

# MEDIEVAL MERCHANTS

*York, Beverley and Hull in the Later Middle Ages*

JENNY KERMODE



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## INTRODUCTION

Medieval towns have been hailed as the cradle of modern society, places where flexible attitudes developed as a consequence of new forms of association: the partnerships, guilds and companies which economic activity particularly encouraged.<sup>1</sup> Many towns developed an environment which especially favoured entrepreneurs, and in the most successful of all, the commercial sector was more significant than even the most flourishing of specialised crafts.<sup>2</sup> York, Beverley and Hull were certainly places of innovation but also of conservatism as a result of the constant inflow of newcomers engaging with traditions and customs which were themselves subject to change.<sup>3</sup> Although many townfolk had their own, sometimes recent, experience of rural communities, life in a town was very different from that in country villages.<sup>4</sup> Continued contact with rural birthplaces,<sup>5</sup> trade, the purchase of manors, intermarriage and polit-

<sup>1</sup> In Max Weber's view, these networks undermined the influence of family, kin and religion, creating fertile conditions for individualism to flourish: *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, ed. J. Winkelmann (Tubingen, 1972), pp. 788, 815, 818, cited in J-P. Genet and N. Bulst, eds., *La ville, la bourgeoisie et la genèse de l'état moderne (XII<sup>e</sup>-XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècles)* (Paris, 1988), pp. 7-8. See also P. M. Hohenberg and L. H. Lees, *The Making of Urban Europe 1000-1950* (Cambridge MA, 1985), pp. 22, 36.

<sup>2</sup> It was a developed commercial sector which distinguished the medium and larger towns in western Europe from their smaller and less successful competitors: N. G. Pounds, *An Economic History of Medieval Europe* (2nd edn, London, 1994), pp. 227-8, 255-61.

<sup>3</sup> P. J. P. Goldberg, *Women, Work, and Life Cycle in a Medieval Economy. Women in York and Yorkshire c. 1300-1520* (Oxford, 1992), pp. 76-7, 280-304, 338; D. M. Palliser, 'A Regional Capital as Magnet: Immigrants to York, 1477-1566', *Yorks Arch. Jnl*, 57 (1985), pp. 111-23; *VCH Beverley*, p. 57; *VCH Hull*, p. 80; *VCH York*, pp. 108-9. For urban migration elsewhere see: P. McLure, 'Patterns of Migration in the Late Middle Ages: The Evidence of English Place-Name Surnames', *EcHR*, 2nd ser., 32 (1979), pp. 167-82; D. G. Shaw, *The Creation of a Community. The City of Wells in the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1993), p. 59.

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of some specific urban characteristics, see P. J. P. Goldberg, 'Urban Identity and the Poll Taxes of 1377, 1379, and 1381', *EcHR*, 2nd ser., 43 (1990), pp. 194-216 at p. 212; D. M. Palliser, 'Urban Society', in R. Horrox, ed., *Fifteenth-Century Attitudes. Perceptions of Society in Late Medieval England* (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 132-49 at p. 145.

<sup>5</sup> Some townfolk could, for instance, refer to rural vicars by name. See, for example, *Test. Ebor.* 1, p. 119 (Richard Ferriby) and for wider rural contacts see *Prob. Reg.* II, f. 243v. (Richard Patrington).

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ical association with country families helped to blur the borders for a minority, but for the majority, urban living was a distinctive experience. Daily life in a densely populated town required a higher level of regulation and control but also offered a greater range of cultural and economic opportunities than was available in the countryside. In common with many of the larger English centres, York, Beverley and Hull had diverse occupational and social structures, aspects which have been the subject of much recent historical research.<sup>6</sup> However, comprehending the dynamics of urban society remains a daunting task and historians continue to disagree about the nature of relationships within towns and about the degree of consensus townsfolk shared.<sup>7</sup>

This study focuses on one urban group, the merchants: men, and very occasionally, women, whose livelihood largely depended on investments in wholesale trade and commerce.<sup>8</sup> They were at the core of urban society, accumulating more wealth than most. Through their spending on charity, on public works and on religious observance, they played an important part in shaping attitudes and in establishing collective objectives. This is not to claim that other groups were not also influential but the combination of commercial and secular power gave merchants a disproportionate prominence in urban affairs. In government, the political rhetoric of merchant oligarchs promoted a narrowly corporatist view of urban society, defining citizenship as part of the process of legitimising their own position. Merchant rulers thus had a central role in the development and management of urban *mentalité*, whether reflecting and responding to popular needs or imposing their own.

At a time when the social and geographical awareness of most Yorkshire urban migrants probably ended at their home village, usually only some fifteen to twenty miles distant from any of the three towns,<sup>9</sup> men whose knowledge extended beyond even London to continental Europe had a different perspective and outlook from most of their neighbours. The commercial world of late medieval Yorkshire merchants could extend from Iceland to North Africa and the Middle East.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>6</sup> In York, for example, Barrie Dobson has discussed one group of religious in 'The Residuary Canons of York in the Fifteenth Century', *Jnl Ecl. Hist.*, 30 (1979), pp. 145–74, and 'Mendicant Ideal and Practice in Late Medieval York', in P. V. Addyman and V. E. Black, eds., *Archaeological Papers Presented to M. W. Barley* (York, 1984), pp. 109–22; Jeremy Goldberg, women, *Women, Work, and Life Cycle*; and Heather Swanson, craftsmen, *Medieval Artisans. An Urban Class in Late Medieval England* (Oxford, 1989). <sup>7</sup> See below, pp. 11–14.

<sup>8</sup> See N. S. B. Gras, *Business and Capitalism* (Harvard, 1939), pp. 67–92 for a discussion which was perhaps too limited by the desire to locate different types of merchant within categories.

<sup>9</sup> See above, note 3.

<sup>10</sup> J. L. Bolton, *The Medieval English Economy 1150–1500* (London, 1980), pp. 287–319. Coins and precious metals travelled even further than goods. For the geographical extent of the interconnected and separate monetary systems functioning at this time, which took English coins to present-day Vietnam, see J. F. Richards, ed., *Precious Metals in the Later Medieval and Early Modern*

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Overseas traders became geographically mobile and acquainted with all types and conditions of people from chancery clerks to Dutch porters, English abbesses and Baltic fur traders. They acquired a wide political awareness and expertise in foreign courts and cultures, as well as a knowledge of exotic commodities and currency exchange rates.<sup>11</sup>

Historians have generally concentrated their investigations of English medieval merchants on outstanding individuals such as Alice Claver, William de la Pole, Richard Whittington and the Cely family.<sup>12</sup> These studies have provided invaluable insights into the complex world of late medieval trade and finance but raise difficulties in assessing how typical such individuals were of the merchant class as a whole. Moreover, some historians have confined their discussions to probate records, evidence mainly of wealth and piety;<sup>13</sup> others have analysed mercantile business but paid little attention to political or personal matters.<sup>14</sup> It has therefore been difficult to establish a broader impression of both the social and political characteristics of the merchant community, and of the pattern of trading activity at every level within it.

The notable exceptions are the broader studies of Eleanora Carus-Wilson, Sylvia Thrupp and Pamela Nightingale.<sup>15</sup> All three explore inte-

*Worlds* (North Carolina, 1983), pp. 3–26; E. B. Fryde, 'Italian Maritime Trade with Medieval England (c. 1270–c. 1530)', *Recueils de la Société Jean Bodin*, 32 (1974).

<sup>11</sup> Such experience could be acquired rapidly. Just a year after becoming a freeman of York in 1471 and when 'about 23 years old', John Hagg of York was acting as a witness in a dispute in Bergen-op-Zoom. *Bronnen*, II, pp. 1056–7.

<sup>12</sup> C. M. Barron, 'Richard Whittington: The Man Behind the Myth', in A. E. J. Hollaender and W. Kellaway, eds., *Studies in London History Presented to Philip Edmund Jones* (London, 1969), pp. 197–248; A. Sutton, 'Alice Claver, Silkwoman', in C. M. Barron and A. F. Sutton, eds., *Medieval London Widows 1300–1500* (London, 1994), pp. 129–42; E. B. Fryde, *William de la Pole. Merchant and King's Banker* (London, 1988); Alison Hanham, *The Celys and Their World. An English Merchant Family of the Fifteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1985); R. Horrox, *The de la Poles of Hull*, East Yorkshire Local History Series, no. 38 (Hull, 1983); M. K. James, 'A London Merchant in the Fourteenth Century', *EcHR*, 2nd ser., 8 (1955–6), pp. 364–76 (Gilbert Maghfeld); E. Power, 'Thomas Betson, a Merchant of the Staple in the Fifteenth Century', and 'Thomas Paycocke of Coggeshall, an Essex Clothier in the Days of Henry VII', in her *Medieval People* (1924; 10 edn, London and New York, 1963), pp. 116–69.

<sup>13</sup> P. V. McGrath, 'The Wills of Bristol Merchants in the Great Orphan Books', *Trans. Bristol & Glos. Arch. Soc.*, 68 (1951) (seventeenth-century merchants); G. H. Nicholson, 'Bristol Merchants and their Wills in the Later Middle Ages' (Univ. of Birmingham MA thesis, 1970).

<sup>14</sup> E.g. Gilbert Maghfeld and see E. B. Fryde, *Some Business Transactions of York Merchants: John Goldbeter, William Acastre and Partners, 1336–1349*, Borthwick Paper No. 29 (York, 1966).

<sup>15</sup> P. Nightingale, *A Medieval Mercantile Community. The Grocers' Company and the Politics and Trade of London, 1000–1485* (Yale, 1995); S. L. Thrupp, *The Merchant Class of Medieval London* (Ann Arbor, 1948), and 'The Grocers of London, a Study of Distributive Trade', in E. Power and M. M. Postan, eds., *Studies in English Trade in the Fifteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1933), pp. 247–92; E. M. Carus-Wilson, 'The Merchant Adventurers of Bristol in the Fifteenth Century', *TRHS* 4th ser., 11 (1928). For a later period, see W. G. Hoskins, 'The Elizabethan Merchants of Exeter', in S. T. Bindoff, J. Hurstfield and C. H. Williams, eds., *Elizabethan Government and Society* (London, 1961), pp. 163–87; D. H. Sacks, *The Widening Gate. Bristol and the Atlantic Economy 1450–1700* (Berkeley and London, 1991).

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grated aspects of the merchant community: its wealth, politics and social status. Eleanora Carus-Wilson was less interested in Bristol merchants as a social and political group than in their overseas trade. Sylvia Thrupp presented a virtual *histoire totale* of London merchants, discussing social attitudes, life expectancy, literacy, social cohesion and politics but largely ignoring their commercial ventures overseas. Her work on the London Grocers' Company, in contrast, was an assessment of their distributive trade within England, accompanied by an outline of their political development. The most recent study of the Grocers' Company, by Pamela Nightingale, traces its commercial and constitutional history, as part of a wider narrative of the interplay between traders and metropolitan and national politics.

This book is more inclusive and attempts to analyse all levels of merchant society by considering some 1,400 individual merchants who lived in York, Beverley and Hull during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.<sup>16</sup> The intention is to look at merchants' lives in as many aspects as are visible to the historian: their ambitions and achievements in politics, their attitudes towards religion, their family and extended circles of friends and business acquaintances, the nature and conduct of their trade at every level, and the impact such a significant group had upon their town communities.

In many respects the picture of Yorkshire merchants which emerges is similar to that of their London contemporaries. Both comprised a mobile and fluid class of people who quickly accumulated wealth within a single lifetime, only to see it as rapidly dispersed. Each generation largely made its own fortunes, earning a livelihood by developing distinctively flexible entrepreneurship in response to the peculiar opportunities and pressures exerted by long-distance trade. Merchants in Yorkshire exercised considerable influence on cultural and political life, and in some respects, like their London counterparts, may well have had more in common with merchants from other towns than they had with their fellow burgesses. However, it is difficult to identify a merchant class drawing apart from the rest of urban society, as Sylvia Thrupp did in the case of London. What was apparent in York, Beverley and Hull, however, was shared attitudes and ambitions, shaped by the distinctive experience of commerce and the exercise of political authority into an evolving class-consciousness.

<sup>16</sup> Neville Bartlett compiled biographies of York citizens, including merchants, but did not cover as many aspects as this present study or analyse them as a group: J. N. Bartlett, 'Some Aspects of the Economy of York in the Later Middle Ages, 1300-1550' (Univ. of London PhD thesis, 1958).

## Introduction

### METHODOLOGY

In 1924, in her preface to *Medieval People*, subtitled *A Study of Communal Psychology*, Eileen Power argued for the value of reconstructing single lives as an antidote to learned treatises on economic developments. Twenty-four years later, Sylvia Thrupp adopted a more prosopographical approach to the London merchant class, commenting on the difficulty of constructing a 'type biography, a silhouette portrait that is a composite of many profiles and coincides with none'.<sup>17</sup> Both approaches have much to commend them, although biographies are probably more successful in overcoming some of the difficulties historians face in consolidating the separately recorded activities of an individual into a rounded portrait.<sup>18</sup> In this study, a middle way is taken. Thus, the variety of individual experiences is described but against a background of common characteristics.

Whether the following pages engage with all the merchants, however defined, of late medieval York, Beverley and Hull is another issue. It is more than likely that many have slipped through the net of this study (over 100 became freemen of York alone each year in the 1360s); but it does include those for whom probate records survive,<sup>19</sup> whose trading and commercial activities can be tracked in customs records and published sources,<sup>20</sup> and those whose political careers can be described from town and national records. The nature of particular sources and the interpretive problems associated with them are discussed in the appropriate chapters below. Occupational ascriptions provided the initial identification of individuals,<sup>21</sup> but the merchant group is defined in this study as including those who described themselves or were described as *mercator* or *mercier*, as well as anyone else who is recorded as active in regional or overseas trade and can be identified as of York, Beverley or Hull. A key

<sup>17</sup> Power, *Medieval People*, p. vii; Thrupp, *London Merchant Class*, p. xii.

<sup>18</sup> For an excellent collection of biographies see Barron and Sutton, *Medieval London Widows*; cf. J. I. Kermode, 'The Merchants of York, Beverley and Hull in the 14th and 15th centuries' (Univ. of Sheffield PhD thesis, 1990), appendix 4.

<sup>19</sup> J. Charlesworth and A. V. Hudson, eds., *Index of Wills and Administrations entered in the Registers of the Archbishops at York, 1316–1822*, YAS Rec. Ser., 93 (1937); F. Collins, ed., *Index of Wills from the Dean and Chapter's Court at York, 1321–1636*, YAS Rec. Ser., 38 (1907); *Index of Wills in the York Registry, 1389–1514, 1514–1553*, YAS Rec. Ser., 6 (1889), II (1891).

<sup>20</sup> K. Hohlbaum, K. Kunze and W. Stein, eds., *Hansisches Urkundenbuch*, 10 vols. (Halle and Leipzig, 1876–1907); C. Koppman G. F. von der Ropp and D. Schafer, eds., *Die Reesse und andere Akten der Hansetage, 1256–1530*, 17 vols. (Leipzig, 1870–91); H. J. Smit, ed., *Bronnen tot de Geschiedenis van den Handel met Engeland, Schotland, en Ireland, 1150–1485*, 2 vols. (The Hague, 1928); W. S. Unger, ed., *Bronnen tot de Geschiedenis van Middelburg in den landsheerlijken Tijd*, 2 vols. (The Hague, 1923–6); J. Lister, ed., *The Early Yorkshire Woollen Trade*, YAS Rec. Ser., 64 (1924).

<sup>21</sup> Hard and fast divisions were probably only relevant for guild or company membership and some men embraced a wide description of their activities. John Richmond of York described himself in 1442 as chapman, alias shipman, alias mariner and finally as merchant: CPR 1441–68, p. 35.

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criterion for inclusion in the analysis of trade below, therefore, is the identification of wholesale traders as opposed to retailers. This two-pronged approach, definition by function as well as by description, proved to be reasonably satisfactory, even though there were self-styled merchants, making wills, but not apparently engaged in local or distant trade, and other merchants active in trade and claiming residence in one of the three towns, but for whom no other corroborative evidence has survived.<sup>22</sup> The difficulties in describing regional and local trade are discussed in chapter 8.

The group under detailed discussion constitutes a cross-section of merchants, a mixture of elite and lesser merchants more representative than the top 1 or 2 per cent usually assumed to be typical. It will become apparent that not every merchant can be included in every analysis, a point starkly emphasised when quantifying the data. The quantification of inconsistent data is controversial but it overcomes some of the problems raised by relying on illustrative anecdotes drawn from exceptional but richly detailed documents. It is tempting to pick out the 'plums' as universally representative, but it is important that these are tested against a broader sample to establish just how far they do reflect widely shared attitudes. A context has been created here by combining as wide a range of evidence as possible, and revealing the unusual examples as atypical instances of many aspects of personal and business life.<sup>23</sup> Basic, less detailed but more numerous documents should not be ignored but taken as a complete record and aggregated to establish a balanced context.<sup>24</sup> Care has also been taken to include only those records which contain appropriate material for each analysis. Thus, although the probate records for 658 individuals have been consulted, the statistical analysis of religious expenditure was based on 412, and of cash estates on 425. The statistical discussion of overseas trade is based on 695 individuals who were active during three periods: 1306–36, 1378–1408 and 1460–1500. The overlap in sources for individuals is not large: information on both trading activities and estates at death was found for 225 merchants.

<sup>22</sup> The repeated trawling of documents is an essential process in compiling cumulative lists. Once the search of the Customs Account Rolls had begun, it became clear that identifying the home base of some of the merchants was a problem and so the names of those regularly listed alongside known York, Beverley or Hull merchants were noted, and checked in other sources.

<sup>23</sup> For an example of the anecdotal approach, see Eamon Duffy who argues that unusual and full preambles to wills are 'important indicators of the theology concealed under the simpler' preambles: E. Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars. Traditional Religion in England 1400–1580* (New Haven and London, 1992), p. 326. See below, chapter 4.

<sup>24</sup> For a provocative discussion of the 'new social history', see J. A. Henratta, 'Social History as Lived and Written', *Am. Hist. Rev.*, 84 (1979), pp. 1293–333.

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### YORK, BEVERLEY AND HULL

These three towns provide a good basis for comparison, located within forty miles of each other in south-east Yorkshire, on the lowland plain between the River Ouse and the uplands of the Yorkshire Wolds. The great north road linking southern England to the Scottish borders and the extensive Ouse/Humber river system were the keys to the region's development (see map 1). The Ouse was a great commercial highway, navigable up to Boroughbridge on the Ure. Its Yorkshire tributaries carried wool, and later cloth and lead, into the Humber and thence overseas through Hull. Timber was carried from Hull to Lincolnshire via the Trent and Foss Dike, and wool from the Lincolnshire Wolds back to Hull. Lead from Derbyshire and the south Pennines came down the Rivers Don and Trent, and wine returned to the north midlands by the same route. The Humber was the gateway to the North Sea fisheries and served all three towns. York enjoyed a strategic position, dominating regional road and river networks and the fertile Vale of York. Beverley, however, was not on any major road or waterway, and without the improved Beck would have been entirely land-locked. Edward I's new town of Hull, standing at the confluence of the River Humber and its tributary, the River Hull, had the advantage of a natural harbour and dominance of the Humber estuary.

Strategically adjacent to an extensive wool producing region, each of the three towns could readily engage in England's growing overseas trade. Perhaps more than any other factor, investment in North European markets accounted for the economic success of one urban centre over another during this period. Within the region, York, Beverley and Hull outran smaller rivals such as Hedon, Scarborough, Whitby and Yarm so that, by c. 1300, those ports had to be content with a limited role in coastal trade and a marginal involvement with international markets.<sup>25</sup> One important consequence was the absence of a sizeable merchant class in any other Yorkshire town in the later middle ages: a circumstance which afforded the merchants of York, Beverley, and Hull considerable influence beyond the immediate environs of their own towns. Even so, only Hull survived the international recession of the fifteenth century with some shreds of its overseas trade intact. By 1500, York and Beverley had fewer merchants actively engaged in trade beyond the region and, instead, came to rely on a mixture of traditional urban functions.

<sup>25</sup> For a fuller discussion of the region's development, see D. Hey, *Yorkshire from AD 1000* (London, 1986), pp. 1-118; Goldberg, *Women, Work and Life Cycle*, ch. 1. For a discussion of the region's urban development, see J. I. Kermode, 'Northern Towns' in *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain*, 1 (Cambridge, forthcoming).

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York, with a population of probably some 14–15,000 in 1377, was a large and imposing city by English standards: capital of the north and second only to London in importance.<sup>26</sup> The city's forty-one or so parishes created an impressive array of spires and towers alongside those of fifteen religious foundations and the Minster itself. The panorama, from any direction, confirmed York's regional pre-eminence through the size and grandeur of its public buildings and the prevalence of stone and stained glass. York's strategic location guaranteed it regular royal visits and constant attention, drawing the city into national and county politics. The government lodged there in the early fourteenth century when the king was campaigning in the north. Parliament met in York thirteen times. In addition Richard II removed his household and government to York in 1392, but the city played no formal role in royal government until Richard III established the future Council in the North there in 1484.

Over the centuries, successive kings had demanded loyalty, cash, troops, hospitality and sanctuary and in return York had steadily acquired constitutional privileges until royal charters of 1393 and 1396 gave it the status of an independent incorporate county.<sup>27</sup> York was beholden to no-one except the king, from whom the city was held at farm: set at £100 since 1086. Its two MPs attended parliament regularly, paid by a council which was strongly committed to maintaining its national and regional presence. As home to the Minster, diocese and archbishopric of York, the city acquired an ecclesiastical importance which extended throughout the north of England. Archdeacons of Richmond and other officials of the archbishop routinely set out from York on their visitations into the northern counties and over the Pennines, drawing laymen back into the city to attend to church matters.

More mundanely, the presence of so many clerks, ecclesiastical offices and religious institutions created one of the largest, and perhaps most self-indulgent, consumer populations in the north. An unusually large conglomeration of highly specialised craftsmen resulted, with at least fifty craft guilds active in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. York combined an extensive industrial sector with its service role and had been a centre for textile and leather workers since the early thirteenth century at least; it was also the principal bell-foundry in the north. The city's thrice-weekly general markets, its fish, corn and cattle markets, and three annual fairs, attracted visitors from across the region.<sup>28</sup> They came to buy

<sup>26</sup> Pounds, *Economic History of Medieval Europe*, pp. 227–8, 255–61. For all that follows on York, see *VCH York*, pp. 25–116.

<sup>27</sup> See S. Rees-Jones, ed., *York 600: The Government of Medieval York. Essays in Commemoration of the 1396 Royal Charter*, Borthwick Studies in History, 3 (York, 1997).

<sup>28</sup> *VCH York*, pp. 484–91.

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essential goods, imported dyestuffs, teasels and wine, alongside more exotic continental luxuries: almonds and liquorice, Mediterranean fruit and spices, silks and brocades. Performances of the Mystery Plays probably brought in countless more visitors as did royal dispensations of charity to the poor in the late fourteenth century.<sup>29</sup>

What distinguished York from other northern towns, apart from its size, was its complex combination of functions and its unique social and cultural ambience. However, even a varied economic base was not proof against shifts in England's trade and successive visitations of plague. From the prosperous heights of the 1370s and '80s, the city began to slide into recession. By 1524-5, its population had fallen to around 6-8,000, its investment in overseas trade had all but disappeared and its textile industry had severely contracted.

Beverley was originally an almost entirely ecclesiastical creation.<sup>30</sup> The town had grown around the Minster, under the lordship of archbishops of York. Pilgrims were attracted to St John's shrine from the eighth century, and by the 1120s, Beverley had become a borough with its own hansehus and annual fair. By 1377 it had a population of some 5-6,000. Like York, Beverley was an early textile centre, manufacturing a distinctive Beverley 'blue' cloth for export. Its proximity to the Yorkshire Wolds was an advantage to the town's merchants collecting wool and grain, giving them a significant edge over rivals in the early fourteenth century. A fairly diverse economy developed in the town and there were at least thirty-nine craft guilds active in the 1390s. The Beverley Mystery Play cycle may have attracted large crowds, as in neighbouring York, but performances became less frequent in the 1430s, suggesting that any economic advantages were insufficient to overcome the reluctance of the craftsmen to perform them. Two weekly markets and four annual fairs maintained Beverley's place as the largest market town in the East Riding: some compensation for being overwhelmed by the rise of Hull in international trade. By 1524-5, Beverley had disappeared from the ranks of major provincial towns and its population had shrunk by maybe a third to around 2,000.

The town remained subordinate to its seigneur, the archbishop of York, and was governed by twelve keepers under the supervision of his steward, not achieving independence until the 1545 charter of incorporation. MPs had represented the town between 1295 and 1306, but not again in the middle ages. Beverley never developed an expensive commitment to civic display, perhaps because its seigneur, the archbishop, and

<sup>29</sup> J. H. Harvey, 'Richard II and York', in C. M. Barron and F. R. H. Du Boulay, *The Reign of Richard II: Essays in Honour of May McKisack* (London, 1971), p. 210.

<sup>30</sup> For most of what follows, see *VCH Beverley*, pp. 2-47, 218-22.

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local patrons, the Percy family, kept civic ambition in check.<sup>31</sup> Maybe their proprietorial attitude discouraged religious orders since only two friaries and the preceptory of the Knights Hospitallers were established in the town. The Minster canons may have been equally discouraging since they retained control over the two parishes which had been detached from their prebendaries in the thirteenth century.<sup>32</sup>

In a number of important respects, Hull was quite unlike either York or Beverley.<sup>33</sup> It did not share their antiquity, had little industry and was almost entirely engaged with port activities. When Edward purchased Wyke on Hull from Meaux Abbey in 1293, the small port was already well established: sixth in England in the value of its trade in 1203–5. Edward enlarged the quay, built a new water-mill and improved the roads from York, Beverley and Hessle. He extended the duration of the two weekly markets and annual fair, built a ditch around the town and in 1297 designated Hull as one of the nine English ports through which wool and leather could be traded. Two years later Hull was granted borough status, and in 1440 could afford to buy its independence as an incorporate county.

From the outset, the new borough concentrated on trade and exploited its position at the mouth of the Humber to control shipping. It remained a small town with a population of about 3,000 in 1377 which had scarcely changed by 1524–5. In 1401 contemporaries acknowledged that Hull was the 'key to the adjoining country and whole county of York'.<sup>34</sup> Manufacturing developed slowly and there is no record of craft guilds until the early fifteenth century: four or five by the 1470s including weavers, tilers and tippers.<sup>35</sup> The town church, Holy Trinity, was dependent on the nearby parish of Hessle, although acquiring some parochial rights. Apart from two, possibly three friaries, and the Charterhouse founded in 1378, no other religious orders settled in Hull.

Developments within medieval English boroughs were also reflected in increasing record keeping. This was as much an expression of constitutional achievements as a consequence of bureaucratic necessity.<sup>36</sup> Borough archives usually contain copies of charters, milestones on their road to autonomy, financial records and some form of precedence book. Of the three towns considered here, York's records are the most plentiful and well organised.<sup>37</sup> The main categories consulted in this study were

<sup>31</sup> *Bev. Town Docs.*, p. 33; *VCH Beverley*, pp. 28, 34–42. <sup>32</sup> *VCH Beverley*, p. 162.

<sup>33</sup> For most of what follows, see *VCH Hull*, pp. 1–89, 407–12.

<sup>34</sup> *C. Inq. Misc.*, 1399–1422, pp. 92–3.

<sup>35</sup> *VCH Hull*, pp. 56, 58; Hull RO, BRE I, pp. 16v, 17, 23v.; BRB I, ff. 39(2), 105, 120; M 479/356.

<sup>36</sup> Rees-Jones, 'York's Civic Administration 1354–1464', in her *York 600*, pp. 109–12.

<sup>37</sup> For extracts and discussion of all the York records, see A. F. Johnston and M. Rogerson, eds., *Records of Early English Drama: York*, 2 vols. (Toronto and London, 1979).

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the freemen's rolls; the memorandum books<sup>38</sup> and their successors, the house books;<sup>39</sup> and the fourteen surviving chamberlains' account rolls.<sup>40</sup> Beverley has no separate record of freemen's entries but lists were recorded from time to time on the dorse of several of the sixteen account rolls which have survived between 1344 and 1502. The paper cartulary, great guild book and governors' minute book are Beverley's books of record and there is a small collection of borough deeds.<sup>41</sup> Like Beverley, Hull has no separate freemen's rolls, but a few lists have survived in three of the bench books,<sup>42</sup> Hull's books of precedent and record. Fifty-six chamberlains' rolls are extant and the city has a good collection of deeds.<sup>43</sup>

### URBAN SOCIETY

The influx of migrants, attracted by opportunities for personal betterment, created problems as did the diverse occupational and social structure which characterised urban society.<sup>44</sup> Increased specialisation in the larger towns was matched by an increase in the numbers of semi- and unskilled and non-franchised people living at the margins, magnifying the distance between the top and bottom of urban society.<sup>45</sup> For some recent commentators, that very diversity generated such tension and conflict that the constant challenge was to find ways of keeping the townsfolk together.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>38</sup> M. Sellers, ed., *York Memorandum Book*, I and II, Surtees Soc., 120 (1911), 125 (1914); J. W. Percy, ed., *York Memorandum Book B/Y*, III, Surtees Soc., 186 (1973).

<sup>39</sup> First edited by A. Raine, *York Civic Records*, I–III, YAS Rec. Ser., 98 (1939), 103 (1941), 106 (1942), and partly replaced by a complete edition of books 1–6; L. C. Attreed, ed., *York House Books 1461–90*, 2 vols. (Stroud, 1991).

<sup>40</sup> R. B. Dobson, ed., *York City Chamberlains' Account Rolls 1396–1500*, Surtees Soc., 192 (1980).

<sup>41</sup> Extracts from all the Beverley sources appear in A. F. Leach, ed., *Beverley Town Documents*, Selden Soc., 14 (1900), and *Report on the Manuscripts of the Corporation of Beverley*, RCHMSS (1900); M. Bateson, ed., *Borough Customs*, 2 vols., Selden Soc., 18 (1904), 21 (1906).

<sup>42</sup> Hull RO, BRG 1; BRE 1; BRE 2; BRB 1.

<sup>43</sup> K. M. Stanewell, *Calendar of the Ancient Deeds, Letters, Miscellaneous Old Documents etc. in the Archives of the Corporation* (Hull, 1951). The account rolls for 1321–34 and 1464–65 have been edited, together with a selection of rentals, in R. Horrox, ed., *Selected Rentals and Accounts of Medieval Hull, 1293–1528*, YAS Rec. Ser., 141 (1983).

<sup>44</sup> R. H. Hilton, 'The Small Town as Part of Peasant Society', in his *The English Peasantry in the Later Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1975), pp. 76–94; R. Holt and G. Rosser, *The Medieval Town. A Reader in English Urban History 1200–1450* (London, 1990), p. 4; G. Rosser, *Medieval Westminster 1200–1540* (Oxford, 1989), p. 120; D. G. Shaw, *The Creation of a Community. The City of Wells in the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1993), pp. 64–5.

<sup>45</sup> See Rosser, *Medieval Westminster*, pp. 217–25 for an interesting discussion of the inequalities of wealth distribution and of a specific group of marginal people, those seeking sanctuary at Westminster.

<sup>46</sup> Discussed in S. H. Rigby, *English Society in the Later Middle Ages. Class, Status and Gender* (London, 1995), pp. 169–77. As evidence for social cohesion, historians have highlighted instances of collective action as strategies for containment, whether the refurbishing of a church or street cleaning. See Rosser, *Medieval Westminster*, p. 3; Shaw, *Wells*, p. 132.