

A Survey of Urbanization in the English Midlands, c. 1550-1750

Yoh Kawana*

Introduction

The urbanization of early modern England represented significant economic and social changes prior to what is conventionally regarded as the period of industrialisation after the mid-eighteenth century. Urban growth was not only concentrated in the capital, but also in the provinces, especially in the post-Restoration period when the rate of urban expansion was much faster than that of the demographic growth of the country as a whole. In this respect, England was different from continental Europe where large urban centres generally stagnated in the early modern period. New industrial towns, together with ports, dockyards and leisure towns, exemplified the most explicit urban growth, reflecting the transformation of energy resources, the expansion of international trade, and the rise of fashion and conspicuous consumption in the domestic market.¹⁾

Although the general patterns of demographic urbanization in the early modern period illuminate this unique phase of English economic and social history, they tend to conceal diverse local experiences on which our historical interpretations should depend. The economic importance of a town should be assessed not simply by its scale or speed of growth, but by the role each town played in relation to other urban centres and the surrounding agrarian economy. As regional specialisation has come to be understood as a key dimension of industrialisation in England, the varying economic functions of both large and small towns require detailed explanations as to how collectively they formulated a local economic system.²⁾

The principal aim of this paper is to highlight the differing backgrounds to the economic performance of Midland towns from roughly 1550 to 1750.³⁾ In order to distinguish essentially

* Associate Professor, Graduate School of Economics and Management, Tohoku University

1) P.J. Corfield, *The impact of English towns, 1700-1800* (Oxford, 1982), 7, 10; E.A. Wrigley, 'Urban growth and agricultural change: England and the Continent in the early modern period', in R.I. Rotberg et al., *Population and history: from the traditional to the modern world* (Cambridge, 1986), 147-148, 150-151; J. Langton, 'Urban growth and economic change: from the late seventeenth century to 1841', in P. Clark, ed., *The Cambridge urban history of Britain, vol. II 1540-1840* (Cambridge, 2000), 466.

2) J. de Vries, *European urbanization, 1500-1800* (London, 1984), 9-10; P. Hudson, 'The regional perspective', in P. Hudson, ed., *Regions and industries: a perspective on the industrial revolution in Britain* (Cambridge, 1989), 16-17, 22.

3) In this essay, 'the Midlands' designates the area consisting of Derbyshire, Lincolnshire, Leicestershire,