

THE ORIGINS OF TOWNS IN MEDIEVAL HAMPSHIRE: THE CASE OF ALTON

By MARK PAGE

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses evidence of urban origins and growth in Hampshire between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries, with particular reference to the town of Alton. It uses ideas relating to the gradual evolution of medieval towns to balance the suggestion that the dominance of Winchester stifled urban development in the county before 1100.

INTRODUCTION

There is general agreement among historians and archaeologists that the period 850–1300 was one of urban growth in England. However, the origins of towns, especially small towns, are not always easy to identify. Documentary and archaeological evidence of urban development is often either lacking or difficult to interpret. Many towns evolved gradually over time; the point at which a particular place became urban may be impossible to determine precisely. Moreover, the defining characteristics of towns have provoked disagreement: where do we draw the line between urban and rural? This paper offers some thoughts about the origins of towns in Hampshire before 1200, and makes a particular study of the urban development of Alton.

In Hampshire, at the time of the Norman Conquest, the principal urban centres were Winchester and Southampton. There can be no doubt that these places were towns. Both housed mints in the tenth century, which according to the laws of Athelstan had to be located in towns (Yorke 1995, 310). In both towns it is possible to recognize a distinctively urban use of space: high densities of buildings arranged closely in rows along streets and around market places. Both

towns were characterized by occupational diversity, with evidence of a range of crafts and trades, and both acted as commercial centres for the surrounding area. By these and other criteria, Winchester and Southampton were urban settlements in the eleventh century (Biddle and Keene 1976, 449–69; Platt 1973, 6–11; Hinton 1996, 48–9). Elsewhere in Hampshire, it is more difficult to find such clear evidence of urban development.

Winchester and Southampton were among the boroughs or burhs of southern England which Alfred and his successors fortified in the ninth and tenth centuries as a defence against the Danes. Domesday Book records a third borough in Hampshire in 1086 at Christchurch (or Twynham). Eleventh-century Christchurch seems to possess some of the attributes of a town. Domesday Book records a total of 39 messuages or building plots, which were probably arranged along a regular street plan in the shape of a cross. Some messuages may have been destroyed during the construction of the castle *c.* 1100, which distorted the pattern of streets. Christchurch also appears to have been an early religious centre of some importance, which may have acted as a focus for urban development; the church drew revenue from a number of messuages in 1086. However, the urban status of Christchurch in the eleventh century has been disputed. The number of messuages was small, there was no mint, and little evidence has been found of the kind of economic activity identified at Winchester and Southampton. The settlement, it is argued, was a fishing village and rural market centre rather than a town (Penn 1980, 38; Jarvis 1983, 7–21; Hinton 1984, 152–3; Golding 1989, 8).

In the twelfth century, by contrast, documen-

tary evidence reveals that Christchurch was indubitably urban. In the 1150s, the lord of the manor, Baldwin de Redvers, earl of Devon, excused his burgesses of Christchurch from payment of certain customary dues, including the rent of market stalls and 'all market duties'; he also reduced his share of the market tolls, from £4 to £3 10s., possibly as a reward for their loyalty during the civil war (Bearman 1994, 80–1). At the end of the twelfth century, a later earl granted to the mother of the abbot of Quarr an annuity out of the market tolls of Christchurch. The same earl confirmed to Peter Long a piece of land opposite the market place, with a shop at the eastern corner, and a further parcel of land in Yarmouth, perhaps indicating a trading link between the two towns (Bearman 1994, 35, 120–1, 170). The building of the priory at the end of the eleventh century may well have facilitated urban growth. In c. 1140 Baldwin de Redvers granted the canons a tithe from the tolls of Christchurch fair and first right of purchase in Christchurch in the absence of the earl. The same document refers to the bargate, possibly a stone gateway into the town, a school, and two streets along which the canons held a number of messuages (Bearman 1994, 64–6; Jarvis 1983, 14, 19–20). Such features provide clear evidence for the existence of small towns (Dyer 2003, 102).

Christchurch may well exemplify a common pattern of urban development in medieval England: the evolution of a largely rural settlement which gradually assumed that bundle of features which, it is argued, characterized a town. Such places are sometimes called 'pre-urban nuclei' or 'proto-towns': places which acted as a focus for urbanization by offering security, a market for goods and services, and a regular place of assembly for commercial, social and religious gatherings (Blair 2000, 246–7; Dyer 2002, 8). Inevitably, the point at which a particular place can be said to have achieved urban status will be a matter for debate, and dependent as much on the preconceptions of the historian as on the quality of the evidence. In the case of Christchurch, there can be no doubt that there was a town in the middle ages, but whether its urban origin lies in the eleventh century or the twelfth will not be easily resolved.

There may be objections that the precise dating of urban origins is of little more than academic interest; that the study of town life in the later middle ages, when the evidence is fuller, is of greater concern than the possibly fruitless quest for the date of foundation. Such protests are easily countered. The existence or otherwise of towns in eleventh-century Hampshire has influenced ideas about the realities of political and economic power in the county. For example, it has been argued that royal protection of Winchester until c. 1140 restricted the growth of places such as Andover, Basingstoke and Odiham, which may have delayed their attainment of urban status until the twelfth century. This policy may also have prevented the establishment of mints in the tenth-century burhs of Portchester and Christchurch (Hinton 1984, 154–5). The apparent lack of small towns in Hampshire before 1100 is in contrast to other southern counties, such as Somerset. An alternative explanation to the dominance of Winchester, however, may be the inadequacies of the evidence, which obscures our view of the urban character of Basingstoke, Christchurch and the like (Yorke 1995, 315–16). Clearly, if we are to understand the economic and social development of Hampshire around the time of the Norman Conquest, we must continue to seek evidence of urban origins and growth.

For many of Hampshire's small towns, evidence of their urban status becomes available only in the thirteenth century or later. For example, the addition of three burgage plots in Fareham in 1211–12, which was recorded in the estate accounts of the bishopric of Winchester, provides us with our earliest documentary evidence of the town (Beresford and Finberg 1973, 118). The addition of burgage plots implies that the town was already in existence and flourishing, but we do not know exactly when it was founded. It has been remarked that Fareham was ideally located for a market centre, because of its position for road and navigable river communications. However, although archaeological investigation has produced evidence of eleventh-century occupation, it has not proved possible to characterize the settlement as being specifically urban, in the manner of Winchester or Southampton (Hinton 1984, 152).

A number of Hampshire towns possessed urban features at the time of Domesday Book. Markets were held in Basingstoke and Titchfield; a market was probably also located in Kingsclere. Like Christchurch, however, the urban status of these settlements has been doubted, and confirmatory evidence of their urban character is not available until later centuries (Hinton 1984, 149–50, 154–5; Hughes 1976, 39, 80, 135). Certainly, there is an acknowledgement that medieval markets were not always held in towns, as testified by the numerous informal trading places of the eighth century and later discovered through metal-detecting, and by the many grants of market charters to the lords of rural manors in the thirteenth century (Blair 2000, 245; Britnell 2004, 158–9). Nevertheless, we cannot dismiss the possibility that towns existed at Basingstoke, Kingsclere and Titchfield in 1086 or earlier. Similarly, it has been suggested that Andover achieved urban status around the time of the Norman Conquest, although it was not until 1175 that the men of the town were granted a merchant guild and freedom of toll throughout the realm (Lilley 1999, 26–31). The origins of other towns may also lie in the period before 1100; for example, Romsey almost certainly originated as a market centre around the gate of the tenth-century abbey (Hughes 1994, 195, 198). Another town with uncertain origins is Alton, which provides the focus of the second part of this paper (Page 2003).

THE ORIGINS OF ALTON

There can be no doubt that by the thirteenth century Alton was a centre of manufacturing and commercial activity. A market was explicitly stated to be held there in 1232, for which the bailiffs of the town paid the crown £13 a year (Allen Brown 1991, 67). In 1203 Geoffrey the vintner of Alton was fined 2 marks (£1 6s. 8d.) for breaking the regulations governing the sale of wine (Stenton 1938, 147). In 1236 Geoffrey the servant and Stephen of Alton were similarly fined for selling wine contrary to the assize. Also in 1236, Eustace the cobbler of Alton was arrested on suspicion of theft (PRO, JUST1/775, mm. 15–15d).

The quality and quantity of evidence relating to Alton's status as a market town improves over the course of the thirteenth century. Account rolls, for example, surviving from the reign of Edward I (1272–1307), record the collection of market tolls and other payments characteristic of towns. Thus, fines worth 17s. 10d. were collected at the court held by Ralph, keeper of the king's market, in 1279–80. In the same year the pillory and tumbrel were repaired, while in 1281–2 new stocks were made at the prison (PRO, SC6/978/1, mm. 1, 4). These were methods of punishment employed frequently in medieval towns. Other examples can be found at Alresford and Overton in 1301–2 (Page 1996, 100, 329). In 1280–1 two casks of cider were bought at Alton and sent to Guildford (PRO, SC6/1089/20, m. 3). There appears to have been a considerable trade in cider in the town at this period. Finally, in 1287–8 William de Foro (literally 'of the market') paid 4d. to have two stalls in Alton, from which to sell his wares in the market place (PRO, SC6/978/1, mm. 4, 9).

Like other towns discussed in this paper, we may suspect that the origins of Alton's urban growth lie in the twelfth century or earlier. Indeed, references to Alton can be found in many of the Exchequer pipe rolls, which survive in unbroken series from 1155–6 and record the money received by and owed to the crown in each year. However, it is often unclear whether these are references to one of the manors of Alton or to the town. An early record, perhaps the earliest, of the borough of Alton occurs in the pipe roll of 1219 when the borough was fined 5 marks (£3 6s. 8d.) for the offences of concealment and harbouring, which may refer either to strangers, criminals or stolen goods (Harris 1976, 33). At other times, Alton was often described by the Latin term *villata*. This is usually translated as 'town', 'township' or 'vill', but such words did not necessarily carry their modern urban connotations in the middle ages. A vill was the smallest administrative unit of medieval local government and was used to describe both rural and urban communities. Thus, in the pipe roll of 1203 places as varied as Andover, Basingstoke, Barton Stacey and Wallop were all described as vills (Stenton 1938, 143–4).

Many of the payments made by the people of Alton in the twelfth century were contributions to

royal taxation. During the reign of Henry II (1154–89) levies known as aids were imposed by the king on manors of the royal demesne and on cities and boroughs. In 1167–8, for example, Alton owed £10 16s. 8d. to the treasury towards the aid (*auxilium*) of that year (*PR 14 Henry II*, 181). The whole of this sum may have been paid by the manor of Alton Westbrook, the portion of Alton held directly by the king. However, there is the possibility that some of the money was levied on the inhabitants of the town or borough. With this consideration in mind, it is worth comparing the amount of aid owed by various communities in Hampshire. For example, in 1167–8 Alton owed more to the king than any other royal estate or town in the county except Winchester (*PR 14 Henry II*, 181–2). Thus, the people of Basingstoke owed £8 13s. 4d. and the inhabitants of Andover £7 16s. 8d., manors which both included developing market towns. The wholly rural community of Kings Somborne owed £4 3s. 4d.

None of this proves categorically that Alton possessed a valuable market in the mid-twelfth century, the traders of which were able to contribute significant sums to the royal coffers. Nevertheless, the evidence is at least suggestive that this was indeed the case. But can the origins of Alton as a town be traced even further back in time? The description of Alton in Domesday Book does not suggest a place which had at this time developed any urban characteristics. Nor is there evidence of any trading activity. Thus, no mention is made of a market or right of toll, as there was for instance at Basingstoke, Kingsclere and Titchfield. However, it has been suggested that the market worth £8 a year at Neatham in 1086 may have been physically located within Alton manor, even though it remained financially attached to Neatham because this was the hundredal manor, and the market a hundredal right (Hinton 1984, 149). Historians have long recognized the strong association between markets and hundredal manors in Domesday Book (Britnell 1978). Thus in Hampshire, markets were held at Basingstoke in Basingstoke Hundred, Titchfield in Titchfield Hundred, and Neatham in Neatham Hundred. It may be significant for the location of Neatham's market that the hundred was renamed Alton Hundred during the

course of the twelfth century (*PR 32 Henry II*, 175).

Neatham's market must have been the scene for considerable commercial activity, at which large numbers of tolls were collected from the assembled merchants and traders. A value of £8 in 1086 placed the market there in a different league from those at Basingstoke, worth £1 10s., and Titchfield, worth £2. Neatham lies about 1½ miles (2.4 km) to the north-east of Alton; the Domesday description of Neatham may well incorporate part of Alton within its apparently wide extent (there were 52 ploughlands and 8½ mills). Whether the market in 1086 was held there or in Alton, it was clearly of some importance for the inhabitants of the surrounding area and likely to act as a focus for urbanization.

In spite of the undoubted dominance of Winchester in the eleventh century, Hampshire shared in the commercialization of the countryside which was taking place at this time as the result of a growing population and the intensification of estate exploitation (Dyer 1988, 76–9). Markets would have developed naturally wherever large gatherings of people regularly occurred, such as at royal residences, local administrative centres, and important churches. Alton/Neatham was one such place; Andover, Christchurch and Romsey were others. Whether we choose to describe these settlements as towns or 'pre-urban nuclei' before 1100, they were evidently of some significance and shared many of the characteristics of small towns in other southern counties. The exceptional size and status of Winchester at the time of the Norman Conquest should not blind us to a lesser pattern of urban development, further evidence of which will emerge as historical, archaeological and topographical research progresses.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Part of this article was originally published in *Alton Papers*. I am grateful to the editors for allowing me to reproduce it here. I am also indebted to Martin Morris for sharing his ideas about Alton and Neatham with me, and to John Hare for his comments on an earlier draft.

REFERENCES

Manuscript sources

The National Archives: Public Record Office (PRO)

JUST1 Assize rolls

SC6 Ministers' accounts

Printed sources

Allen Brown, R (ed.), 1991 *Memoranda Rolls 16–17 Henry III, 1231–3*, HMSO, London.

Bearman, R (ed.), 1994 *Charters of the Redvers Family and the Earldom of Devon 1090–1217*, Devon and Cornwall Record Society, new series, 37.

Harris, B E (ed.), 1976 *The Great Roll of the Pipe for 3 Henry III, Michaelmas 1219*, Pipe Roll Society, new series, 42.

Page, M (ed.) 1996 *The Pipe Roll of the Bishopric of Winchester 1301–2*, Hampshire Record Series, 14.

The Great Roll of the Pipe for 14 Henry II, 1167–8, Pipe Roll Society, 12, 1890.

The Great Roll of the Pipe for 32 Henry II, 1185–6, Pipe Roll Society, 36, 1914.

Stenton, D M (ed.), 1938 *The Great Roll of the Pipe for 5 John, Michaelmas 1203*, Pipe Roll Society, new series, 16.

Secondary sources

Beresford, M & Finberg, H P R 1973 *English Medieval Boroughs: A Hand-List*, Newton Abbot.

Biddle, M & Keene, D 1976 *The Late Saxon Burh*, in Biddle, M (ed.), *Winchester in the Early Middle Ages*, Oxford.

Blair, J 2000 *Small Towns 600–1270*, in Palliser, D M (ed.), *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain*, I, 600–1540, Cambridge.

Britnell, R H 1978 *English Markets and Royal Administration before 1200*, *Econ Hist Rev*, 2nd series, 31 183–96.

— 2004 *Britain and Ireland 1050–1530: Economy and Society*, Oxford.

Dyer, C 1988 *Recent Developments in Early Medieval Urban History and Archaeology in England*, in Denecke, D and Shaw, G (eds.), *Urban Historical Geography: Recent Progress in Britain and Germany*, Cambridge.

— 2002 *Small Places with Large Consequences: The Importance of Small Towns in England, 1000–1540*, *Historical Research* 75 1–24.

— 2003 *The Archaeology of Medieval Small Towns*, *Medieval Archaeol.* 47 85–114.

Golding, B 1989 *An Introduction to the Hampshire Domesday*, in Williams, A and Erskine, R W H (eds.), *The Hampshire Domesday*, London.

Hinton, D A 1984 *The Towns of Hampshire*, in Haslam, J (ed.), *Anglo-Saxon Towns in Southern England*, Chichester.

— 1996 *Hamtunsire: A Review of the Archaeology and History of Medieval Hampshire*, in Hinton, D A and Hughes, M (eds.), *Archaeology in Hampshire: A Framework for the Future*, Winchester.

Hughes, M 1976 *The Small Towns of Hampshire: The Archaeological and Historical Implications of Development*, Winchester.

— 1994 *Towns and Villages in Medieval Hampshire*, in Aston, M and Lewis, C (eds.), *The Medieval Landscape of Wessex*, Oxford.

Jarvis, K S 1983 *Excavations in Christchurch 1969–80*, Dorset Natural History and Archaeological Society, Monograph Series, 5.

Lilley, K D 1999 *Norman Towns in Southern England: Urban Morphogenesis in Hampshire and the Isle of Wight 1066–1215*, University of Birmingham, Urban Morphology Research Monograph, 5.

Page, M 2003 *Medieval Alton: The Origins of a Market Town*, *Alton Papers* 7 3–6.

Penn, K J 1980 *Historic Towns in Dorset*, Dorset Natural History and Archaeological Society, Monograph Series, 1.

Platt, C 1973 *Medieval Southampton: The Port and Trading Community, A.D. 1000–1600*, London.

Yorke, B 1995 *Wessex in the Early Middle Ages*, Leicester.

Author: Dr Mark Page, Centre for English Local History, Marc Fitch House, 5 Salisbury Road, Leicester LE1 7QR.