be characterised in some detail, and the distortion of this framework under severe pressure may be partially measured.

An investigation into such matters involves necessary methodological assumptions of which the reader should be aware. In looking at a society under strain, it is clearly necessary to distinguish between what was 'normal' and what was 'abnormal'. This may be especially difficult when, as in this case, a good deal of the evidence (though far from all) derives from a period of intense short-term crisis, and the subsequent years of accelerating

¹ Peter Clark and Paul Slack, 'Introduction', in Peter Clark and Paul Slack (eds.), *Crisis and Order in English Towns 1500-1700: Essays in Urban History* (London, 1972), pp. 4-6 - a classification which is further developed by the same authors in their *English Towns in Transition 1500-1700* (Oxford, 1976), chaps. 1-5.

² Sylvia L. Thrupp, *The Merchant Class of Medieval London 1300-1500* (Michigan, 1962).

economic decline. Problematic as this may be, however, it is here that the historian may claim one advantage over his anthropological colleagues. A longer time-scale under investigation does permit a more confident assessment of what was 'typical'. Indeed, since strain at this period is most usually first displayed by either the shortage or the failure of individuals to fill various social positions, rather than by changes in the pattern of positions itself, it does seem quite possible to distinguish between normality and otherwise at Coventry before institutional change results.

Rightly or wrongly, therefore, this analysis is based on two premises. First, that to understand social structure (as a framework of social positions and relationships, *infra* p. 72), it is necessary to view it as a process over a period of roughly one generation. Instead of taking a single moment in time (as subsidy returns or early listings of inhabitants force us to do), it is essential to reconstruct the average life-cycle: the normal processual passage of individuals through a changing pattern of social roles. Here, the 'generation' concerned has been arbitrarily taken to comprise that which was born, flourished, or died in the period 1500 to 1530, and especially during the first two decades of that period. For certain purposes, when precisely contemporaneous evidence is lacking, however, I have had to look either forwards or further back. Where this is so, the fact is drawn to the reader's attention.

A second premise concerns the necessity for a multi-dimensional approach to social structure. It is surely impossible to characterise a medieval society simply by evaluating its activities in separate economic, political, religious and similar categories. As far as possible we need to seek for the manner in which these factors and many others inter-connected and over-lapped: that is, to look at the formal and informal contexts in which medieval citizens inter-related. If this involves in some cases a statement of what seems obvious in one sphere, it is only then that a valid picture of the balance between *different* spheres of activity may be assessed. Clearly, however, it will be impossible wholly to fulfil this ideal. Although Coventry is peculiarly well documented for this period, there are, nonetheless, considerable areas of social life where the information is either scanty or non-existent – most seriously for the incidence of various forms of social deviance.

Given these assumptions then, this study will focus on Coventry society as an example of what may have been happening in different

4 *Introduction*

ways and in different degrees to similar provincial cities or other major towns at the end of the middle ages. An introductory survey of English towns, and some comments on their varying fortunes at the beginning of the sixteenth century will therefore trace the general urban context in which the fate of Coventry should be judged. In part II, a discussion of the long-term decline of Coventry, culminating in a critical period of short-term crisis between 1518 and 1525, then provides the dynamic circumstances in which an understanding of the city's social structure has to be placed. The analysis which follows in part III, thus involves a change of tempo from macro-time to micro-time: it concentrates on the more permanent institutional and processual features of the social structure largely before the period of crisis. In so doing, it also seeks to appraise the ideal of late medieval urban community before the framework was distorted. Part IV (and the essential appendices that complement it) is inescapably more detailed. In it are measured the incidence of depopulation which the city was experiencing in the early 1520s; the degree to which the population structure was consequently affected – as represented in the only census of a medieval city yet known in this country; and, finally, the increasing strains which subsequently deformed the social system. The book ends with an attempt to evaluate the nature of Coventry's experiences in the wider context of what the author would take to have been a period of general urban crisis for large numbers of important English towns during a much ignored period in the history of English communities.

This survey will then have served some purpose even if it goads others into disagreement about the approach slopes to one of the major watersheds in the cultural, social and economic history of the nation. The wider generalisations that might be made from this analysis, however, are in large part dependent on its validity as a community study.