

# TOWNS AND TRADE

The classic definition of an Anglo-Saxon town was that it had a defensive wall or stockade, a mint, and a marketplace. Some of Alfred's *burhs* were old settlements re fortified. Others were new forts set up in locations which later developed into fully fledged towns. An example of this was the town of Oxford, which was of no special importance in Alfred's reign, to judge from contemporary evidence, but which had developed apace by the year 1000. The tenth-century records of the abbey of Abingdon describe how the citizens of Oxford got together to pay for canal and rechanneling work on the River Thames, so that boats could sail up the river more easily to do business with the town.

Money, and the increasing amount of reliable coinage in circulation, provided the crucial factor in the growth of those towns which developed from Alfred's military centres into marketplaces. Warwick, Stafford, Buckingham, Oxford — most of the county towns of modern England originated in the tenth century. Roughly 10 percent of England's population was living in towns by the year 1000, which meant that the country's farming methods had developed the efficiency to produce a 10 percent surplus — while the town dwellers were generating sufficient profit to purchase the foodstuffs and other supplies they needed.

Eyeing this growth in the money economy with both apprehension and covetousness, Alfred's successors tried to stake their claim to some regulation — and to taking a cut — of the growing volume of urban business:

I, King Athelstan [ran a decree of around 930 A.D.], with the advice of my Archbishop, Wulfhelm, and my other bishops also, inform the reeve in every borough,

The Romans based their occupation of Britain around a few fortified and elegant urban communities, which were resorts and garrisons as much as they were towns. Living in a city, or *civis*, was the essence of Roman civilisation, and the barbarians who subdued Rome were literally "uncivilised" in that they were not city dwellers. The Anglo-Saxons only took over a few Roman sites like London, Bath, Cirencester, and Lincoln. Their preferred unit of habitation was the village, and England remained predominantly rural until the reign of King Alfred, when the threat of the Vikings provoked his construction of a network of defended settlements known as *burhs* — the root word of the modern borough.

and pray you in the name of God and All His saints, and command you also by my friendship . . . that no one shall buy goods worth more than twenty pence outside a town; but he shall buy within the town, in the presence of the market-reeve or some other trustworthy man, or again, in the presence of the reeve at a public meeting.<sup>59</sup>

This regulation suggests there was a flourishing black economy in Anglo-Saxon England, with businessmen quietly doing deals between themselves, out of sight of the king's reeve and out of reach of his tolls and taxes — and the disappearance of these laws in subsequent generations suggests that the royal attempts to play trade commissar were abandoned. Free enterprise triumphed, and business expanded accordingly. In 1000 A.D. England's chief salt town was Droitwich, near Worcester, where the profusion of natural brine springs was exploited by the locals in a profitable complex of saltpans and furnaces. Anglo-Saxon wills show that landowners as far away as Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire were making investments in the salt-making plants of Droitwich, while the records of churches in Westminster, Coventry, and even Paris show Droitwich saltpans and furnaces included in their investment portfolios.<sup>60</sup>

Documents from the town of Winchester in these years show how outside investment was starting to push up urban land values. In 975 the clerics of the Old Minster relinquished a large country estate which was yielding them good food-rents in order to obtain a plot of only two acres inside the city, while tenth-century wills and charters from other parts of the country describe the bishop of Chester

owning fourteen houses in the town of Stafford, and the abbess of Barking owning no less than twenty-eight in London. Down in the west country a certain Elfgar of the manor of Bishopsworth outside Bristol owned ten houses in the nearby city. On the assumption that these multiple investments in house property had rental and resale implications, we can conclude that England already had its first property developers.<sup>61</sup>

It also had town planners. Alfred's *burhs* were laid out to very regular grids, often arranged as a square, with a regular distance between the streets. Their designers obviously knew about surveying — as is clear from one document which takes us into Winchester on market day. The cattle were herded in the main street and into nearby Gar street, where modern excavations have uncovered the remains of pens, hurdles, and manure of sheep and cattle. The animals passed on to Fleshmonger street, later known as Parchment street, where they were butchered by the tradesmen who lived and worked on the same premises. Nearby was Tanner street, where the cattle's hides were processed into leather, and also Shieldmaker Street, where craftsmen fashioned the tanned leather onto wickerwork or round wooden boards.

We can imagine this busy chain of business working its way through the commercial part of the town, while over at the cathedral the pilgrims arrived by the hundred to venerate the relics of St. Swithin. The town records show a hosier, a shoemaker, and a soapmaker in position to sell their wares to the visitors, along with two meeting halls where the prosperous citizens gathered to feast and drink — early evidence of the civic banquet.<sup>62</sup> These Winchester burghers

seem to have been a jolly bunch. The development of town life was to hasten the development of family surnames, which, like street names, were often based on trades and occupations — Tanner, Weaver, Carpenter, and so on. But, in the meantime, Winchester's cheery inhabitants identified each other with affectionate or derisive nicknames: Clean-hand, Fresh-friend, Soft-bread, Foul-beard, Money-taker, Penny-purse, and Penny-feather.<sup>63</sup>

Trade was the life of the town, and by the year 1000 England's merchants had been trading for some time in goods that came from exotic and faraway places. As the Venerable Bede lay dying in 735 A.D., he had called for the "treasures" that he wished to distribute to his fellow monks, and first out of his treasure chest came pepper<sup>64</sup> — which, growing in the East Indies, had travelled tens of thousands of miles by mule train and ship to reach Baghdad and the Mediterranean. It was probably in the northern Italian town of Pavia, the ancient capital of Lombardy, that English merchants had picked up Bede's pepper. Pavia was the great centre of commercial exchange between northwestern Europe and the East, and accounts of the time vividly describe merchants' tents being pitched in the fields beside the river Ticino on the outskirts of the city. Prominent among the merchants were the *gens Anglicorum et Saxorum*, who haggled over silks, spices, ivory, goldwork, and precious stones with merchants from Venice and the southern Italian ports of Amalfi and Salerno.<sup>65</sup>

It had been a tough journey for the Englishmen, down through the Rhineland and over the Alpine passes, and it was small wonder they were in a bad temper when they got

there. According to one early eleventh-century document, the English had taken offence at the opening of their bags and baggages by the Pavian customs officials, and had grown violent. The kings of Lombardy and England subsequently held discussions about this outbreak of English hooliganism abroad, and it was agreed that England's merchants could have the right to trade in Pavia free of tolls and transaction taxes, provided that they paid a collective levy every three years.

It is the earliest detailed example of a commercial treaty in English history, and under its terms the English purchased their licence to trade with the triennial payment of fifty pounds of pure silver, two fine greyhounds with gilded and embossed collars, two shields, two swords, and two lances. In an additional clause that was presumably intended to reduce the incentive for local extortion or bribery, provision was made for the Pavian official in charge of the market to receive two fur coats and two pounds of silver as his own cut on the deal.

England's numerous seaports were proof of this heritage. *Port* was originally an Anglo-Saxon word that meant "market." The port reeve supervised the marketplace as the shire reeve supervised the shire. But by the tenth century the word also carried its modern meaning as a trading location on a harbour, and the array of English ports from Ipswich down to London and around the south coast was impressive. These centres of commerce significantly outnumbered the ports along the facing stretch of the Low Countries and northern France, and they were some of the fastest-growing communities in the country.

This reflected the fact that it was considerably easier to

travel and to transport merchandise in the year 1000 over water than over land. It was not until the eighteenth century that European engineers constructed highways to match the roads over which the Romans had transported their legions so efficiently. Hundreds of light wooden sail- and oar-powered boats shuttled up and down the rivers of medieval England in a network of navigable waterways that reached a surprising distance inland. The great royal residences were all built on or near water. Oxford and Cambridge were both ports before they were university towns, with busy trading jetties. Exeter, Worcester, Norwich, and Stamford also flourished on river traffic.

But the little ships that glided so busily between England's county towns did not fare so well on the open sea. Aelfric's "Merchant" was not exaggerating when he spoke of the risk of shipwreck. Nothing could be taken for granted. It was a matter of thanks to God if the narrow passage between Dover and Calais was accomplished without mishap. Accounts of Athelstan's army moving north against the Scots describe ships and men moving in tandem up the coast — and the navy would have stayed very safely within sight of land, for it was rare for a ship to spend a night on the open ocean if that could be avoided. Even the Vikings, the maestros of sea travel, who made up tents onboard and would travel through the night on their long ocean voyages, would come in to land after dark whenever they could. It was so much safer to make up fires and cook supper on a beach, or under the shelter of trees.<sup>69</sup>

Two hundred years after 1000 A.D. England was clearly established as the principal supplier of high-quality wool to northern Europe. By the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the Cotswold villages and towns, the South Downs and saltmarshes, the lowlands of East Anglia, and the slopes of the Yorkshire Pennines were all prosperous areas thronged with sheep. They were the basis of a flourishing industry that exported wool to the great cloth factories of Flanders, and subsequent documentary evidence demonstrates how wool was the source of England's wealth — the backbone of its economy and culture. When the Lord Chancellor started presiding over the House of Lords, he sat on a wool-sack. Journeymen travelled to the local markets to buy up the produce of England's many thousands of prosperous sheep farmers, and a network of packhorses and muletrains systematically transported the wool in convoys to the ports of southeast England, where merchants organised profitable flotillas to ferry the wool bales across to the Low Countries.

But we can only deduce that all this existed — or was starting to exist — in the year 1000, for while documents survive that testify to tenth-century trade in wine, furs, fish, and slaves, there is no similar paperwork that shows England exporting wool or woollen cloth. The evidence is indirect, like the legacy of place names — the Isle of Sheppey, for example, and towns like Shipton and Shipley whose names suggest a livelihood derived from sheep. Anglo-Saxon wills regularly discuss the disposition of sheep by the hundred, and excavations reveal sheep bones, sheep shears, wool spindles, weaving batons, and all the paraphernalia of cloth production.

The best evidence of commerce is a letter of 796 A.D. from the emperor Charlemagne to Offa, the great king of Mercia, complaining at variations in the size of the *saga*, the woollen cloaks and blankets that Mercia exported to France. Charlemagne asked the king to make sure that the cloths would in future be made to the same size that they used to be.<sup>52</sup> This would seem satisfactory evidence of English woollen cloth being exported to Europe a couple of centuries before the millennium, and from the centuries after 1000 A.D. we know that Norwich, Ipswich, Colchester, Rochester, Dover, and all the principal ports of the southeast were busily involved in the wool trade. Since it is certain that all these ports were healthily in business by the year 1000 exporting *something*, and since we also know that every Viking longship routinely carried a small quantity of rough woven cloth to trade with, it does not seem unreasonable to suppose that ships from the sheep-rich country of Engla-lond engaged in the same trade.

The Anglo-Saxons were clearly sheep-rearing folk, and our calendar drawing for this month reflects that — a flock of delightfully frisky and wool-covered sheep cavorting under the eye of equally contented shepherds. May was the month of shearing, when the animals were first washed and the sheared wool then rinsed in a series of baths. Where necessary, it was lightly greased with butter or lard to facilitate the separation of the individual wool fibres with the heads of thistles or teazles that were used like combs. Then the spinning could commence.<sup>51</sup> The spinning wheel did not appear in Europe until the thirteenth century, but the hand spindles and loom components regularly unearthed from Anglo-Saxon excavations suggest that wool-making must have been a common household process.