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Decline or Transformation? Archaeology and the Late Medieval ‘Urban Decline’ in Southern England

BEN JERVIS

Archaeological evidence is used to examine how urban life changed in the later medieval towns of Sussex, Surrey, and Hampshire in southern England, in light of ongoing debates about the existence of a fifteenth-century urban ‘decline’. The article proposes that rather than seeking evidence of decline, we should consider how and why experiences of urban life vary. The role of towns in commercial and political networks is highlighted as a key cause of variability in late medieval urban experience.

INTRODUCTION

Structural changes to the rural economy in response to the crises of the fourteenth century are now well understood. It was, for example, a combination of social, environmental and economic factors which accelerated the farming out of demesne land and a shift towards less labour intensive pastoral agriculture in the later fourteenth to fifteenth centuries (Campbell 2000, 10; 2016; Dyer 2005, 194–7). As Campbell (2000) shows, there is no single narrative for these changes, with their pace and intensity determined by factors such as population density, the proximity to large towns and any particular English region’s natural environment. The social and economic implications of these changes have been studied from historical (Britnell 1993; Campbell 2000; Dyer 2005) and archaeological (Johnson 1996) perspectives, with these narratives being linked by a shared emphasis on their role in initiating the development of capitalist modes of agricultural production.

Recent work on population and economic development (Broadberry et al. 2015; Campbell 2016, 328) shows that in the later fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries both population and economic growth fell dramatically as the result of climate change, the Black Death, and international warfare. However, gross domestic product per capita, a measure of individual wealth, rose in this period (Broadberry et al. 2015, 203). This was a time of personal prosperity, and opportunities for social mobility, through the acquisition of agricultural land and property in towns. Although some markets and fairs reduced in importance, and some trade moved out of formal settings,

the increase in waged labour in the countryside fuelled demand for commodities produced by urban craftsmen (Dyer 1989, 323–4; 2015, 46; Britnell 1993, 162, 194).

Despite our understanding of later medieval economic and social change deepening considerably in the past two decades, the implications for later medieval towns have been less intensively reviewed in recent scholarship (although see Dyer 2015). The Black Death, which hit England for the first time in 1348 but with subsequent outbreaks into the 1380s, certainly lowered urban populations, and a diminishing pool of potential rural migrants, delayed the re-populating of towns (Britnell 1994, 205; Campbell 2016, 300–19). In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the fortunes of towns were the subject of intense debate and a general consensus existed that towns were 'in decline' in this period. The idea of urban decline still circulates in the popular and specialist literature, particularly in archaeological literature where researchers are seeking an explanation for a scarcity of fifteenth-century evidence (see review in Astill 2000). However, whereas one might expect agricultural and demographic crises to impact dramatically on urban settlements, most towns persisted, even in environmentally marginal areas of England (Dyer 2015, 47). The picture remains incomplete, in part because most scholarship has focussed on the larger towns, but small towns of less than two thousand people also demand our attention, given that they were vital elements of the medieval economy and closely integrated with agrarian production (Hilton 1985; 1992; Galloway, 2001, 126; Dyer 2002, 3–4; 2003, 111). These were places generally characterized by a reliance on activities other than primary agricultural work for their income, and these settlements straddle the blurred divide between town and country. Moreover, although the number of town dwellers decreased with the population in the later Middle Ages, the proportion living in towns appears relatively stable (Dyer 2002, 5).

In light of our revised understanding of the later medieval economy, it is worth re-opening this debate; to think about how towns were transformed in the later Middle Ages. In what follows, this debate is briefly revisited. The evidence for later fourteenth and fifteenth century small towns in the counties of Sussex, Surrey, and Hampshire is then used to provide an archaeological perspective.

REVISITING THE DECLINE DEBATE

The urban decline debate of the late 1970s was sparked by Pythian-Adams' (1978; 1979) work on later medieval Coventry, and Dobson's (1977) survey of declining urban fortunes, building upon Postan's (1973, 44) assertion that the majority of towns were in decline in the fifteenth century. The debate is one of contradictory evidence and definitions (Reynolds 1980). The principal sources used by Dobson were contemporary descriptions (principally Leland's mid-sixteenth century itineraries but also including those by foreign merchants); pleas for relief, and the comparison of tax records from 1377 and 1524–5. Taking the contrary position, that the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were a period of urban buoyancy, Bridbury (1981; 1984) disputed the evidence for decline, arguing that civic investment in new buildings, the acquisition of charters of incorporation (charters which placed a borough under the control of a corporation, headed by a mayor), and the investment in rural land by urban merchants,

provides evidence of prosperity. Interestingly, whilst presenting a picture of urban decay, Dobson (1977) identified the evidence for individual prosperity which might be expected on the basis of the economic evidence identified by more recent studies of economic growth (Broadberry et al. 2015).

A number of studies of individual towns showed that there was no single narrative of urban fortune. In East Anglia, for example, Yarmouth (Norfolk) appears to have declined, but Norwich and Ipswich prospered, whilst in Hertfordshire towns in close proximity can be shown to have had markedly different experiences (Saul 1982; Bailey 1993). Reviewing the debate, Reynolds (1980) called for clarity on what was actually meant by decline. In relation to wealth, does economic decline mean that towns as urban corporations were poorer, or that individual wealth was diminished? A drop in population was a national trend, not unique to towns, and does not, on its own, equate to urban decline (Palliser 1988, 2). Questions were raised over the character of this decay, particularly in relation to its pace. Both Hadwin (1986) and Alan Dyer (1991) have sought to summarize the key points of the debate and find common ground; principally that decline did occur but was neither universal nor consistent in its effects and severity. Whilst such syntheses and considerations of the issues at stake are useful, they also perhaps create a false promise of consensus over the later medieval urban experience. Indeed, Alan Dyer's (1991, 27) conclusion is that there was variability in urban fortunes and, significantly, that these are related to the character and fortunes of English regions.

It is instructive to briefly examine each type of evidence and what it tells us about the state of towns in the fifteenth century. Tax records have two functions; firstly providing data regarding population and, secondly, data regarding the wealth of this population. Even as measures of population, a lack of clarity over tax avoidance and exemptions means that these records are unreliable (Dyer 1991, 31; Rigby 2010). There does seem to be relative stability in the proportion of the population living in towns, although whether this should be seen as stagnation or as towns 'holding their own' is debatable (Rigby 2010, 410–11). A key problem with the taxation records from 1334, 1377 and 1524–5 is that they represent fixed points, separated by long intervals (Rigby 1979). Palliser (1988, 4) attempted to address this through the use of income tax records from 1436, but his work proved inconclusive. Bridbury (1962; 1981; 1986) brushes off this issue, arguing that an increase in the total tax yield from towns from 6.5% in the fourteenth century to 15% in 1524 is, when considered alongside other evidence, suggestive of urban vigour. An alternative interpretation might be that the economy was more commercialised in 1524, rather than towns being more prosperous (Palliser 1988, 13). Such a broad-brushed approach masks fluctuations and the variability within the data. Alan Dyer (1991, 34) shows that the tax data could be interpreted more as a re-ordering of the urban hierarchy, both in terms of wealth and population, revealing a story not just about towns, but about their relationship to their regions.

Contemporary descriptions emphasize physical decay. Italian merchants commented on the lack of important towns outside of London, York and Bristol, whilst Leland's itinerary comments on the apparent decline of small towns and the decay of features such as town walls (Dobson 1977, 4–6, 9). Dobson's reading of Leland is selective, however. Lee (2010) emphasizes that he also commented on towns developing

specializations, which were able to adapt and grow. McFarlane (2011, 19) argues that our understanding of urban places is always comparative. We compare towns with other places that we recognize as towns, have experienced, or with perceptions of an urban ideal. It is, therefore, unsurprising that Italian merchants, used to the international trading cities of Genoa, Venice or Florence, found the English urban landscape unfamiliar. In reading Leland, Dobson could be argued to be seeing the thriving thirteenth- and fourteenth-century boroughs as an ideal form of medieval town, rather than acknowledging the steps taken by urban communities to adapt to new circumstances.

Pleas for relief are equally problematic. Dobson (1977, 11) takes these at face value, as evidence of declining urban prosperity. Bridbury (1981) is more cynical, seeing them as a strategy used to gain exemptions and higher levels of freedom, considering them alongside the acquisition of charters of incorporation as a deliberate attempt by burgesses to gain greater autonomy. This perspective is supported by evidence for the continued investment by urban merchants in building projects, the making of loans to the crown, and the acquisition of rural land. Tittler (1984) sees this evidence slightly differently, as a means by which towns sought to regain prosperity, rather than maintain and build upon it. The crux of this debate comes down to the political strength of towns; whether they were in a position to effectively make demands (as proposed by Bridbury) or were being pro-active in reversing decline (as proposed by Tittler). If pleas for relief are genuine they need not relate to prevailing decline, but could be due to local issues of financial mismanagement or circumstances such as fire (Dyer 1991, 40–1).

This debate over the historical evidence was undertaken without the benefit of the explosion of archaeological work in towns of all sizes, particularly from the 1980s, which accelerated after the introduction of PPG16 in 1990 and subsequent planning policies. Clearly archaeology has great potential for enhancing our understanding of later medieval urban life, and, in particular, might help to enhance our understanding of the scale and character of the decay of urban fabric and the contraction of settlement space. In larger towns, Astill (2000, 218–9) and Hinton (1990, 196) show that there are differences in the intensity of fifteenth-century activity, suggesting that fortunes varied, even within individual towns. Areas lacking fifteenth-century evidence are difficult to interpret as it is widely believed that the period saw a change in waste disposal practices (Astill 2000, 217; Dyer 2003, 105). Differences are also apparent in the evidence for rebuilding provided by standing remains and excavated evidence, for example Hinton (1990, 194–5) presents the intensive building in Gloucester on the basis of the cloth trade, in contrast to Oxford. The erection of new houses, particularly in new styles, and the modernization of existing ones is suggestive of prosperity in towns. Whilst the presence of later medieval buildings might be seen as evidence for prosperity and investment, a lack of surviving buildings cannot be seen as evidence for poverty as there are a wide range of factors which influence survival (Currie 1988). They do, however, provide evidence both for urban prosperity and the adoption of new ideas of domesticity which cannot be ignored (Johnson 1993; 2010; Dyer 1997; 2006; King 2010). This archaeological evidence can be set against historical evidence. For example, under Henry VIII, re-edifying statutes required landlords to repair derelict property, although it is unclear whether these

indicate widespread dereliction or simply a rise in population in the sixteenth century (Bridbury 1981, 23–4; Dyer 1991, 35–6). Decreases in rent in larger towns may be suggestive of a decline in demand, but this same evidence could also suggest that property was not maintained, whilst disruption to lines of inheritance impacted upon the ownership and management of property (Dyer 1991, 38–9; Britnell 1994, 207). Taken together these sources of evidence emphasize the variability in the intensity and character of urban activity in the later Middle Ages.

This variability can also be seen in regards to public building and is also best illustrated through the combination of historical and archaeological evidence. Bridbury (1981; 1984) argued for continued investment in civic architecture, such as guildhalls and churches, although the chronological range of such development has been called into question (Tittler 1984). Most churches saw investment, indicative of a shift towards popular piety. Those which were not subject to investment may not relate to financial limitations, but rather population decline resulting in a congregation that was not viable (Bridbury 1981, 13; Hinton 1990, 197). Such investment relates both to urban prosperity (in a broad sense) and the persistence of civic infrastructure. Town walls were commonly not repaired, but this may be because they were obsolete, as defence infrastructure shifted to the establishment of coastal artillery forts and there was greater political stability (although many walls were brought back into use during the English Civil War), rather than because of a lack of funds or leadership (Creighton and Higham 2005, 221). In many areas, including the study area, there is no evidence of 'flight from office', with population decline creating opportunities for new people to enter the urban elite, for example in Rye (East Sussex) (Draper 2009, 100), indeed, where this does occur, it is often in the later fifteenth century when the economy is more conventionally seen as recovering (Palliser 1988, 16). Discussing the contraction of towns, Lilley (2000; 2015) has argued for this process to be seen not as decay but as evidence of re-planning and adaptation, suggestive of continued decision making and consensus building.

The debate is a complex one. It is polarized but there is also common ground between the positions. A critical reading of this debate, such as that made by Reynolds (1980) may suggest that it is, in fact, the wrong debate to be having. All of the evidence was produced for a reason, it is more than an index of decline or prosperity. Pleas for relief were strategic and their motivation will have varied between towns. Descriptions are reliant on people's experiences of towns, whilst building activity may have been motivated by civic pride, population change, or events such as fires. Furthermore, as new archaeological evidence becomes available, so the variability in the experiences of individual towns, or even of neighbourhoods, becomes increasingly clear. A key finding of Alan Dyer's (1991) study, which remains the most recent comprehensive analysis, is that urban experiences varied and that towns were situated in a wider socio-economic milieu. The dynamics of this milieu were transformed in the later Middle Ages and, therefore, we might shift our focus from identifying decline or growth and creating league tables of towns, to thinking about how we might address this process of transformation.

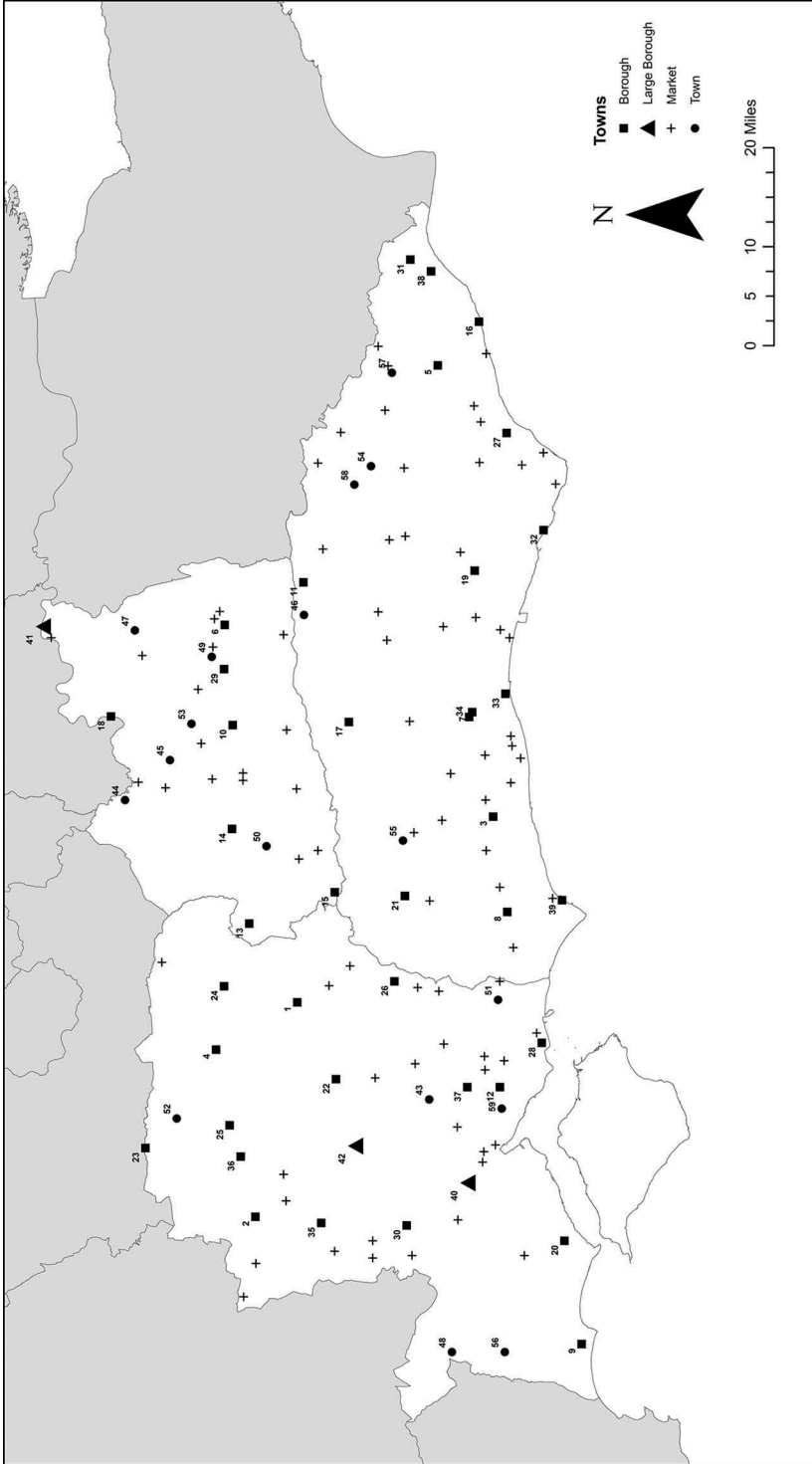
THE LATER MEDIEVAL ARCHAEOLOGY OF SMALL TOWNS IN SOUTHERN ENGLAND

In order to open up new avenues of research into later medieval urbanism we can focus on a case study. Studies of urban decline typically focus on single larger towns, for example Coventry (Pythian-Adams 1979) and Colchester (Britnell 1986). As Christopher Dyer (2015) highlights, no study has been undertaken of a small town and its respective region, although the fortunes of smaller towns have been contrasted with each other (Bailey 1993; Goddard 2011). In order to address this issue, a regional case study will be presented, embracing the counties of Sussex, Surrey, and Hampshire (Illus. 1). A regional survey has advantages over the close study of an individual town as it allows the identification of some of the variables which might impact upon urban fortunes. These contiguous counties offer a useful case study due to their varying environment; from the wooded upland of the Weald to the fertile coastal plain of West Sussex and the downland chalk pasture, their varied administrative character and the range of towns, which includes ports and inland towns of different sizes. London is an important presence in the region, as are the three larger towns of Southwark, Winchester, and Southampton. The fortunes of these towns have been discussed at length elsewhere (Platt 1973; Keene 1985; Carlin 1996) and analysis will not focus upon them, although their impact on their region will be taken into account.

An intensive survey of published archaeological information was undertaken and information was extracted from the county historic environment records, published round-ups of archaeological work and two sets of urban surveys, those undertaken of the counties in the 1970s (Aldsworth and Freke 1976, Hughes 1976; O'Connell 1977) and the more recent English Heritage funded Extensive Urban Surveys. The results of excavations have been recorded and information relating to standing buildings has also been noted. Although intensive, it has not been possible to consider every town due to variations in the quantity of archaeological work undertaken and the number of buildings surviving.

No firm set of criteria have been set for including a place in the study. Some towns have extensive standing remains and no excavated archaeology, for example. Meanwhile, others may be extensively excavated but have few or no later medieval buildings. A loose definition of town has also been adopted. Places which were boroughs are included, as are some market settlements. In the Weald there are smaller nucleated settlements which exhibit urban characteristics (Gardiner 1997a). Elsewhere, other settlements such as Emsworth and Botley (both Hants) aspired to be towns but appear to have remained villages, and these are referenced, but not discussed in detail.

The towns in the region varied in size and character and also experienced different traumatic events in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. All were affected by the Black Death to some degree, and several towns, for example Andover and New Alresford (both Hants), suffered from fires (see Roberts 1987). All of the ports were raided in the later fourteenth or early fifteenth centuries by the French, the Cinque ports of Sussex being most affected. The majority of the Sussex ports were impacted by coastal change which led to the silting of their harbours, whilst warfare impacted upon trade with France in the early fifteenth century (Gardiner 1995a; Mate 2006, 82–90).



ILLUS. 1 The distribution of towns and markets in the study area. *Boroughs*: 1: Alton; 2: Andover; 3: Arundel; 4: Basingstoke; 5: Battle; 6: Bletchingley; 7: Bramber; 8: Chichester; 9: Christchurch; 10: Dorking; 11: East Grinstead; 12: Fareham; 13: Farnham; 14: Guildford; 15: Haslemere; 16: Hastings; 17: Horsham; 18: Kingston; 19: Lewes; 20: Lymington; 21: Midhurst; 22: New Alresford; 23: Newtown; 24: Odham; 25: Overton; 26: Petersfield; 27: Pevensey; 28: Portsmouth; 29: Reigate; 30: Romsey; 31: Rye; 32: Seaford; 33: Shoreham; 34: Steyning; 35: Stockbridge; 36: Whitchurch; 37: Wickham; 38: Winchelsea; 39: Withering; *Larger Towns*: 40: Southampton; 41: Southwark; 42: Winchester; *Other Towns*: 43: Bishop's Waltham; 44: Chertsey; 45: Cobham; 46: Crawley; 47: Croydon; 48: Fordingbridge; 49: Gatton; 50: Godalming; 51: Havant; 52: Kingsclere; 53: Leatherhead; 54: Mayfield; 55: Petworth; 56: Ringwood; 57: Fordingbridge; 58: Rotherfield; 59: Titchfield.

The rise of the east coast ports also degraded their monopoly on the herring trade (see Jervis 2015 for further discussion). Only one town in the study area, Newtown (Hants), was deserted, although some, such as Bramber (West Sussex) and Seaford (East Sussex) reduced in size considerably. In the countryside, agricultural practices, on the whole, shifted from arable cultivation towards pastoral husbandry, although in all areas the agricultural economy remained mixed (Campbell 2000, 101; 431; Broadberry et al. 2015, 83). Although there was less grain to be traded, towns became centres of cloth production (an industry which revived from the 1340s; Oldland 2014; Broadberry et al. 2015, 144–6). Some markets associated with smaller settlements did disappear, leading to a concentration of trade in the towns, including within informal locations such as inns, although a commercial hierarchy persisted (Mate 2006, 23). Although impacting upon trade, warfare stimulated coastal economies as resources were required for boat building, weapons manufacture, and to sustain armies, including that stationed in Calais.

The picture is largely of towns persisting, as urban populations adapted to the challenges of the fifteenth century. The following discussion is chiefly concerned with how urban life changed in the later Middle Ages. It breaks into two parts. Firstly, the character of later medieval urban archaeology is assessed and, secondly, the role of towns in social and economic networks is reflected upon.

CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN URBAN SPACE

Recent approaches in urban archaeology and urban history have emphasized the performative elements of urban life, seeing towns more as improvised processes of 'becoming' urban, rather than repetitive performances of 'being urban' (Arande et al. 2002; Christopherson 2015; Jervis 2015, 2016; Lewis 2016; Brantz 2016; de Munck 2016). Town dwellers entered into discursive and productive relationships with urban space. Archaeological evidence illustrates these processes, but too often we have seen the scant remains of fifteenth-century urban life as inert, rather than 'as alive with generative capacity' (Arande et al. 2002, 516; see also Bennett 2009). To develop an approach which acknowledges the vibrancy of the urban environment it is necessary to look beyond evidence as an indicator of the intensity of occupation (and by implication of decay or growth), to think about the processes of continuity and transformation mediated through the spatial and built environments of towns.

One common explanation for the perceived lack of fourteenth and fifteenth century archaeology is that depositional practices changed as households moved away from dumping in pits, to removing waste from the town (Astill 2000, 227). However, even in the twelfth to fourteenth centuries few, if any, pits were dug as 'rubbish pits' (Brown 1999; Buteux and Jackson 2000; Bryant 2012; Jervis 2014, 119–30). Rather, pits dug as latrines, quarries or for industrial processes were filled with waste as they went out of use, with the majority being removed from towns, as it was in later periods. Furthermore, pits did continue to be dug. In Alton (Hants) excavations show a similar intensity of pit digging in the fifteenth century to the preceding thirteenth and fourteenth centuries (Millett 1983; Taylor 2007; Taylor and Hammond 2007), whilst in Romsey (Hants) a number of later medieval pits have been excavated. These are less frequent than in earlier periods, but functioned as cess pits and were filled with a mix of fresh contemporary waste and re-deposited earlier material (Jervis 2012). Similar

evidence comes from numerous other towns in the study area such as Christchurch (Dorset, formerly Hants) (Jarvis 1983), Bishop's Waltham (Hants) (Lewis 1985), Lymington (Hants) (Southern Archaeological Services 1995), Petersfield (Hants) (Fox and Hughes 1993), Chichester (West Sussex) (Down 1974; 1978), Lewes (East Sussex) (Freke 1978a; Russell 1990; Swift 2009a), Shoreham (West Sussex) (Stevens 2009), Battle (East Sussex) (James 2008), Crawley (West Sussex) (Stevens 1997; 2008), Reigate (Surrey) (Williams 1983), Bletchingley (Surrey) (Robertson 2003), Seaford (Freke 1978b); Croydon (LB Croydon, formerly Surrey) (Potter 1995; Davison and Potter 1995; Askew 2010), Kingston (LB Kingston, prev. Surrey) (Andrews et al 2002) and Chertsey (Surrey) (Poulton 1998a; Jones 1998a).

If we view the urban landscape as formed of interactions between people, spaces and the material world, it is not a fixed stage for action but develops through it (Jervis 2016). Processes of pit digging and waste disposal illustrate this point well. Pits do not reflect the mechanical repetition of a culture of pit deposition, but rather are the result of improvisations as people confronted waste material and conflicting uses of space. These improvisations were re-iterations of past experiences and, as such, the act of digging and disposing in pits would have been a familiar element to urban life, in this period, of wider socio-economic change. Pressure on space caused established practices of managing the urban environment, and the intermittent filling of redundant pits with convenient waste material, as a strategy of living with the town. It is noticeable that the highest densities of pits are in the towns which were growing, such as Alton, or within the crowded central areas. Elsewhere, a lessening of pressure on space through depopulation perhaps meant that activities could become more dispersed, causing pits to become more isolated and disassociated with living spaces. This can perhaps be seen in Dorking (Surrey) where pits have been excavated in peripheral areas (Hayman 1998) but scarce evidence of later medieval activity has been found in the town centre (O'Connell 1980; Pine 2003).

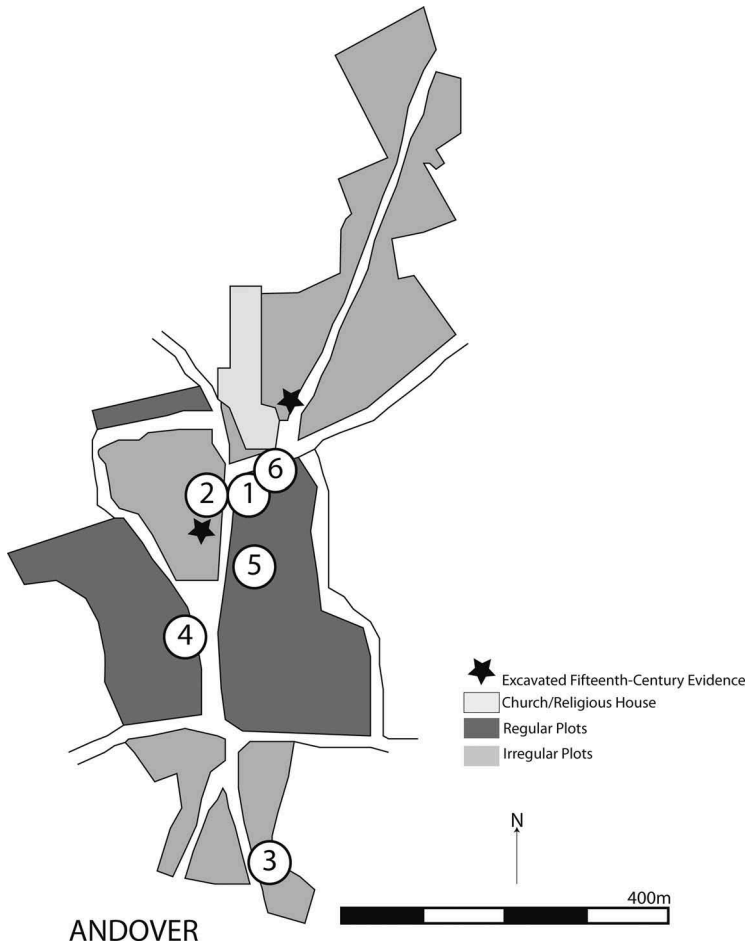
De-population undoubtedly lessened pressure on space in some areas, and in many towns empty spaces emerged. Two models are evident. The first is contraction, as peripheral areas were abandoned as property became available in town centres. This might be associated with formal re-planning, as proposed for Winchelsea (East Sussex) (Lilley 2015) and often saw the most recently colonized areas deserted first as in Lewes (Freke 1976; Swift 2009b) and Andover (Ellis and King 2013) (Illus 2 and 3). In Steyning (West Sussex), the excavated remains of decayed buildings at Fletcher's Croft suggest later medieval abandonment in favour of new rental properties in the core of the town (Evans 1986, 88). In Godalming (Surrey) excavations at the periphery of the town suggest shrinkage and a shift towards cultivation (Poulton 1998b–c; Oram 2005), a process also seen in Battle where, by the 1430s, most of the suburban plots had been acquired by burgesses and converted to gardens (Searle 1974, 356). The contraction of settlements can be associated with a falling population, but this need not be indicative of poverty, as can be seen through the evidence of rebuilding in Battle, Steyning and Lewes, for example. Rather, we might be seeing people taking opportunities to inhabit newer properties, likely to be rental properties, in the core of the town.

A second model for abandonment can be seen in towns such as Lymington where individual plots seemingly became abandoned in a piecemeal way, for example, at 52



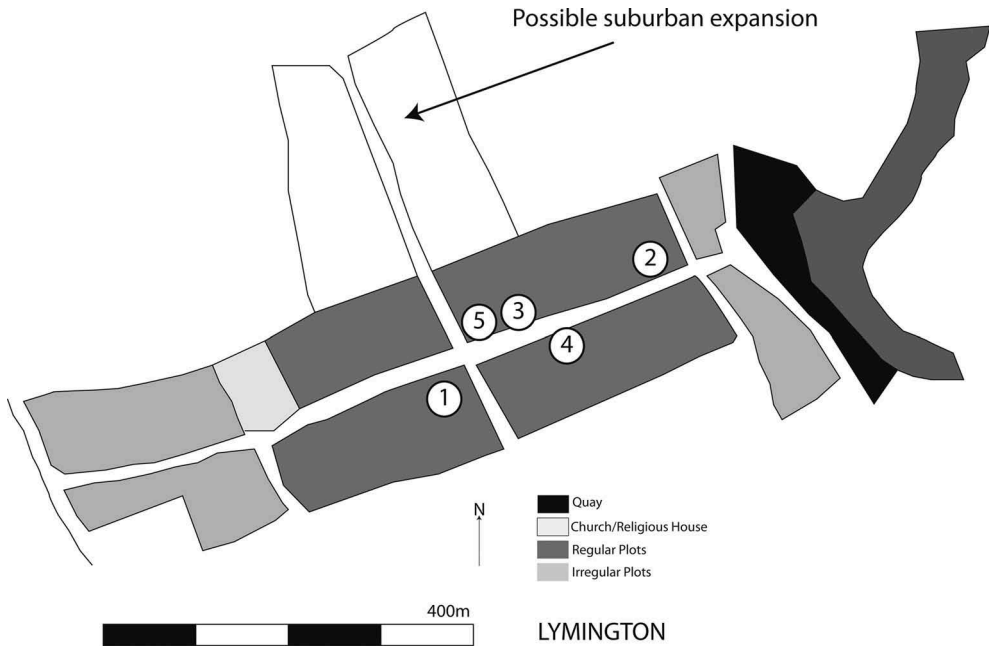
ILLUS. 2 Plan of Lewes. 1: Walwers Lane (no fifteenth century evidence excavated), 2: North Street (no fifteenth century evidence excavated); 3: St Martin's Lane (no fifteenth-century evidence excavated); 4: Baxters Print Works (evidence of continued occupation into fifteenth century); 5: Friar's Walk (evidence of continued occupation into fifteenth century); 6: 161 High Street (fourteenth–fifteenth century pottery excavated); 7: Market Place (late medieval encroachment); 8: 74–5 High Street (fifteenth-century timber framed house); 9: 67 High Street (Fifteenth-century timber framed house); 10: 92 and 99–100 High Street (fifteenth-century timber framed houses). Redrawn and simplified from Harris 2005b.

and 106 High Street, features were filled in during the fourteenth century with no evidence of later activity (Hammond and Preston 2005; Wessex Archaeology 2008), but with continued occupation, including deposition in pits elsewhere (Southern Archaeological Services 1995; Test Valley Archaeological Trust 2004) (Illus. 4). In Guildford (Surrey), we see both this process: for example, 71–73 High Street and 192–194 High Street were seemingly vacant in the later medieval period (Pine 2012a; 2012b), and the contraction of the settlement from peripheral areas such as Tunsgate and Quarry Street (Boas et al. 1994), with continued occupation at other sites on the High Street (Boas 1995; Boas et al. 1996). This may be associated with processes of engrossment (the merging of adjacent plots into a single larger one), as is well illustrated in Winchelsea (Martin and Rudling 2004, 106; Martin and Martin 2004, 98).



ILLUS. 3 Plan of Andover. 1: Chantry Street (Wealden hall post-dating 1435 fire); 2: Angel Inn (Built 1445); 3: Winchester Street excavations (Abandoned by late fourteenth century); 4: 19–21 and 25 High Street (fifteenth-century buildings); 5: 66 High Street (Dated 1450–75 (84) and 1465–99 (90)). Redrawn and simplified from Hampshire County Council undated

These spaces are typically seen as indicative of decay, but this interpretation is problematic. There were already open spaces within towns, which remained so into the later medieval period, and as Michael Smith (2010) argues, it is dangerous to impose the modern perspective that a town must be a high density settlement onto the past. In Chichester, open space with evidence for ploughing has been identified within the medieval town (Down 1978, 47). Excavations in Reigate show there to have been open areas behind the street frontage, occupied by layers associated with cultivation, and features such as malting kilns and even a pond (Woods 1974; Williams 1979; 1983; 1984; 1989; 2005; Clough 2004). Fish processing, ship-building and butchery took place on open ground at the Ropetackle site in Shoreham throughout the medieval period



ILLUS. 4 Plan of Lymington. 1: 52 High Street (no evidence after thirteenth century); 2: 126 High Street (hiatus from fourteenth–seventeenth centuries); 3: 102–3 High Street (late medieval pits cut thirteenth-century demolition layers); 4: 26–27 High Street (dated by dendrochronology to 1468–1503); 5: 100–101 High Street (fifteenth–sixteenth century). Redrawn and simplified from Hampshire County Council undated.

(Stevens 2011; Wallis 2016). Here, dumps of thirteenth-/fourteenth-century domestic waste in pits are not particularly fragmented or abraded, suggesting that these may be house clearance dumps, rather than the typical accretions of domestic waste associated with occupation. A similar area at Tanyard Lane in Steyning also functioned as an industrial area associated with butchery and pottery production until the mid-fifteenth century, when it became a croft (Freke 1979; Gardiner and Greatorex 1997). These spaces were neither empty nor domestic; they were used periodically in ways which leave only ephemeral evidence. These were spaces made significant through the performance of everyday activities related to craft and subsistence, they were essential for industrial and economic activity and they persisted in this role into the fifteenth century, thus becoming spatial mediators of continuity within a changing urban landscape.

New open spaces do not need to be seen as indicative of decay. Monica Smith (2008) demonstrates that unoccupied space can become important for social negotiation, whilst they might also be considered as an adaptation, introducing fire breaks into the town. These were spaces of potential and opportunity (see also Harding 2002, 563). We know, for example, that in Seaford land was given over to pasture (Gardiner 1995b, 192) and in Romsey, Hastings (East Sussex), Bishop's Waltham and Odiham (Hants) excavated

layers suggest horticulture was practiced (Devenish 1979; Pine 2002; Jervis 2012; Clarke 2013). At Guildford the abandoned castle bailey was probably adopted by the cloth industry (Poulton 2005, 149). These were not activities that were new to towns, but population decline offered opportunities for their expansion and separation from crowded domestic spaces, allowing activities to be practiced more intensively, and for some separation between the domestic and economic spheres to develop. The absence of dumps of fifteenth-century material, as seen in abandoned areas of Southampton castle, for example (Brown 2002, 150), suggest that a conscious effort was made to keep these spaces clear, providing evidence for communal co-operation in the management of public spaces and the respecting of claims to them. As Smith (2008) argues, these were spaces for consensus building, as communities identified empty areas, not as dumping grounds but as important parts of the urban landscape. There were exceptions; in Pevensey (East Sussex), plots abandoned due to flooding and erosion were used for dumping and in Fordingbridge (Hants) the rubble from a demolished building appears to have remained *in situ* (Dulley 1967; Harding and Light 2003). By the sixteenth century, this property was used as a tannery and a garden, showing how these open spaces could be adapted over time.

Urban experiences were clearly variable. Some towns, such as Alton, Arundel (West Sussex), Midhurst (West Sussex), Chertsey and Kingston expanded, and pressure on space was retained. In the continued presence of pits within burgage plots we see elements of urban life persisting, whilst open ground in towns retained its significance as space where craft processes, and potentially contaminating activities such as butchery, could take place. However, population decline also created potential for new engagements with urban space: we see newly open areas creating new spatial distinctions, separating domestic from economic or subsistence activities, as in Battle. Demographic change not only increased wages and personal prosperity, but relieved pressure on urban space, creating the potential for spaces to become significant in new ways.

BUILT SPACE

Evidence for rebuilding, both in the form of standing structures and excavated footings, provides further evidence for the transformation of urban spaces. The evidence for new building is problematic. The survival of buildings is limited by a variety of factors, as is well demonstrated by examples from Bramber and Bletchingley, both towns which are recognized as having experienced economic decline and de-population, but equally they possess good surviving examples of fifteenth-century buildings (Gray 2002; Harris 2004). The fifteenth century appears to have seen a surge in urban house building (Roberts 2003, 194). Construction is a continuous process, buildings are constantly modified or repaired, meaning that investment in architecture may not be a good indicator of prosperity (Johnson 2010, 65). However, the later Middle Ages see a number of architectural innovations and, therefore, the act of building can be considered less important than a consideration of what was being built and how existing structures were being adapted as new forms of domestic life emerged.

The most characteristic innovation is the development of the Wealden house. These jettied structures, with an open hall and private chambers, appear to have developed in towns, probably in Sussex (Alcock 2010). They are particularly common in the

Wealden ports of Rye, Winchelsea, and Hastings, as well as the inland towns of Robertsbridge (East Sussex), Crawley, and Battle, and are likely to have developed out of a need for rental properties (the structures being particularly efficient in their use of space) and, in part, due to the presence of specialist craftsmen in towns capable of constructing these buildings. The core distribution extends into southern Surrey (urban examples in Farnham and Godalming) and eastern Hampshire (urban examples in Alton, Petersfield, Titchfield, and Wickham) (Lewis 1990; Gray 2002). An example in Andover is an outlier (Lewis 1990).

If we accept the link between Wealden houses and rental properties, then their development is suggestive of inward migration. Rental property was always an important part of urban housing (Rutledge 1995; Harding 2002, 553; 557; Pearson 2009, 2) and such migration was common before the Black Death. However, it persisted despite this demographic shock, perhaps due to changes in the countryside and the growth of the labour demands of the urban cloth industry. Urban growth and migration can be taken as indicators of prosperity; however, it may also have had implications in terms of urban inequality. Lacking from the surviving housing stock in most towns are the smaller, single roomed properties which, in larger towns, are associated with the urban poor (Pearson 2009, 15). Examples might include cottages in East Grinstead (East Sussex) held by the parish, potentially to house the poor (Wood 1968) and the smaller properties above shops which formed a part of terraces. The majority of such housing would probably have been built by religious houses, who were better able to commit to the long term investment required to maintain such properties (see Dyer 2005, 159 for a discussion of investment in urban property). Whilst it is likely that such houses existed elsewhere and have since disappeared, the decreasing population can also be considered to have reduced the need for such property. Size, as well as location, was a key determinant of the value of a property, and, as demand on space reduced, as is perhaps demonstrated by the erection of houses side on to the street in Overton (Hants) and Titchfield, so poorer members of the population were able to inhabit larger plots containing multi-roomed dwellings.

Wealden halls are comparatively spacious properties and perhaps indicate a rising demand for higher quality rental properties by urban populations. As town-dwellers acquired wealth they were able to command a higher standard of living, and we can see the Wealden form as born out of these changes; both as more town dwellers came to be in a position to acquire additional property to rent and as urban labour became more profitable (Mate 2006, 108–110). Much of this rental property was constructed by institutions, for example, Battle Abbey built rental properties in the town (Hinton 1990, 192).

Fully floored houses also seem to emerge as an urban phenomenon in the region, occurring in Hampshire from around 1480 and pre-dating the insertion of floors into existing structures (Roberts 2003, 153; 2007), although in Surrey they do not emerge until the mid-sixteenth century (Wild and Moir 2013). In Winchelsea and Rye there are examples with added floors and structures built in this style from the mid-fifteenth century (Martin and Martin 2004, 143; Martin et al. 2009, 108). Such houses could still incorporate a commercial function on the ground floor, with more spacious living space on the upper storey.

The majority of houses retained an open hall, with modifications taking the form of extensions. In many cases extensions were constructed over multiple phases, as identified at Shovells in Hastings and 25–27 High Street, Robertsbridge (Martin and Martin 1999, 121–2; Martin 2003). Ancillary structures were built at Marlpins, Shoreham and a new wall and roof were added in the fifteenth century (Thomas 2005). Excavated remains show the later medieval rebuilding of properties in Alton, Seaford, Chichester, Hastings, and Pevensey, although it is difficult to tell how they differed from their predecessors (Down 1974, 51; 1978, 164; Rudling et al. 1993; Barber 1999; Currie 1999; Stevens 2004). However, a major change was the adoption of stone buildings in some towns, such as Battle (Searle 1974, 365). Additional wings and bays were added to houses in most towns, for example in the north Hampshire towns of Kingsclere, Odiham and Overton, as well as in Bishop's Waltham (Roberts 2003, 178–9). The evidence from dendrochronology, particularly for Hampshire and Sussex, shows that the changes Hoskins (1953) associated with a 'great rebuilding' in the mid-sixteenth century — modernization and a surge in building activity — can be seen to have begun around a century or so earlier (Roberts 2007; see also Johnson 1997, 149–50) and was perhaps a gradual process. Johnson (1993; 1997) links changes to architectural space to a process of 'closure' with later medieval roots, which continues into the post-medieval period (see also Hinton 1999). Here it is more pertinent to think of these changes as indicative of the adoption of new ways of living, rather than to think too deeply about the meaning of the architecture itself; the archaeological evidence clearly demonstrates that urban households were investing in new ways of living, both by building new houses and modernising existing ones.

Although we cannot see re-building as an index of prosperity, we can think about its implications for urban life and society. Demographic change created opportunities for people to acquire both property and wealth, and created spaces of ambiguity within urban hierarchies. In Rye, for example, new people were able to enter the urban elite thanks to the demographic impact of plague and raiding (Draper 2009, 100). Increased wealth allowed people to construct new material worlds, the process of commerce having already served to begin to re-configure existing concepts of property (see Howell 2010). Urban architecture became one way in which people confronted the implications of commerce. Crucially, people were in a better position to acquire wealth and had greater freedom to dispose of it, fuelling a commodity market but also creating opportunities for the erection of properties for rent, and the modification of their own homes as architecture became a medium for the display of fashion and taste, for example through the construction of Wealden frontages (Martin et al. 2009, 100–101). Domestic buildings, therefore, not only tell us that there was individual wealth available but, crucially, that societal restrictions on display were degrading.

A new feature of later medieval towns are inns. The best documented within the study area is the Angel, Andover, built by Winchester College in 1435 (Roberts 1991), but there are also surviving examples, or possible examples, in Battle, Bramber, Kingsclere, Petersfield, Romsey, Lymington, Chertsey, and Guildford. Inns developed out of increasing long distance travel as a result of commerce, making them a phenomena emerging from the socio-economic conditions of the later medieval period. The quantity of inns relates both to the size of a town but also its location in relation to

overland trade routes. Inns were often founded by institutions or important landowners, and innkeepers were wealthy members of urban populations, with some investing in rural land (Hare 2013, 486–93). Importantly, inns were associated with informal trading outside of the marketplace, meaning that trade bypassed civic tolls and created opportunities for further accumulations of personal wealth (Dyer 1989; Hare 2013). Here then, we can see a further transition in urban life, as commerce created new features within urban society, but inns functioned as locations where established rules of commerce could be re-negotiated through informal trading. Encroachment into marketplaces in towns such as Lewes, Kingsclere, and Farnham also hints at changes in the organisation of commerce, with permanent shops, such as those surviving at Newbury Street, Whitchurch (Hants) (Hampshire AHBR 3513–4), replacing temporary stalls (see Searle 1974, 365–6 for Battle), strengthening links between traders and particular markets.

Bridbury (1981, 14) argues that investment in churches provides evidence of urban buoyancy. Within the study area few churches were in severe disrepair. The church at Bramber was gradually demolished through the fourteenth–fifteenth centuries, and the parish was amalgamated with that of Botolphs (Harris 2004, 15). St Giles, Winchelsea was severely damaged by French raids and fell outside of the contracted town (Martin and Martin 2004, 80–2). The church in Seaford was in a poor state in the 1450s, but repairs were undertaken and major repairs were also made to St Clements and All Saints in Hastings following raids in 1377 (Harris 2005a, 18; 2010, 36–7). A merging of parishes was proposed for Lewes in 1377 but was not carried out, and works continued to be undertaken to the towns churches through the fifteenth century (Harris 2005b, 20). The most extensive rebuilding took place in Arundel, where the church was rebuilt in the perpendicular style in the later fourteenth–fifteenth centuries and two chantries were founded, and in Alton where a new chancel and nave were erected in the fifteenth century (Harris 2009, 31; Hampshire County Council undated.). Where fifteenth century work can be seen through later modifications the principal additions were towers (for example in Overton and Chertsey) or aisles (as in Fordingbridge and Whitchurch). Elsewhere there were occasional insertions of new windows and repairs to roofs, as in Kingsclere after a fire in 1402 (Hampshire County Council undated.). This continued investment in churches was occurring at a time when the principal urban religious houses such as Lewes Priory and Chertsey Abbey experienced little, if any, investment in new building (although Battle Abbey is an exception) (Hare 1985; Poulton 1988; Lyne 1997). This is well illustrated by Romsey Abbey, where fifteenth-century work is limited to the addition of an aisle to the parish church (Scott 1996, 94). It is well established that the later Middle Ages saw a rise in popular piety and the investment of communities' newfound wealth in parish churches, perhaps fuelled by a fear of retribution caused by the Black Death and agricultural failures, but also as a symbol of communal pride (Morris 1989, 352). Whilst investment in churches does show that there was wealth in towns, the near universal nature of this investment suggests that it is part of a wider cultural shift in urban life.

Castles at Pevensey, Bramber, Hastings, Lewes, Guildford, and Midhurst had largely fallen out of use by the fifteenth century. At Pevensey and Guildford, areas were used for industrial activities (Poulton 2005, 149; Lyne 2009, 136), but elsewhere there is

remarkably little evidence of any fifteenth-century activity. This may, in part be due to the fact that Lewes, Bramber, and Pevensey all seem to have contracted, meaning there was not pressure on space, whilst the fifteenth century cores of Hastings and Midhurst were some distance from the castles.

Historical records suggest continued investment in the town defences of Hastings (Harris 2010, 19). A new defensive circuit was planned for Winchelsea in the early fifteenth century, but work was suspended once war with France ceased (Martin and Martin 2004, 46–8). Expenditure on Rye's defences continued through the fourteenth century, but the walls were largely ineffective against a major raid in 1377. In the fifteenth century, several towers were leased to private individuals, but later in the century the town was re-armed with artillery (Draper 2009, 173–5; Martin et al. 2009, 41–60). These examples show that where there was a perceived need for defence, and that investment was possible and civic organisation persisted. Walls were important for creating a sense of security, which was vital for attracting trade. A contrast is provided by Christchurch, where the wall was robbed for construction materials (Jarvis 1983; Davies 1984). Town ditches at Farnham and Midhurst were filled and built over, although these probably did not have a defensive function, instead serving to mark the borough limits (Brooks 1998, 104; Poulton and Riall 1998; Magilton and Thomas 2001, 122–4).

We also see civic investment in the erection of a market hall in Battle (Searle, 1974 365) and a possible public building in Titchfield (Hampshire County Council undated.). Centralized planning is particularly evident in the expansion of Portsmouth's port facilities in the fifteenth century (Fox and Barton 1986). Whilst different interpretations can be put forward; buoyant towns investing in new infrastructure, or towns trying to maintain their reputation and stimulate investment, these projects emerged from the ongoing performance of civic administrative structures, showing that these persisted into the fifteenth century.

Buildings do not provide clear evidence of decline or growth. Rather, they demonstrate patterns of continuity and transformation in urban lifestyles. Commerce and changes to the labour market created opportunities for investment in urban and rural property and in churches. Through modification, houses became a means of displaying new-found wealth and allowed people to adopt new lifestyles. Investment in churches and civic infrastructure shows evidence of coherent urban administration persisting, although the Black Death opened up opportunities for new people to gain influence. Commerce created opportunities for communities to invest in parish churches and also stimulated changes such as the development of inns, which were both a symptom of commerce and a driver in its changing character as it moved increasingly into informal settings.

Taken together, the excavated and standing remains are indicative of a process of transition in urban lifestyles, as urban communities responded to opportunities and wider socio-economic shifts. It is clear, however, that towns experienced varying fortunes and communities adapted to changing circumstances in different ways. The remainder of this article is concerned with exploring the wider context of these changes, to identify some of the variables which caused the divergence of urban experiences between the Black Death and the sixteenth century.

TOWNS IN CONTEXT

Prior to the Black Death, towns were a diverse set of settlements, which were founded to perform different functions and developed different characters (see Dyer 2003, 106). The large port of Winchelsea was a very different kind of a place, formed and performed through different sets of social interactions, to a smaller inland town such as Crawley or an administrative centre like Reigate. Borough or market charters, which secured trading privileges and defined a place's commercial status, were an important determinant of the trajectories along which places developed. Whitchurch is a particularly good example of this. Founded as a market on the estate of Winchester Cathedral Priory, which was principally managed to provision the estate rather than for commercial profit (Hare 2006), its borough charter did not provide the same level of autonomy as that of other places such as Petersfield, and it struggled to develop and maintain a strong urban character (Deveson 2000). Whilst this might be seen as a town which was not expanding, we can also view Whitchurch as a place founded for a specific purpose. The political and commercial relationships of which it was constituted were different to those of other towns, such as those on the more commercially focussed estate of the Bishop of Winchester, and therefore it can be seen not as a stagnating or declining town, but as a place in which a different type of urban experience developed. Therefore, if we view towns as bundles of social interactions, continually being re-formed or re-iterated through the formation of socio-economic relationships, some of which are historically determined being rooted in foundation charters, it becomes obvious that towns may develop along multiple trajectories and that a single form of urbanism or urban experience does not exist. This is apparent in the variability observed in the archaeological record, with places adapting in different ways to the challenges and opportunities which emerged as spaces of ambiguity were created within the urban landscape, as the result of population decline and environmental and economic change.

By taking this approach, therefore, this article proposes that rather than focussing on decline or growth, we can instead seek to understand how the performance of towns changed. So far this has been considered in relation to urban spaces themselves and the buildings within them. However, urban performances expand beyond the limits of the town. In what follows, the ways in which towns changed with the commercial and political networks of which they were a part is considered. Clearly some towns did contract, but it will be proposed that this was not the result of a national phenomenon, but rather the result of localized performances which changed the character of places.

COMMERCIAL NETWORKS

In considering the networks of which small towns were a part, it is necessary to consider the implications of the larger urban centres. Of these, London and its suburb of Southwark had the biggest influence. Even after the Black Death, London's dominance over England's economy continued, or even grew, the city being three or four times larger in terms of population than York or Bristol (Galloway 1999, 91). Examinations of manorial records and inquisitions post mortem have demonstrated that the London market had implications for the management of agricultural resources across south-

eastern England. Southwark also grew through the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, due to immigration (particularly from Flanders) and the acquisition of property by the gentry (Carlin 1996). Rises in rent suggest a population surge, with the town benefitting from its proximity to London (Carlin 1996, 130). The growth of Chertsey, Kingston, and Croydon can be linked to their role as intermediate markets for agricultural resources. In all three towns there is evidence for suburban growth and, in the case of Kingston at least, extensive modifications to urban property and infrastructure (Andrews et al. 2002). After the Black Death, agriculture in northern Surrey changed, with a re-orientation towards pasture. This partly represents a general trend, but also relates to a decrease in the demand for the cheaper grains such as rye and oats traditionally produced here (Campbell et al. 1992; Galloway and Murphy 1998, 12; Mate 2006, 40). Through the analysis of grain prices Galloway (2000, 34) suggests a later fourteenth century dis-integration of established grain supply routes to London along the Thames, as markets became more localized in their focus. Correspondingly, the period sees an increase in the coastal supply of grain from the south-west to London (Galloway 2000, 38).

Despite these changes, the towns of Surrey and Sussex continued to play an important role in supplying the capital. Produce was gathered at these regional markets, rather than reaching London through direct trade. Surrey was a major supplier of wood and charcoal. Building timber was traded through Kingston and charcoal through Croydon, for example (Galloway et al. 1996, 453–4; 465; Murphy and Galloway 1998, 12). Dorking also supplied London woodmongers (Galloway et al. 1996, 463). Rye continued to supply fish and cattle to London and London merchants bought up much of the produce from orchards in Surrey (Mate 2006, 44–6). The expansion of the Wealden cloth industry was largely built on credit from London merchants, and London was a major supplier of dyestuffs to this region (Mate 2006, 55). Analysis of debts owed to London merchants shows Surrey to have been particularly closely integrated into the metropolitan economy (Galloway 1999, 96).

Although London dominated the economy of Surrey in particular, we should see the network of towns and smaller markets as not in competition with the capital, but as part of a commercial network oriented towards it. We can see clearly in changes in land use how London influenced agriculture, but towns, as conduits for produce, continued to function much as they had done before. In considering the persistence of markets at a national scale, Masschaele (1994, 268–9) has concluded that although some markets became unviable, marketing networks generally proved to be remarkably resilient (see also Galloway 2001, 127). The persistence of regional marketing networks can be demonstrated archaeologically through the distribution of pottery types, with distinctive zones of exchange being apparent in all three counties in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries (Streeten 1981; Jones 1998b; Jervis 2011; 2012). These zones seem to expand in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, in western Hampshire; for example, similar redwares are found over a wide area between the Avon and Test Valleys, however this may relate more to the organisation of production than changes in the role of market settlements (Jervis 2012). In this area, a marketing system can be seen in which small towns such as Romsey and Andover were interspersed with smaller markets. These appear to have functioned alongside, rather than in competition with, minor markets

taking place on Monday and Wednesday to coincide with Tuesday, Friday, and weekend markets in Romsey and Salisbury.

The evidence for integrated commercial networks is further demonstrated by a general lack of competition between towns. The most striking example of competition is in the Adur Valley, where Bramber was founded to take trade away from the established centre of Steyning. Here, Steyning, the more established town with evidence for metal working, pottery production and butchery (Freke 1979; Barton 1986; Evans 1986; Gardiner and Greatorex 1997), won out. Bramber seems to have had a narrow commercial base, principally based on service and salt extraction, meaning it did not have the diversity to adapt once salt extraction became unviable and its administrative function ceased (Holden and Hudson 1981; Ridgeway 2000). Elsewhere, where there was a well-established urban network, markets struggled to be elevated to the status of towns, an example being Botley in south Hampshire (Hughes 1994, 202). This market in particular demonstrates the impact of the organisation of rural landholding, being at the fringe of the integrated Winchester estate and unable to become established due to its commercial dominance.

Ports demonstrate the highest diversity in fortunes amongst the towns in the study area. Pottery well illustrates shifting trading patterns, with French wares being less prevalent, as commerce shifted towards the Low Countries and the Mediterranean. This is particularly apparent in Winchelsea and Shoreham. Jervis (2015) has reviewed the evidence for the Cinque Ports and argued that their relationship with their hinterland and the diversity of their economic base was key to their success. In Rye and Winchelsea shipyards remained in use, stimulating demand for wood, iron and labour, with the ports retaining a military function into the fifteenth century (Mate 2006, 178–80). Open space at the Ropetackle site in Shoreham probably remained in use as a place for ship building and fish processing. These ports, as well as Hastings, functioned as centres for the processing and marketing of fish, with local fishing becoming increasingly important due to the decline of the Cinque Ports' role in the east coast herring industry. These ports had access to a varied hinterland, with close ties existing between rural landowners and burgesses, with some burgesses acquiring rural land (Saul 1986, 179; Mate 2006, 200). Therefore, they were able to adjust to the flooding of the marsh once coastal defences were breached (Gardiner 1995a). In contrast when the Pevensey Levels, largely in the hands of ecclesiastical landowners, flooded, arable husbandry became unviable, stimulating a change to pasture and limiting opportunities for waged employment, with agriculture on the Levels being slow to recover (Dulley 1966, 37–9; Mate 2006, 172). In western Hampshire, Lymington and Christchurch also persisted as port towns. Lymington benefitted from close links with the Isle of Wight, although administrative links ceased once the manor became separated from the Honour of Christchurch in the fourteenth century (Page 1911). These towns benefitted from a lack of competition as regional markets and from their ability to exploit a large hinterland through maritime links. They contrast strongly with Fareham in the east of the county, where there is no strong evidence for growth or investment. Fareham had to compete with Southampton, which had a wide and well developed commercial network and Portsmouth, which had a military as well as commercial function. The

decline of Fareham as a port therefore demonstrates the importance of a diverse and well developed socio-economic network, which was apparently lacking here.

The study of overland trade from the major port of Southampton provides further evidence of the commercial network which developed in the region. In the fourteenth century, Southampton suffered from a decline in trade and a French raid in 1338, recovery from which was stuttering (Platt 1973, 119). The fifteenth century saw investment and economic growth as the port benefitted from Italian trade (Platt 1973). It was through this trade that dyestuffs were imported into the region, traded overland to production centres such as Romsey, Andover and New Alresford (Hare 2015). The prosperity of these towns was built on their location, able to exploit the downland sheep economy, with ready access to a major port for the supply of essential resources and the exportation of produce. The strength of this development can be seen in the growth of Newbury (Berkshire) and Salisbury as cloth production centres (Yates 2007, 81; Hare 2015). The 'decline' of Winchester is well documented, with it falling from the twelfth richest town in England in 1334 to thirty-fifth in 1524/5 (Dyer 1991, 62–3). However, with a population of between four and seven thousand in the fifteenth century it remained a major focus of regional commercial activity. Whilst remaining an important regional market, Winchester did not stifle the growth of towns in the region which operated within a constantly developing economic network. Indeed, the decline of the St. Giles' fair may have served to disperse commercial activity. The fact that the commercial landscape remained fairly stable, yet the character of towns, in terms of expansion and shrinkage and processes of rebuilding varies, suggests that further factors influenced the trajectories along which towns developed. One of these, political administration, appears particularly important.

THE INTERSECTION OF COMMERCE AND POWER

One major change in the later Middle Ages in the region is the structure of power and regional administration, which is closely linked to commercial networks. For example, in Sussex, each of the rapes (a system of land division which divided the county into lordships) contains at least one port and a market town in the Weald, as well as a network of smaller markets (Jervis 2016). Here the marketing network can be perceived as a system of estate management, allowing goods from the Weald, such as timber, iron and leather, as well as agricultural produce from the coastal plain and downland areas, to circulate. As lineages ended, and lands were re-assigned the administrative landscape of the county changed, with potential implications for their associated sites of commerce.

The Rape of Lewes provides an opportunity to explore this relationship. Lewes was the commercial and administrative heart of the de Warenne estate. Following the death of John de Warenne in 1347 the estate was absorbed into the Honour of Arundel before being dispersed in the fifteenth century (Salzmann 1940, 1–7). Lewes became the possession of an absentee landlord and established commercial networks were potentially disrupted. Lewes probably shrank due to the Black Death, but did not recover to its former size. The town was re-planned, with new buildings along the High Street and encroachment into the market place creating a more compact town, with peripheral areas being abandoned (Freke 1976; Freke 1978a; Swift 2009a; 2009b). The changes in administration did not just affect the town, they also, in some cases, loosened restrictions

on the transfer of rural land, allowing yeoman and gentry farmers to prosper as sheep husbandry became an increasingly important component of the economy (Mate 2006, 182–5, 206). The gradual recovery of Lewes may relate to these developments, with rural changes fuelling regional economic resurgence, which allowed wealth to be redistributed and materialize in new urban and rural buildings. Reigate, the Surrey seat of the family, was also affected by this change. However, it had the benefit of natural resources, Reigate building stone, which provided it with an economic niche (Tatton-Brown 2001), meaning that it had a broader purpose and was able to adapt to the disruption caused by the dispersal of the de Warenne estate.

Like Lewes, Bletchingley, the Surrey seat of the de Clare family, appears to have lost its commercial and administrative significance after the break-up of the family's estate. As the social interactions which underpinned it dissolved, so the town might be perceived as falling into economic decline (Robertson 2003, 5). A contrast can be drawn with Petersfield, also on the de Clare estate, but isolated from its core. Here, the economy appears to have thrived (see Fox and Hughes 1993), with the town able to exploit a diverse hinterland, being a part of a regional economic system more akin to that in the Test Valley. Elsewhere, for example on the estate of the Bishop of Winchester (see below), administrative stability likely contributed to the maintenance of regional commercial networks and promoted commerce and prosperity.

A further observation can be drawn in relation to the apparently persistent commercial networks in western Hampshire discussed above. Here there was a more fragmented pattern of landholding, with neighbouring manors forming a part of different dispersed estates, or being the single holdings of local landowners. Around Andover, for example, manors were held by Hyde Abbey, local landowners such as the de Foxcotts, with other lands forming a part of larger estates such as that of the descendants of the de Clare family. Furthermore, a number of manors passed through a number of different lords, particularly those of Monxton and Quarley, which were originally the possession of alien priories (Page 1911). In this area there was, therefore, both administrative fragmentation and a degree of instability. Exchange networks in these areas seemingly persisted and might be considered more resilient as these local exchange networks were not as closely linked to the economic and political stability of an individual estate.

As commerce and networks of power changed, opportunities developed for the relationship between towns and their hinterlands to take new forms, for example as burgesses acquired and invested in rural land as was the case in the Wealden hinterland of Winchelsea and Rye (Saul 1986, 179). As rural producers had more surplus to trade thanks to demense land being taken out of direct cultivation commerce evolved, with new sites of informal exchange, principally inns, developing (Dyer 2005, 178). Changes to the rural economy, including patterns of landholding, therefore had implications for towns and it is to the role of towns within the rural economy that we can now turn.

TOWNS AND THE RURAL ECONOMY

A key economic development across the region was the growth of the cloth industry. In Guildford and Andover, it is proposed that open spaces were used for the drying of cloth, and it is likely that elsewhere open space in towns was colonized by this industry (Youngs et al. 1985, 180; Poulton 2005, 149). Population decline made agricultural

labour expensive and arable cultivation less profitable, stimulating a turn towards pastoral husbandry and the leasing out of demesne land (Campbell 2000, 171; Dyer 2005, 194–7; Broadberry et al. 2015, 83). This, in turn, may have stimulated an increase in horticultural or subsistence activities within towns, as can be seen in the conversion of suburban plots to gardens in Battle (Searle 1974, 356) and, potentially, in the layers excavated in open spaces in Reigate (see discussion above). However, this was not only a supply-led shift; the fifteenth century saw a rise in domestic demand for cloth, although demand and production fluctuated with general economic trends (Oldland 2014, 30). Rural supply and urban demand came together to bring about a major change to the regional economy (Galloway 2001, 126).

North Hampshire saw particularly profound agricultural changes following the Black Death. Postan (1973, 41–8) saw it as an area in agricultural decline, however Hare (2001) argues that cloth production brought prosperity. Inquisitions post mortem suggest a shift towards pastoralism, with up to 90% of non-working animals being sheep by the fifteenth century. Cultivation patterns changed to those already dominant on the more pastorally focussed downland (Campbell 2000, 106–20; 286–8). The desertion of rural settlements and the evidence for expansion in places such as Kingsclere (where buildings encroached onto the marketplace) suggests that rural populations migrated into towns, replenishing the population and taking advantage of labour opportunities brought about by economic developments. Such inward migration likely drove the construction of new rental properties. These changes had a less dramatic impact on the chalk downland, where existing mixed economies continued to be practiced, but on the West Sussex coastal plain an intensive arable regime, where virtually all animals were working livestock, was generally abandoned after the Black Death in favour of a more mixed economy and the farming out of demesne land (Brandon 1971, 118–9; Campbell 2000, 284; Mate 2006, 181).

Towns in the Weald had a very different trajectory of development to others within the study area. These markets were generally later foundations, often being unusual nucleated settlements within a landscape of dispersed farmsteads (Gardiner 1997b; Jervis 2016). These towns demonstrate particularly clear historical and archaeological evidence of growth (Cornwall 1976, 16–17; 23; Mate 2006, 11–14). They benefitted from the persistent demand for Wealden produce, such as wood, iron and leather, as well as the development of the cloth industry (Gardiner 1996, 134; Mate 2006, 173–7). Arable productivity in this area was lower than elsewhere, with specialized husbandry practices developing (Gardiner 1996, 130–2). As pastoralism expanded there was little need for adjustment in an area in which this was already an important element of rural life. These small towns expanded as centres of production of leather, cloth and iron.

Crawley is a good example of this trend. Developing as a centre of iron production it remained prosperous throughout the fifteenth century. Several new buildings were constructed on the High Street and a tower was added to the church. Excavations reveal continued occupation and iron production from the thirteenth–fifteenth centuries (Stevens 1997; Stevens 2008). Similarly, Robertsbridge experienced fourteenth–sixteenth century growth and expansion, with a number of excavated features dating to this period and at least ten later medieval houses surviving (Gardiner 1997b). The Weald produced staple resources for which demand was always high, and was further

stimulated by re-building, military activity and the personal prosperity of the fifteenth century. These towns, founded as centres of production, filled a particular niche within the emerging commercial networks and were able to both expand and develop a less ambiguously urban character as they did so.

Away from the Weald, some towns, such as Chichester, were able to exploit their situation within commercial networks in which rural producers were shifting towards sheep husbandry, but others were a part of estate networks where rural and urban economies were closely tied. The network of towns and markets founded by the Bishop of Winchester can be viewed as a coherent commercial network, with smaller weekday markets creating opportunities for produce to be sold on at the weekend markets in Titchfield, Bishop's Waltham, and Petersfield, for example. The estate towns became specialized centres for the processing and marketing of cloth. The estate was already a major wool producer before the Black Death and the expansion in demand allowed these towns to thrive, with the well-established network in this area perhaps stimulating growth in other towns in the region such as Alton.

A contrast is provided by Newtown which was entirely abandoned by 1606 (Beresford 1959, 197–200). No archaeological evidence of the town has been found and the extent to which it achieved urban status remains debated. Newtown's failure is generally attributed to the success of Newbury, which was developing as a cloth centre (Yates 2007, 28–31). Newtown likely functioned as a centre for the marketing of grain from the Bishop's estate. As arable husbandry reduced in importance it lost significance. Rather than being a 'failed' town, Newtown was made irrelevant by these changes, an impact heightened by it being a comparative latecomer to the urban scene, meaning that it was unable to establish economic diversity. This accords with the interpretation of 'failed' towns in the Midlands put forward by Goddard (2011) in which towns can be viewed as short term commercial adaptations within the context of the manorial economy. Similarly, Overton, like Newtown, was situated at the geographical periphery of the estate and did not experience significant growth. Here, the demesne was leased out in the fifteenth century (Roberts 1995). Across the region small towns continued to be closely linked to the management of rural manors and estates and it is impossible to understand patterns of growth and decline without understanding each town within its local context.

SUMMARY

This broad analysis has demonstrated that the role of towns within regional commercial and administrative networks were highly variable, with urban communities responding to external change but also driving developments in regional economies. Some towns had to make little adjustment. In the Test Valley, for example, commercial networks apparently persisted and the administrative structure was fairly stable. On the Winchester estate the presence of an integrated estate system allowed towns to continue to develop as centres for the processing of agricultural surplus, being accelerated by the growth of the cloth industry. A similar situation can be suggested for the Weald, where economic conditions favoured the existing agricultural regime. Elsewhere, urban communities had to adapt. Some, such as Newtown and Seaford, lacked the diverse functional base required to survive, but others, such as Lewes and Reigate, re-oriented

as changes in administration created opportunities for townspeople to invest in rural property and rural prosperity allowed the market to persist. In northern Hampshire, small towns absorbed displaced rural communities as the economy re-oriented towards pastoralism. Whilst archaeological evidence shows that urban environments and landscapes changed from the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries, they changed in relation to external factors. Certainly some towns prospered more than others, but the overwhelming pattern is not one of contrasting fortunes, but of the transformation of towns and their role within continually evolving economic and administrative systems.

DISCUSSION

This article has argued that the terms of the debate over later medieval towns need to be changed. As identified by Astill (2000), archaeological evidence is extremely problematic for assessing urban decline or growth, yet this evidence also offers the potential to provide new perspectives on urban life. An acknowledgement of the variability of urban experiences, histories and contexts shifts the focus of research towards the processes, or social interactions, which constitute towns. As these processes change, so ideas about the role of the town and of urban life change. It has been established that the countryside was transformed and that the development of towns relates to these processes. By seeing towns as sites for the entangling of processes which are linked to other places and times we can understand, not only how the town was transformed, but also how multiple urban trajectories emerged in the later Middle Ages (see also Bintliff 1997, 85). Thinking in this way allows us to contemplate what it was about urban life which allowed it to persist and how the causality, or agency, which emerges from processes of dwelling in towns allowed urban communities to transform and adapt to natural, social and economic challenges. Palliser (1988, 2) states that economic activity need not equate to economic prosperity, however, it does reveal a persistence of urban function and character. Archaeology is better placed to understand urban character than economic prosperity and a consideration of archaeological evidence allows us to move away from questioning whether towns declined or prospered, to examining how processes of becoming urban were transformed.

At the regional scale, it is apparent that long-established economic networks persisted, but that their character evolved, adjusting to the impact of population loss on food demand and the labour market, adapting to an economy in which cloth was a major commodity and re-organising as some established elements of the estate system fragmented. In a limited number of cases these changes impacted negatively upon towns, but in most, urban communities adapted to these changes and appear to have prospered from them. Towns persisted as material entities, as collections of buildings and spaces, and they were rooted in the landscape by past action, with their role re-enforced by the efficacy of charters and the rights granted within them. However, each town was formed through unique historical processes, since their formation they had followed individual trajectories, developing distinctive characters and binding them to local networks of commerce and power. It is, therefore, unsurprising that we see a variety of responses to the socio-economic changes of

the later middle ages, with some towns becoming more compact or being re-planned and others becoming more open as spaces allowed for a separation of certain domestic and industrial processes. The building of new rental properties and inns relate to the inward migration of labourers from the countryside and the persistence of long distance trade, as well as the adaption of commercial arrangements. Investment in new styles of house points to changes in living standards and an investment in particular types of lifestyle. Crucially, however, the contraction of towns, either in terms of open spaces developing or the abandonment of peripheral areas, does not generally seem to indicate a decline in urban character. Towns still performed specific roles in regional networks, as markets, centres of production and as ports. The changes we see in the excavated record can be interpreted within this context; not as a lessening of the intensity of urban life, but as a transformation in how urban landscapes emerged. Whilst changes in rural land ownership and cultivation disrupted long distance supply routes, such as those to London, at a local level marketing networks adapted and persisted.

CONCLUSION

It is easy to view an absence of clear archaeological evidence for continuity as indicative of a historically attested process of decline. However, the evidence upon which a historical narrative of decline has been built is ambiguous at best and the evidence for re-building contradicts this view. Here an approach has been developed which situates the archaeological evidence within a wider context and offers a different perspective on fifteenth century urbanism. Clearly, urban life in the fifteenth century was different to that in the thirteenth, but so was rural life and administrative organization. What is remarkable is that in the face of catastrophic agricultural failures and epidemics towns were able to persist and retain much of their distinctiveness, and this could only be achieved through adaptation. By problematizing open spaces, asking what they were for, and what changes in the organisation of domestic spaces mean, the fragmented urban archaeological record can underpin the development of a new narrative. Within this narrative, medieval communities were not passive victims of plague and agricultural crisis, but actively adapted and transformed their ways of life in response to these changes, and played a part in driving the commercial developments which characterize the transition from the later Middle Ages to the early modern period.

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