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By RICHARD HOLT

The century after 1350 saw great economic and social change in the English countryside which would, in the course of time, lead to a transformation in the pattern of agricultural production, with a consequent revolution in social relationships. The factor associated with this process of change was the dramatic collapse of the population that accompanied the initial outbreaks of bubonic plague, whilst a further factor was the failure of the population level to recover; indeed the population lowpoint in England was not 1350 but probably 1450, and it was only after a long period of stagnation that we see evidence of population increase by 1500.¹

The towns, as integral parts of the feudal economy and society, were not immune from such long-term upheaval, although through their ability to attract large numbers of immigrants from the countryside their levels of population remained for a long while fairly stable. By the end of the century after the Black Death, however, as their traditional roles were becoming less important in the face of the new economic conditions, few major towns were able to maintain their levels of wealth.² In this respect Gloucester, as a very typical middle-ranking town, was no exception. The revival of its population after the Black Death was to be relatively short-lived, as the symptoms of its economic decline became apparent by 1450.

The Black Death came to Gloucester in the spring of 1349. Hearing of the appalling effects of the plague on Bristol, the burgesses of Gloucester attempted to seal themselves off, but to no avail.³ The death-rate in the town, as elsewhere, was no doubt hideously high: at Lanthony Priory, on the edge of Gloucester, 19 of the 30 canons died. This mortality rate of over 60 per cent in a closed community was perhaps excessive, but indicates that the death-rate in Gloucester in 1349 was quite consistent with the one-third or more that is traditionally estimated.⁴

By means of immigration most of this population loss, and the loss due to subsequent outbreaks of plague in the 1360s, was replaced in the years to follow. There was, though, some permanent loss in population. The 300 or so built-up properties that Lanthony Priory held in Gloucester about 1350 would be only 240 a century later, the 20 per cent shortfall being mainly the result of cottages in poorer areas of the town becoming vacant and derelict in the years immediately after the Black Death.⁵

It is possible to estimate with some degree of accuracy the town's population level at this time. The returns of the Poll Tax of 1377 record 2239 taxpayers for Gloucester (compared with over 6000 for Bristol and 7000 for York, the largest provincial towns).⁶ To allow for those under fourteen, those who evaded the tax, and those who were simply too poor to pay fourpence, this figure for taxpayers should be doubled, giving an estimated population figure of 4500. This was smaller than the pre-Black Death population, but by how much remains uncertain.

The catastrophe of the Black Death was not accompanied by economic decline. There are many small indicators of Gloucester's continued prosperity during these years, and in particular from the 1370s onwards there is evidence of a great deal of rebuilding. Whilst the number of poorer cottages had declined for want of tenants, houses in the better areas of town were being refurbished or replaced. It seems that many of the wealthier inhabitants between 1370 and 1430 built themselves new houses, which were often larger and grander than those they had previously possessed.⁷

What was the basis of this prosperity? What was the part that Gloucester played within the feudal economy?

Situated on the River Severn, which was easily navigable to rafts, flat-bottomed trows and apparently larger ships as well, Gloucester in the medieval period functioned as an inland port, whilst Bristol controlled the seaborne trade of the river. The region at whose centre Gloucester lay was naturally a wealthy one. The Severn valley was a rich, grain-producing area, whilst to the east of the town lay the important wool-producing area of the Cotswolds. To the west lay the Forest of Dean which produced not only timber, charcoal and coal, but which was also medieval England's main source of iron.⁸ As a river port and as the lowest bridging point on the Severn, Gloucester was a major market, indeed the commercial centre of its region, between Bristol 35 miles to the south and Worcester 25 miles to the north. As such, its marketing function was two-fold. Firstly, like any market it provided a place for the sale and exchange of the surplus produce of both peasants and demesne: and, secondly, it fulfilled the specialized role of distribution centre of luxury goods to the nobility and gentry of the county.

The surviving records make little mention of the many thousands of country people who came to Gloucester during this century to market their surplus crops. The vast number of small transactions by means of which the peasants acquired the cash to pay their rents, although the basic activity of every medieval market, can be perceived only dimly. However, something can be discovered about the traders or dealers who were based in villages or small towns, and who acted as a link between the large market and many of the agricultural producers. Unlike the peasants who marketed their produce infrequently, these men brought goods to Gloucester regularly, and so preferred, rather than pay tolls, to pay for an annual licence to trade in the town. From the surviving enrolments of the payments they made, for the years 1380, 1396, 1398 and 1423, much can be learnt about the trade of the region.⁹

The goods that these rural merchants brought into Gloucester were either raw materials for the town's craftsmen, or foodstuffs destined mainly for consumption within the town. So iron and honey came from the Forest of Dean; tanned leather from surrounding towns such as Ross-on-Wye, Newent and Painswick; wool from the Cotswolds and the Chilterns; fish from villages further down the Severn; and most importantly grain and malt from villages in the Severn and Avon valleys. In addition, from villages all around, men regularly brought in ale, whilst from villages and some towns rather further away – on average ten miles away – bread was brought in. The trade in ale was seemingly the larger of the two, with consignments coming in from practically every village within a six-mile radius. Such quantities of these two medieval staples were, of course, supplementary to the amounts produced within the town, a reminder of how difficult it was at all times to keep a large medieval town and its many visitors supplied with food and drink.

The grain that the rural merchants and the peasants brought to Gloucester was sold to the bakers and brewers of the town. A quantity of documentation relating to charges of illegal trading practices during the 1380s shows numbers of rural grain-sellers coming from the areas to the north and east of the town to sell wheat, barley and malt in quantities varying between a quarter and twelve quarters.¹⁰ The bakers and brewers, when they bought grain, heaped up the measures, and so got more for their money than they should have done: there was, though, little that the rural salesmen could do about it, as they were faced with the same problem in the neighbouring grain markets of Tewkesbury and Cheltenham, and no doubt in other towns and markets too.¹¹

Whilst this constant flow of small parcels of grain into the market was probably sufficient to satisfy Gloucester's own needs, it did not provide the quantities that the large grain dealers sought. Such a dealer of the latter years of the 14th century was Simon Broke, who was wealthy

and influential within the town, being bailiff of Gloucester four times and the representative of the borough in four Parliaments, all between 1392 and 1408.¹² It was Broke's practice, certainly in his younger days in the 1380s to frequent the unlicensed village market at Haw, on the Severn between Gloucester and Tewkesbury, and there and at Chipping Campden and elsewhere he bought large amounts of grain which he shipped down-river. The neighbouring town of Tewkesbury was also a grain market, though not such a large one as Gloucester, and the Tewkesbury bakers, brewers and corn dealers bought their grain from the same areas as did the Gloucester men. It seems that Broke and certain confederates of his were in the habit of illegally forestalling Tewkesbury market; on market days they would buy up grain on the roads leading into the town, and so take all Tewkesbury's business. Together they launched a particularly successful operation on the Saturday after Michaelmas 1386 – a significant time of year, being soon after harvest when stocks would be high and prices would be low, but when the peasants would have to market grain to meet demands for rent. On this Saturday, 5 October, Simon Broke and his accomplices not only covered all the roads into Tewkesbury; they also managed to buy up all the grain coming in by river, seemingly along both the Severn and the Avon.¹³

Of the great quantities of grain that went down the river towards Bristol much was exported, particularly to the Bordeaux region. Exporting grain was a favourite occupation amongst the leading Gloucester merchants, and occasional surviving grants of royal licences show 14th-century Gloucester merchants obtaining permission to export 300, 500, and most often 1000 quarters of grain at a time.¹⁴ In addition, there was illegal exporting; in February 1348 it was reported that grain was being daily sent down the Severn, loaded at sea into ships and taken over to France; and similar charges of widespread smuggling down the Severn were made in the 1380s.¹⁵

The grain trade was, then, a most lucrative one, and given the competition there obviously was for profits, we should not be surprised to find that whilst it was Simon Broke and his fellows from Gloucester who were forestalling Tewkesbury in 1386 and 1387, in 1401 the merchants of Tewkesbury and Worcester were successfully forestalling Gloucester market.¹⁶ It was perhaps as a reaction to this that at about the same time the town authorities in Gloucester were said to be interfering with river-borne grain supplies to Bristol.¹⁷ Competition in the grain trade was fierce, and town administrations, faced with the threat of high bread prices, and consequent unrest among the labour force, were quite prepared to pass the problem on to a neighbouring town.

When the wealthier people of the county frequented Gloucester it was usually for the purpose of purchasing the luxury goods of the Middle Ages, the most important of which being wine. The large quantities of wine that were sold in Gloucester were bought from merchants in the sea-ports, and although Bristol would have been the main supplier, Southampton also was important, and the Southampton records enable the trade to be seen in some detail. During the 15th century about 30 pipes of wine – that is, some 3000 gallons – were each year carted the 93 miles to Gloucester.¹⁸ The Gloucester vintners and taverners sold most of this wine to the gentry and priests of the countryside. At least one of the vintners delivered to his customers in the 1380s; his carter was driving his wagon and eight horses and was delivering a pipe of wine when he was accidentally killed near Cirencester, seventeen miles from Gloucester.¹⁹

Other imported goods besides wine came into the town, and the Southampton records show Gloucester as the destination for regular consignments of almonds, oil, pepper, dates and raisins, as well as on average about 100 bales of woad each year, together with similarly large quantities of madder, alum and soap, all used in dyeing and finishing cloth.²⁰ As with the wine, these items were being carried to Gloucester as a centre of distribution rather than as a centre of consumption.

References to unpaid debts indicate a large volume of luxury goods coming to Gloucester from

London. Between 1350 and 1450 there is evidence of 24 cases of Gloucester men owing money to Londoners, against only one of a Londoner not having paid a debt to a Gloucester burgess.²¹ Amongst these 24 Londoners there were seven mercers, two grocers, a merchant, a haberdasher and a vintner; the Gloucester men they had had commercial dealings with all had similar mercantile interests. These are all examples of Gloucester mercers and other retailers of quality goods purchasing their stock from London suppliers.

Gloucester's distributive function is clearly observed through a similar examination of the credit relationships between Gloucester merchants and their customers. Whilst five Gloucester men in this century after 1350 owed money to men from Worcestershire, Bristol, Wiltshire and Herefordshire, there are references to 22 men from elsewhere who had clearly bought goods on credit from Gloucester merchants.²² The places they came from included Bristol, Worcester, Cirencester, Hereford and Coventry, as well as some more distant places. Mercers from Newark and Hull owed £30 to a Gloucester mercer in 1419; and, less explicably, an Essex fisherman owed £3 to a Gloucester cutler in 1428. In 1442 a Devon chapman had seemingly obtained at least £8 worth of his stock from a Gloucester supplier.

The one-sided nature of the credit relationships denoting sellers and buyers is most clear, and illustrates well the process by which goods went from London to Gloucester, and were then sold over a very wide area. But the long distance nature of at least some of the transactions implies that the Gloucester merchants had more to sell than just the readily available items that could be obtained from London.

It was the manufacturing sector of Gloucester's economy that provided, probably, the goods that these merchants sold. Most of the population of Gloucester during this century were employed in the production of manufactured goods, working as craftsmen in the small workshops that were the units of production of the medieval period. In the rental of the town compiled in 1455, there were 204 named people with a given occupation, and although this is a small and somewhat unrepresentative sample, being biased towards the wealthier end of Gloucester society, yet it does indicate the occupational structure of Gloucester in the later medieval period.²³ Firstly, there was a great diversity of occupations – 51 in all, and this, it must be emphasized, is far from a complete list. Secondly, these separate occupations fell in the main into certain broad categories, with 38 people (19 per cent) involved in metalworking; 40 (20 per cent) in the provision of food and drink; and the largest group of all – 49 (24 per cent) – in the manufacturing of clothing and footwear. A further 18 (9 per cent) were occupied with the primary processes of the production of cloth and leather.

In this pattern of production, Gloucester was little different from other similar towns, with a large proportion of the labour force working to meet the simple needs of the town itself and the visitors to the market. Its proximity to the Forest of Dean, however, ensured that its iron industry was more prominent than would otherwise have been the case. For centuries the smiths of Gloucester had produced horseshoes, nails, arrow-heads, knives and other iron goods in large quantities, and much of this production had been destined for sale outside the region.²⁴ In the 1380s and 1390s the principal groups of ironworkers in Gloucester were the cutlers and the wiredrawers: the former making knives and all sorts of edged tools, and the bulk of the wiredrawers' production being used to make wool cards to comb wool prior to spinning. But there were also other ironworkers in the town; many farriers, of course, as well as sievemakers, locksmiths, armourers and bladesmiths (who made swords). In addition, there were workers in the various copper alloys – pinner, bellmakers, lattoners, braziers and spurriers; and workers in lead or lead alloys, such as plumbers and pewterers.²⁵

The years after 1350 saw a great increase in the amount of cloth made for export.²⁶ Clearly the cloth industry that Gloucester had possessed since at least the 12th century was thriving, and like

the iron industry it produced for the wider market.²⁷ In 1363, 47 master weavers of the town were prosecuted for over-pricing, and we need not suppose that their workshops contained all of Gloucester's looms.²⁸ The cloth that they wove was finished elsewhere. In the 12th and 13th centuries there had been a Fullers' Street in the town; by 1300, however, the battle between the town fullers who 'walked' the cloth and the operators of the new rural fulling-mills had been lost, and there are no more references to fullers in Gloucester.²⁹ The dyers and other cloth finishers who continued to work in the town indicate that some cloth did return after fulling, but probably only a small proportion did so, as the aulnage returns of the 1390s, which record the tax paid on cloths when they were sold, seem to show Gloucester as only a minor cloth market. During 1397, for instance, 350 or so cloths were marketed in Gloucester, or on average only seven a week; and even allowing for the fact that these returns are generally reckoned to be inaccurate in under-estimating numbers of cloths, this figure is a low one for a major town.³⁰ The 134 people recorded as selling these cloths seem not to have been primarily occupied as cloth merchants, being recorded elsewhere as, for instance, brewers, bakers, dyers or even, in some cases, weavers. The merchants who were important figures in the industry appear only as minor cloth sellers: Richard Baret, for instance, amongst the wealthiest of the Gloucester drapers of the 1390s, marketed only three cloths in the town in 1397. It was through men like Baret, however, that the bulk of Gloucester's cloth production was marketed at places such as Cirencester, where it is known that Gloucester drapers were active, or was carried further afield, probably to be exported.³¹

Gloucester, then, functioned as a market only for cloth manufactured by small, independent producers; cloth which no doubt supplied the needs of the town itself and its locality.

During the course of this brief survey of Gloucester's commercial and industrial functions reference has already been made to some of the merchants who were active in the town. As in all other medieval towns, the merchants formed a social and economic élite group, the top tier of urban society. They controlled the government of the town, and through the offices of bailiff and Parliamentary burgess they represented Gloucester's interests, or their own interests, to the outside world. Whilst it is not possible to define the number and extent of this group, it is easy to identify the leading members of the oligarchy simply by looking at who held these important public offices. The two bailiffs were elected annually, and Gloucester sent two representatives to Parliament, which met almost annually during the later Middle Ages: consequently these posts saw a constant procession of occupants.

Perhaps the wealthiest of the Gloucester élite in the years around 1400 were the drapers. Richard Baret, who died childless in 1401, made cash bequests totalling nearly £400, and bequeathed ten shops and tenements, in addition to the bulk of his cash and property which he left to his widow.³² Judging from the social position he held – he served as member of Parliament for Gloucester five times, and was four times bailiff between 1372 and 1401 – he was the leading Gloucester draper of his time.³³

In terms of numbers the most important group of the oligarchy were the retailers of luxury goods, such as the mercers and vintners. Prominent amongst these men was William Crook who was bailiff eleven times between 1361 and his death 40 years later, and four times member of Parliament.³⁴ He was a vintner and, like at least some others of his trade, also a brewer.³⁵ Amongst his many properties was a bakehouse, though it is not clear whether he baked bread himself or rented it out.³⁶ By a judicious combination of interests he prospered, though his pre-eminence in public office clearly owed as much to his unusual longevity as it did to his social position.

The craftsmen of Gloucester were represented in the ruling oligarchy only by those at the very top of their trades: those whose interests probably lay more in marketing goods than in making

them. John Luke, who was bailiff in the 1430s and 1440s, was described as a brazier, but travelled in the Welsh Marches with goods worth £40 or more; and William Oliver, bailiff five times in the same period, was described as a chaloner, but presumably did not himself manufacture bedding.³⁷ John Pope, who was bailiff in the 1380s and 1390s, as a goldsmith was hardly typical of the artisan class.³⁸

Brewers and bakers were prohibited by law from holding the chief offices in towns: their occupations were held to be incompatible with the exercise of powers to control the prices of basic victuals.³⁹ The regular enforcement of the Assizes of bread and ale, designed to hold down the cost of basic foodstuffs, was amongst the most important of the bailiffs' tasks. But brewers, at any rate, held office in Gloucester. Apart from vintners and others with a brewing interest, such as William Crook, there were several men described as brewers who served as bailiff during this century; indeed in 1445 both of the bailiffs were brewers.⁴⁰ One can only assume that it was their wealth that secured their entrance to an office not legally theirs.

One other group of victuallers, in addition to the brewers, who held office was the fishmongers; at least three served as bailiff during this period.⁴¹ Their trade was varied, as they dealt not only in preserved sea fish, but also in salmon, eels, shad and lampreys from the Severn.⁴² A Gloucester lamprey could be worth as much as 10s. during Lent – perhaps six or eight weeks' wages for a labouring man – and the supply of such fish to the Court and to noble households was very profitable to the small group of Gloucester men who bought them from the Severn fishermen, or who themselves were able to rent fish-weirs from the Crown or the monasteries which owned them.⁴³

Apart from the occupational groups already referred to, and those people like Simon Broke whose interests were too varied to allow of any occupational designation other than simply 'merchant', only one other group seems to have filled the offices of bailiff or Parliamentary representative at this time, and that was the lawyers.

It is by the 1390s that it is possible to identify for the first time professional common lawyers resident in Gloucester. Their staple trade would have been to represent the legal interests of members of the local gentry, but they appear in the records usually when they acted in an official or semi-official capacity – when they served on a Commission of the Peace, or when they represented the borough of Gloucester in a legal dispute.⁴⁴ Gloucester lawyers served as stewards of nearby rural manors; and in the years after 1400 they are increasingly to be found filling the major public offices.⁴⁵ Indeed, they come to dominate the public offices, contributing after 1420 far and away more candidates for office than the mercers, the second most numerous group. This leading role was the result of their wealth and influence, but a further factor was their enthusiasm for office. By serving as bailiff, and more importantly as Parliamentary representative, they could more easily bring themselves to the notice of the Crown, and thus secure the lucrative patronage in the sphere of local officialdom that they obviously prized. Collecting taxes or customs dues, supervising Gloucester's pavage revenues or repairs to the castle – these and similar tasks which had always been performed by leading members of the élite, now in the 15th century were being entrusted to the lawyers who had served as members of Parliament.⁴⁶ By 1450 there were at least seven or eight lawyers resident and working in Gloucester, together constituting the most influential and outward-looking section of the burgesses.

Socially, however, the lawyers were not full members of the borough community. They married outside the town, preferring the daughters of the rural gentry to those of their merchant neighbours.⁴⁷ In this they presumably showed their social ambitions as well as their social origins. But the other leading men of the town seemed content with the society in which they found themselves, and married within their group. All too often their wives were the widows of former member of the élite; their mortality rate was high, and often they died childless.⁴⁸ As a result

those who lived and prospered sooner or later inherited, so that a combination of sickly, childless relatives, judicious marriage and long life was the surest formula for the accumulation of wealth.

The transfer of such wealth from generation to generation can often be traced when it took the form of landed property. It was the practice of all the wealthier men of Gloucester to own some property in the town, which at the least would be the house they lived in, and at the other end of the scale could be a sizable estate. The largest such holding around 1450 was that of Thomas Bisley, who owned over 30 houses of one sort or another; he was followed by Thomas Deerhurst with 28, and by about five others with ten or more houses.⁴⁹

It is usually assumed that such investment in landed property by those with generally commercial interests did little to further their prosperity.⁵⁰ The rental value of such property was always, certainly in Gloucester, too small to be a very significant part of a merchant's income. But despite this, the ownership of land was still clearly of importance to these people. A well-documented example is that of William Griffyn, a Gloucester mercer whose business was failing in the 1370s. By 1379 he was unable to meet debts of £60 or more to merchants from London and elsewhere, and so his property was valued by the bailiffs as a preliminary to forced sale. He held five tenements and eight shops, with an annual rental value of £10, in addition to his own dwelling worth £1.⁵¹ The five tenements and three of the shops were sold immediately for £67; two more shops were sold eighteen months later for £13.⁵² His property, then, had been more than equal to his debts, and had in practice acted as security against which he had borrowed. This is not the only case of a Gloucester merchant having to sell property to meet a certain or probable debt, and it appears that the ownership of property was useful, or indeed necessary, in obtaining commercial credit. The rental value of property, then, whilst obviously of importance in insuring against old age and sickness, was to someone like William Griffyn of less importance than the capital value of his lands, which was a constant factor in his commercial dealings.

But there were those who deliberately accumulated property to obtain rental income, and who invested money to maximise that income. As stated above, of the individuals owning property in Gloucester about 1450, those with the largest holdings were Thomas Bisley with over 30 houses, and Thomas Deerhurst with 28. Both of these men were lawyers, as was John Gilbert, who held over 20 properties. Like their record in filling public office, this ownership of property by lawyers appears to have been the result of deliberate policy as much as an accidental concomitant of wealth. For instance, the properties of Thomas Deerhurst are the best documented, and reveal an attitude to property that was different from that of most of his peers. Firstly, he and his father John, also a lawyer, had purchased most and perhaps all of the property, rather than acquiring it by the usual methods of marriage and inheritance.⁵³ And, secondly, both of them followed a deliberate policy of developing their property. John Deerhurst had built a block of five houses or cottages on a vacant plot, and his son had similarly built a block of seven. One or the other of them had 'recently rebuilt' another such block. Several of Deerhurst's properties were clustered together in Southgate Street, and nearby were three vacant plots purchased by his father, clearly available for future development.⁵⁴ Of the 28 dwellings that Thomas Deerhurst owned, there is a known rental value for half: fourteen of his properties were rented out for £5 18s. 4d. This is, of course, in contrast to William Griffyn's thirteen properties worth £10 a year – roughly twice as much. And the difference arises from the type of property both men owned. Griffyn held houses and shops in the better retail quarter around the High Cross, let for large rents to lesser merchants or wealthier craftsmen.⁵⁵ Deerhurst's properties on the other hand, particularly the newer ones, were all aimed at the lower end of the housing market, so that whilst Griffyn's were let for rents varying from 10s. to over £2, many of Deerhurst's were let for only 6s. 8d. or 8s. One must assume that Deerhurst's concentration on cheaper properties was more profitable to him,

and gave a better return than investment in more expensive properties would have done. Thomas Bisley's properties, too, although less can be said about them, were aimed at tenants from the lower social groups.⁵⁶ Yet, however profitable these holdings were in relative terms, they still must have been of marginal importance to these men whose incomes from other sources were many times greater than their incomes from rents.

Despite their wealth, and the pre-eminence that these merchants and lawyers enjoyed within their town, there were rivals to their power: institutions and officials determined to assert their own rights and privileges. The castle of Gloucester was the symbol of royal power in the region, the centre of the county administration; and the Church, in at least some of its various manifestations, maintained an aloof separateness that denied, or attempted to deny, the authority of the burgesses. During the years after 1350 the people of the town were becoming increasingly impatient with the claims of these extraneous establishments.

Since 1200 the burgesses of Gloucester had enjoyed the right of self government from the Crown. The elected reeves, and later bailiffs, had presided over the borough court, and had collected for their own use all Crown dues and rents from the town, paying over instead the fixed annual fee-farm of £65.⁵⁷ Such independence from royal authority was, however, limited. In the 1230s, despite the charter, the town was governed by a royal official – the Gloucester man, Richard the Burgess, who used the title 'Mayor of Gloucester' between 1228 and about 1240.⁵⁸ In 1264, during the Barons' War, Prince Edward, secure in the castle, drove de Montfort's supporters out of the town in a manner which was a stark reminder that the castle's function was as much to control the town as to protect it.⁵⁹ The unpopularity of the castle would have been heightened by the vestigial powers that the constable continued to wield in Gloucester, of which the most notable was 'castelcoule', a due of 3*d.* which he was entitled to collect each time a burgess brewed. In the 1320s, the only years for which figures are available, this yielded over £20 annually, and must have been a source of considerable annoyance to the large-scale professional brewers of the town, who would have been least able to evade it.⁶⁰ It is not surprising, then, that we find in the 1370s the town authorities adopting an air of studied indifference to the misfortunes suffered by the Crown servants who lived in the castle. Between the castle and the houses of the town lay the Bareland, an open space retained for military purposes, but on which the people of the town had taken to dumping ordure and general refuse. The stench inside the castle must have been appalling, but despite repeated demands from the Crown the bailiffs did nothing to stop the practice. In May 1381 the Earl of Buckingham, the King's uncle, was appointed to look into the matter, which was clearly by now giving great cause for concern.⁶¹ Throughout the country the administration was unpopular, and disturbances which would culminate in the Peasants' Revolt of June and July 1381 were already occurring. At the beginning of the year the bailiffs of Shrewsbury had lost control of their town, and there must have been fears for Gloucester.⁶² By the middle of July, Buckingham, having put down the rebellion in Essex, was back in Gloucester, and after a meeting of all the people of the town in the meadow now called Sudmede, ringleaders of the opposition to the Crown were singled out – Thomas Bisley, who had served as bailiff five times in the previous fourteen years; Thomas Compton, a young man who would be bailiff four times before his death in 1412; and several others. Charged with rebellious talk, they were all put in gaol. We are left to speculate as to the exact nature of the grievances they had been expressing, but a long-standing resentment of the castle had surely been a contributory factor.⁶³

There were quarrels, too, with the Church, or rather with sections of it as the religious dimension of medieval urban life was expressed through many different forms. There were eleven parish churches in Gloucester, and most of these also accommodated private chantries for the dead, as well as parish guilds which maintained chantries, so that there were in 1363 over 60

chantry priests in the town.⁶⁴ The spiritual needs of the living community were perhaps better served by the three orders of friars who had houses in Gloucester, and who were everywhere renowned for the quality of their preaching and the relative poverty of their lifestyle. The physical needs of a proportion of the old and frail were met by the three hospitals of St Bartholomew, St Mary and St Margaret.⁶⁵

The three major religious houses – St Peter's Abbey, Lanthony Priory and St Oswald's Priory – stood in yet another relationship to the townspeople. Dedicated to the monastic ideal, they did not by the 14th century play a very active role in either the religious or the social life of Gloucester. However, through their considerable holdings of urban land their relationship with many lay people was a close one: over half of the houses in Gloucester owed rent to them.⁶⁶ Under such circumstances it is clear that disputes over land or rent between the monks and the town would have been common, and indeed a list of such disputes between the Priory of Lanthony and the bailiffs of Gloucester survives from around 1450.⁶⁷ Interestingly, the nature of these points of disagreement, and the antiquity of many of them, indicate that the bailiffs had become openly defiant of Lanthony; in particular, they denied Lanthony's ancient rights of jurisdiction over many of their properties. The second half of the 14th century had seen the priors of Lanthony fighting to maintain their position; after about 1400 they seem to have ceased to do so in the face of the intransigence of the town authorities, so that in 1450 the bailiffs had still not paid to Lanthony £50 compensation they had been ordered by the courts to pay as long ago as 1391. The bailiffs were no longer paying rents of over £7 a year to the Priory, and, most importantly, they now exercised their authority over the suburb outside the South Gate, although most of it lay outside their area of jurisdiction, and was legally subject to Lanthony's authority.⁶⁸

St Peter's Abbey, a major landowner in Gloucestershire and elsewhere, was the greatest of the representatives of the feudal order within Gloucester. Even so, like Lanthony Priory, it was by 1400 unable to withstand the growing assertiveness of the burgesses. Its own view of its relationship with the town was perhaps best expressed in 1305, when a great banquet given by the abbot was attended by the important local ecclesiastical personages as well as all the leading laymen of the county, whilst seemingly none of the townspeople had been invited.⁶⁹ Yet in 1414 the Abbey, in desperation, was to pay 40 marks to the Crown for a confirmation of its ancient rights of jurisdiction over its own precincts and its tenants within Gloucester: rights which, it was complained, the burgesses of the town were ignoring.⁷⁰ It would be surprising if such a confirmation had, in practice, any effect: without doubt the burgesses continued to exercise their own jurisdiction over all of the people and the area of Gloucester.

A considerable amount may be known about Gloucester at the end of the century after the Black Death through the most important single document to survive from the medieval town administration. The rental of the town that was compiled in 1455 lists each house or property with its owner, and often its occupant, and was designed apparently to facilitate the collection of the landgable or chief rents which were due to the bailiffs, although an unsuccessful attempt in the same year by the town authorities to secure an Act of Parliament compelling householders to pay for repairs to the streets probably provided an additional reason for undertaking the exercise.⁷¹

An unfortunate feature of the rental is that it is impossible to derive from it an exact figure for the number of houses in Gloucester, because of the many references to multiple holdings. The total of over 700 properties, however, may represent as many as 1000 dwellings, and clearly this enables an estimate to be made of Gloucester's population in 1455. Uncertainty about the size of the average household – if indeed such a concept is realistic for medieval towns – makes any such estimate a tentative one; however, if each of the 1000 dwellings housed four persons on average,

the resultant population estimate is 4000. In comparing this with the population estimate of 4500 for 1377, it must be taken into account that the Poll Tax assessment included the suburbs outside the south and east gates which were omitted from the 1455 rental.⁷² The southern suburb contained at least 100 dwellings, mainly cottages, in the 1440s; the eastern suburb was probably similar.⁷³ The estimate of the population in 1455 should, then, be augmented by around one fifth.

There are too many uncertainties here to be able to state with any confidence that there were 5000 people in mid 15th-century Gloucester. The population was, though, apparently comparable with that in 1377, so that around 1450 Gloucester's population was very much what it had been in the years immediately following the outbreaks of plague a century before. It is very likely that the severe decline in population and prosperity that affected most other large towns at the end of the medieval period had already begun. And indeed there are signs of decline other than dubious population estimates. The 1455 rental itself is one such sign. The strenuous efforts of its compiler Robert Cole, the rent-collector of Lanthony Priory, to establish liability to pay landgable, coupled with internal indications that this rent had in fact not been paid on many properties for a great many years (in some cases 200 years), indicate this to have been a desperate attempt on the part of the bailiffs to collect a greater proportion of the notional £10 a year that the rent totalled, and so to increase town revenues.⁷⁴ The request to make owners of houses responsible for street repairs, unsuccessful in 1455 but granted at last in 1473, should be seen as a further indication that the revenues received by the bailiffs from tolls, rents and court profits were less than they had been.⁷⁵ Indeed only eight years before, in 1447, the men of the town had petitioned the Crown for some relief, claiming that the £65 for which they had to account each year to the Exchequer could be paid only if the bailiffs contributed £20 from their own pockets; a situation brought about, they said, by a reduction in the town's population due to epidemics, evidenced by the dereliction of many houses in the town.⁷⁶ The contents of the 1455 rental ought, of course, to throw more light on this claim; unfortunately, it is not a very clear light. In 1455, 48 properties in Gloucester were described as 'new', as opposed to only six which were 'decayed' or 'ruined'. It can be shown, though, that some at least of these 'new' buildings were perhaps 20 years old; and it is probable that derelict buildings would have been quickly demolished, as the timber of which they were built had a re-use value, if only as firewood.⁷⁷ In which case the existence of a large number of vacant plots could indicate a decline in the housing stock, and although comparison with Lanthony Priory records show that the rental ignored most open ground, even so we are told of 24 vacant plots, as well as over 60 other pieces of land described as tofts or curtilages. Nevertheless the only certain sign in the rental of houses going out of use is the 20 or more former dwellings now being used as stables.

When in 1487 the town was again to petition the Crown for a reduction in its fee-farm, and it was claimed that the burgesses had fallen into such poverty that Gloucester now lay desolate, with more than 300 houses having fallen out of use in recent years because of the loss of population, we might feel that this was exaggeration; but there can be no doubt that by then Gloucester's decline had become acute.⁷⁸ In the 1520s, the returns of the Lay Subsidies show that the population of the town was now as low as 3000.⁷⁹

The people of the 15th century saw the decline in the town's population as the cause of the deepening economic depression. They misunderstood what was happening to Gloucester, and to towns like it. As the population of medieval towns was maintained only by constant immigration from the countryside, the size of a town consequently depended on its ability to attract immigrants; so that when in the 15th century unprecedented prosperity came to the English peasantry, the economic need to leave the countryside lessened. Furthermore, the towns had become less attractive. The general reduction in upper-class spending power was passed on to those town merchants whose speciality lay in supplying luxury goods to the gentry; and lower

down the urban social scale many craftsmen, particularly in the textile industry, saw their livelihoods slipping away in the face of competition from craftsmen based in villages and small towns.⁸⁰ Gloucester was simply becoming less important within the regional economy, and although it would maintain a level of economic activity commensurate with its status of market centre and county town, it would be many years before there was a return to the solid prosperity of the medieval period.

It is ironic that while in the midst of recession, with its population falling away, and the income of the administration greatly reduced, Gloucester should have received an augmentation of its civic dignity with the charter of 1483. The bailiffs had long enjoyed every power they could realistically hope to wield; now they were to be joined by a mayor, aldermen, and a common council.⁸¹ Despite the earlier complaints of the high cost of holding office, there seemed an eagerness to take on the extra expense that the inevitable increase in ceremonial entailed. With the cancellation in 1485 of the reduction in the fee-farm which had accompanied the charter, the finances of the administration must have been more uncertain than ever before.⁸²

Hindsight makes it easy to be wise, and so the pretensions of the burgesses of the 1480s are most cruelly exposed. Yet they were not to know that their town was in a long-term decline, as part of a much wider phenomenon of change; they were not to know that the century that had followed the Black Death had seen the last flowering of medieval Gloucester.

Notes

1. J. Hatcher, *Plague, Population and the English Economy 1348–1530* (1977), 69.
2. R.B. Dobson, 'Urban Decline in Late Medieval England', *Trans Royal Hist Soc* (5th Ser) 27 (1977), 1–22.
3. P. Ziegler, *The Black Death* (1969), 138.
4. P.R.O., C115 K2/6685, f. 12v.
5. P.R.O., C115 K1/6678, *passim*.
6. W.G. Hoskins, *Local History in England* (2nd edn 1972), 238.
7. P.R.O., C115 K1/6678, *passim*.
8. H.R. Schubert, *History of the British Iron and Steel Industry* (1957), 98.
9. *Glos R.O.*, GBR 1295, 1296, 1297, 1298.
10. P.R.O., KB 9/32 mm. 16, 20, 21. A quarter of grain was 64 gallons by volume, the equivalent probably of 400 lbs. weight.
11. *Ibid.*, m. 20.
12. W.H. Stevenson, *Calendar of the Records of the Corporation of Gloucester* (Gloucester 1893), 1042, 1054; Gloucester Cathedral Library, *Register B of St Peter's Abbey*, 341; P.R.O., C115 L1/6687, f. 8v; *Members of Parliament* (House of Commons 1878), 244, 258, 263, 268.
13. P.R.O., KB 9/32 m.20; KB 27/506, Justices m.15.
14. *Calendar of Patent Rolls 1330–34*, 232, 509, 514; *1338–40*, 81; *1385–89*, 128.
15. *Cal. Pat. Rolls 1348–50*, 67; *Cal. Fine Rolls 1383–91*, 178.
16. *Cal. Pat. Rolls 1399–1401*, 516.
17. *Cal. Close Rolls 1399–1402*, 146.
18. O. Coleman (ed), *The Brokage Book of Southampton 1443–44 2* (Southampton Rec Ser 6, 1961), 325.
19. *Cal. Close Rolls 1377–81*, 455.
20. *Brokage Book of Southampton*, 322 and *passim*.
21. *Abstracts of Inquisitiones Post Mortem for Gloucestershire 6* (The Index Library, British Record Society, 1912), 109, 187; the other references are all to be found in *Cal. Pat. Rolls* and *Cal. Close Rolls* between 1350 and 1450.
22. A. Beardwood (ed), 'Statute Merchant Roll of Coventry 1392–1416', *Dugdale Soc* 17 (1939), 28; the other references are all to be found in the *Cal. Pat. Rolls* and *Cal. Close Rolls* between 1350 and 1450.
23. W.H. Stevenson (ed), *Rental of all the Houses in Gloucester A.D. 1455* (Gloucester 1890), *passim*.
24. Schubert, 94–98, 118.
25. *Glos. R.O.*, GBR 1295, 1296, 1297, 1298.
26. H.L. Gray, 'The Production and Exportation of English Woollens in the Fourteenth Century', *Eng Hist Rev* 39 (1924), 13–35.

27. During the reign of Stephen an annual payment to the Crown of 20s. from the weavers of Gloucester was granted to St Augustine's Abbey, Bristol: *Cal. Charter Rolls 1300-1326*, 378.
28. P.R.O., KB 27/411, Fines mm. 1,2.
29. W.H. Stevenson (ed), *Calendar of the Records of the Corporation of Gloucester* (Gloucester 1893), 119, 121, etc.
30. P.R.O., E101/339/2.
31. P.R.O., KB 27/429, Rex m. 26d.
32. P.R.O., PCC Wills, 1 Marche ff. 4-5v.
33. *Members of Parliament*, 195, 199, 252, 255, 258; P.R.O., KB 27/471; *Cal. Recs. Corp. Gloucester*, 1008, 1045; S. Rudder, *A New History of Gloucestershire* (Cirencester 1781), 139.
34. *Cal. Recs. Corp. Gloucester*, 978, 980, 1005, 1014, 1017, 1041; P.R.O., C115 L1/6687 f. 46v; SC 6/1271/1; *Abstracts of Gloucestershire Inquisitiones Post Mortem* 6 (The Index Library, 1912), 109; Rudder, 139; *Members of Parliament*, 182, 225, 228, 249.
35. P.R.O., KB 27/411, Fines m.1; KB 9/29 m.55.
36. P.R.O., C115 K2/6682 f.143v; C115 K1/6678 f.48v.
37. P.R.O., C1/12/41; *Cal. Pat. Rolls 1441-46*, 8, 134; *Cal. Recs. Corp. Gloucester*, 52, 1100, 1108, 1121, 1123; *Cal. Pat. Rolls 1446-52*, 126.
38. *Cal. Recs. Corp. Gloucester*, 1005, 1025; *Cal. Inquisitions Miscellaneous*, 82; P.R.O., C115 K2/6684, f.29.
39. Statute of York (1318): *Statutes of the Realm* 1 (Record Commission, 1810), 178.
40. Walter Chauntrell and William Saundres: *Cal. Recs. Corp. Gloucester*, 1125; *1455 Rental*, 17, 30.
41. Walter de Markeley in 1366-67, Thomas Hilley in 1447-48, and John Kylray in 1456-57: P.R.O., KB 27/429, Fines m.2; KB 27/411, Fines m.2; Rudder, 139; *1455 Rental*, 4; *Cal. Recs. Corp. Gloucester*, 1141; P.R.O., C115 K2/6685 f.17.
42. P.R.O., KB 9/32 m.18; KB 27/506 mm.10d, 12; *Cal. Liberate Rolls 1226-1272*, (6 volumes), passim.
43. *Ibid.*; P.R.O. E101/559/26 mm.1-5; C115 K2/6684 f.208.
44. For instance, *Cal. Pat. Rolls 1408-13*, 373; *1413-16*, 177; P.R.O., C115 K2/6685 f.17.
45. P.R.O., C115 K2/6682 ff.121, 127v, 245; *Glos. R.O.*, D621/M1 mm. 18, 27.
46. For example, *Cal. Pat. Rolls 1429-36*, 5, 442; *Cal. Fine Rolls 1430-37*, 67, 97; *1445-52*, 58, 187.
47. For example, P.R.O., C1/39/101.
48. See, for instance, the family relationships and the rapid turnover in property as evidenced in P.R.O., C115 K1/6678, passim.
49. *1455 Rental*, passim.
50. R.H. Hilton, 'Rent and Capital Formation in Feudal Society', in R.H. Hilton, *The English Peasantry in the Later Middle Ages* (Oxford 1975), 209-12; A.F. Butcher, 'Rent and the Urban Economy: Oxford and Canterbury in the Later Middle Ages', *Southern Hist* 1 (1979), 12-18.
51. *Inquisitiones Post Mortem . . . Glos.* 6, 109.
52. P.R.O., CP 25(1) 78/79 mm.31, 33.
53. *1455 Rental*, passim.
54. *1455 Rental*, 8, 10, 12, 40.
55. *Inquisitiones Post Mortem . . . Glos.* 6, 109.
56. *1455 Rental*, passim.
57. *Cal. Recs. Corp. Gloucester*, 6-9.
58. *Cal. Pat. Rolls 1225-1232*, 182; *Cal. Recs. Corp. Gloucester*, 280-285, etc.
59. W.A. Wright (ed), *The Metrical Chronicle of Robert of Gloucester* 2 (Rolls Series, 1887), 744.
60. P.R.O., SC6/854/8.
61. *Cal. Pat. Rolls 1370-74*, 243, 293; *1381-85*, 22.
62. *Cal. Pat. Rolls 1377-81*, 631-2; *1381-85*, 1-2; H. Owen and J.B. Blakeway, *A History of Sbrewsbury*, 1 (London 1825), 168-74.
63. P.R.O., C115 K2/6685 ff. 12, 12v. For a more detailed consideration of this episode, and the full text of the reference to it in the Register of Prior Hayward, see R.A. Holt, 'Thomas of Woodstock and Events at Gloucester in 1381', *Bull Inst Hist Res* 58 (No. 138), 237-242.
64. L.E.W.O. Fullbrook-Leggatt, *Anglo-Saxon and Medieval Gloucester* (Gloucester 1952), 76-81; P.R.O., KB9/29 m.38.
65. Fullbrook-Leggatt, 70-76.
66. *1455 Rental*, passim.
67. P.R.O., C115 K2/6685 ff. 10-16v.
68. *Ibid.*
69. W.H. Hart (ed), *Historia et Cartularium Monasterii Sancti Petri Gloucesteriae* 1 (Rolls Series, 1863), 38.
70. *Cal. Charter Rolls 1341-1417*, 471.

71. *1455 Rental; Rotuli Parliamentorum* 5 (1783), 338a.
72. P.R.O., C115 K2/6685 f. 11v.
73. P.R.O., C115 K1/6678 ff. 2–17v.
74. *1455 Rental*, 10, 68, 112, etc.
75. *Rotuli Parliamentorum* 6 (1783), 49a.
76. *Cal. Pat. Rolls 1446–52*, 70.
77. Robert Cole described the New Inn as 'lately built' by John Twynnyng, a monk of St Peter's Abbey: *1455 Rental*, 84. However, Cole himself had described the New Inn in exactly the same terms in 1445: P.R.O., C115 K1/6678 f. 66, and furthermore John Twynnyng had not been a monk at Gloucester since at least 1441: *Cal. Pat. Rolls 1441–46*, 29.
78. *Cal. Recs. Corp. Gloucester*, 59.
79. In 1524 there were 390 taxpayers in Gloucester: P.R.O., E179/113/189.
80. Hatcher, 45–46.
81. *Cal. Recs. Corp. Gloucester*, 20.
82. *Ibid.*, 21.

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