

# MEDIEVAL TOWNS OF MERSEYSIDE

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## Introduction

The present study arose out of a report on the historic towns of Merseyside commissioned by the former Merseyside County Council and undertaken between 1984 and 1986 by the Archaeological Survey department of Liverpool Museum (formerly Merseyside County Museums). The original planning report dealt with only three medieval towns, Liverpool, Prescott and Newton-le-Willows, but the scope of the study was widened for the 1986 seminar to cover the evidence for the origin, growth and decline of towns in the medieval period in the county of Merseyside and its immediate vicinity. A detailed presentation of the evidence for medieval towns in the area has recently been published (Philpott 1988).

## Previous Work

While historians had long realized the importance of the grants of market and borough charters as both a *de facto* recognition of and a spur to urban growth and development, the town as unit of study for the archaeologist is a relatively recent concept (Schofield and Palliser 1981). Individual historians as early as the beginning of the century had begun to compile and publish valuable documentary sources which concerned the growth of towns in Lancashire, mostly in the *Transactions of the Lancashire and Cheshire Historical Society* and the *Lancashire and Cheshire Record Society*. Documents such as the Exchequer Lay Subsidies of 1322, various rentals, deeds and property transactions, provide clear evidence of the burghal status of settlements in southwest Lancashire, while Volume I of the *Victoria History of the County of Lancashire* (Farrer and Brownbill 1907) is an invaluable compilation of documentary material. Stewart-Brown's work on Liverpool made available much primary source material and stimulating syntheses to the archaeologist (eg Stewart-Brown 1916). Equally the meticulous work of F.A. Bailey in transcribing and publishing the Court Leet and other documents for Prescott provided a wealth of documentary evidence for the townspeople, the industries and petty disputes of the town (Bailey 1937). Bailey's work on the detailed Prescott surveys of 1592 and 1721 enabled him to reconstruct in great detail the layout of the town and approximate locations of all buildings within it. The topography of Prescott in the 16th century has thus been described as 'the best known of any similar town in northern England' (Davey 1978, 3).

It is only from the late 1970s, however, that the towns of the Merseyside area were examined from an archaeological viewpoint. The first archaeological survey of a medieval town in the area was conducted by P.J. Davey in Prescott (Davey 1978). This identified a number of early building survivals, demonstrated that the essential structure of the medieval and early post-medieval town remained fossilised in surviving boundaries, and drew attention to the archaeological potential of this well-documented medieval and post-medieval market town. Five excavations in derelict land in the town followed the report but later levelling and rebuilding had destroyed much of the medieval and later archaeological evidence (Holgate 1983).

With the exception of Liverpool and Prescott, the medieval towns of southwest Lancashire have received scant attention from archaeologists, and although Morris has attempted a regional survey, his conclusions are necessarily general (1983). The earliest excavations at towns in Merseyside were not strictly urban, being examinations of castles where the castle preceded the development of the town. At West Derby castle, a fine preserved timber bridge was revealed in a section dug across the moat in 1927 (Droop and Larkin 1928, 47-55), while in 1843 the Rev. E. Sibson opened the motte at Newton-le-Willows, under the impression it was a prehistoric barrow, but revealed a possible timber foundation for the motte (Sibson 1843). Further excavation at Newton castle by the North West Archaeological Trust took place in 1986-87 (J. Lewis in prep.).

Subsequent archaeological excavation in towns has taken place at South Castle Street, Liverpool in 1976 and 1977. The first of two excavations lay close to the site of the castle and revealed substantial evidence of the early 18th century market and associated features, but failed to recover evidence earlier than the 17th century. The second produced an excellent sequence of phases of infilling of the Pool of Liverpool in the mid-late 17th century (Davey 1985; McNeil 1985).

Robin Holgate's excavations within burgages in Prescott failed to produce significant medieval structures (Holgate 1983), and excavation within a burgage in Prescott in 1985 revealed a late 18th century pottery manufactory but little earlier evidence other than loosely stratified soil horizons containing medieval and later pottery (McNeil 1989).

Excavation, then, has so far contributed only marginally to the questions of urban growth and development in

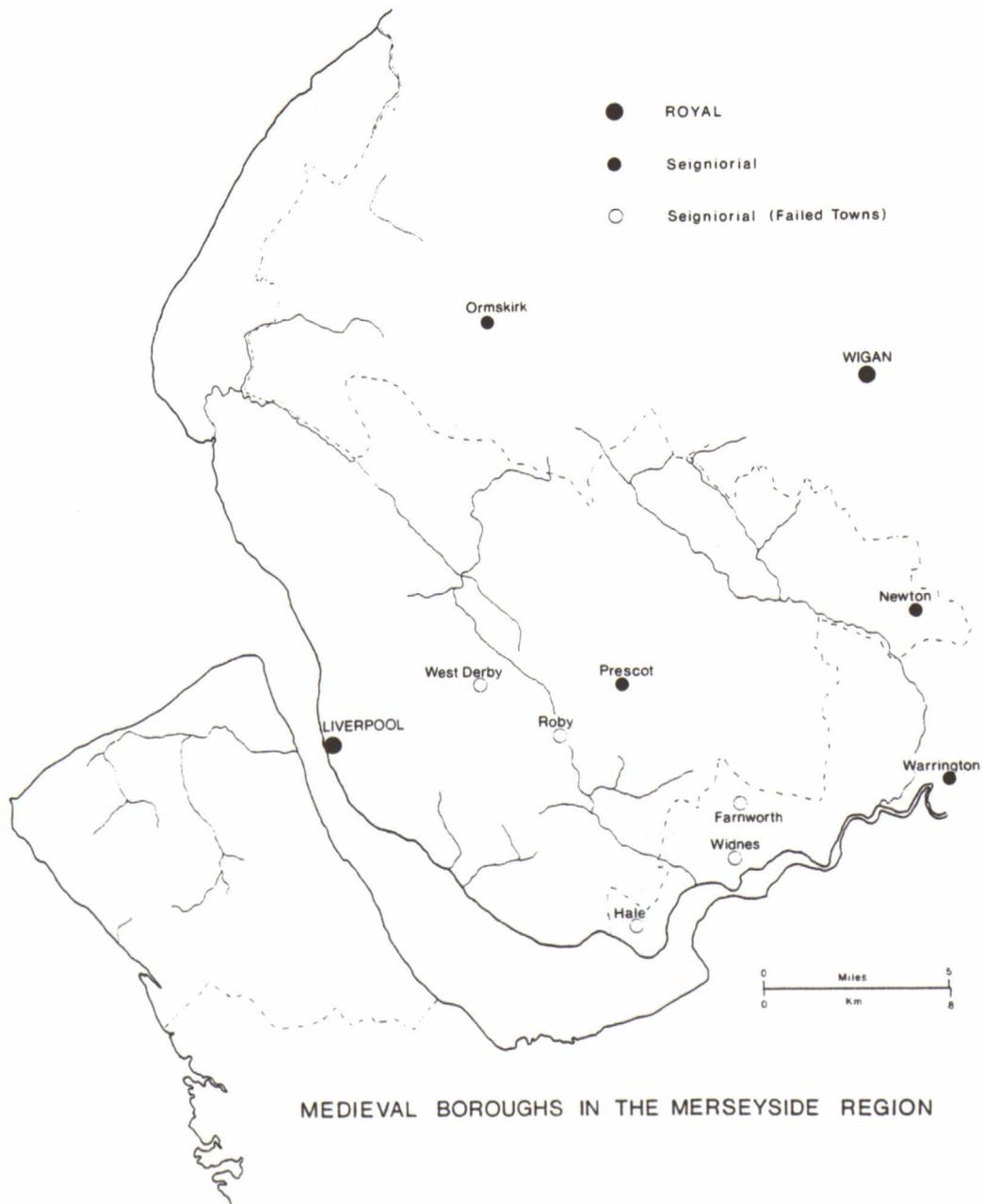


Figure 1: Boroughs in the Merseyside region.

Merseyside and for a wider view of the background to the rise of towns in the region we must turn to historical sources.

### The Growth of Urbanism in England

The origins of the English borough lay in the Anglo-Saxon *burh*, which began life primarily as a fortified centre for the defence of the local population against the Danish armies. By the late Saxon period, they had begun to acquire administrative, ecclesiastical and commercial functions as well as gaining an increasing degree of autonomy. By the Norman conquest, features such as merchant guilds, royal officials and borough courts were becoming common in the larger towns. In the post-conquest period, the upsurge in trade in luxury items and the development of the cash economy with peasants meeting their feudal obligations to their lord in cash instead of labour services, led to a great increase in economic activity. The consequent growth in new markets, located at convenient assembly points wherever people congregated, was formalised in royal grants of market charters. Local landowners sought charters, not only to stimulate trade by granting privileged conditions of exchange, but also to increase their own revenue from stallage, taxes and tolls. The grant of a market charter was followed in a minority of towns by a further rise in status to that of the borough.

### The Medieval Town: A Definition

The definition of the medieval town follows that adopted by Beresford and Finberg in their work on medieval towns in England (1973). The chief distinguishing mark of a medieval town, which set it apart from markets and other nucleated settlements, was the possession of burgage tenure. The privileges of burgage tenure were extensive, enabling the holder freely to sell, rent, subdivide, or leave in the will the burgage plot to whomever the holder wished. In return, a standard rent of 12d *per annum* was payable to the lord of the manor but at Liverpool, and elsewhere, the opportunity was subsequently taken to raise the rent in the case of escheated burgages which reverted to the lord through bastardy, felony or lack of an heir (Stewart-Brown 1916, 31). The degree of freedom and personal mobility which burgage tenure offered the feudal peasant was a great incentive to taking up residence in towns, and the grant of burgage tenure has been seen as 'the basis of the fortunes of the vast majority of English medieval towns' (Beresford and Finberg 1973, 26).

Borough charters were issued initially by the king but, increasingly through the 13th century, by local landlords, who might be either religious houses or secular landowners. There are two principal circumstances in which borough charters were granted: a town could be

established on a new site with a borough charter granted by the king or a local landowner which invited people to take up burgages there and enshrined the privileges of burgage tenure in the town; or a charter could be obtained for an existing settlement, usually, but not invariably, a market centre, which granted the privileges of burgage tenure.

Merseyside and its immediate environs have several settlements which, although all technically towns by virtue of the possession of burgage tenure, were widely different in other respects. Some, like Liverpool, remained towns throughout the medieval and later period. Others, such as Hale and Roby, received the formal grant of borough status but failed to develop and reverted to manors. Still others, for example Prescot and Ormskirk, flourished briefly but lost their burghal status in the general economic decline of the late medieval period.

The date of market and borough charters provides a rough index of the growth of trade and of the consequent rise of towns throughout the country. By this standard, the northwest can be seen to have developed relatively slowly (Table 1). Of over one hundred boroughs recorded in the Domesday Book, only one, Penwortham, lies in the area between the Ribble and Mersey, as south Lancashire was then known. Over England as a whole the grant of market charters reached a peak in the mid to late 13th century, while in south west Lancashire most markets received formal charters in the late 13th to mid 14th century. The borough charters show a similar delay. Following the national pattern, the four Lancashire royal boroughs are earlier than the majority of smaller seigniorial boroughs, being established between 1179 and 1246. By contrast, seigniorial borough charters, apart from the two hundredal centres of West Derby and Warrington, all appear to be 14th century or later.

### The Rise of Medieval Towns in Merseyside

The economic, geographic or social conditions which contributed to the rise of boroughs varied not only from place to place but also over time. The factors which led to the rise of medieval towns in Merseyside mirror those in operation elsewhere and the diversity of origins and fortunes of towns within this restricted area illustrates the complexity of those factors.

Certain recurrent features can be seen among the medieval settlements that developed into towns in south west Lancashire (Fig. 1). Most were already established as local religious or administrative centres before the conquest and acted as focal points attracting people from the surrounding area. Some of the earliest towns in southwest Lancashire developed at the hundredal centres. The importance of these late Saxon capital manors is demonstrated by the fact that after the

Norman conquest a castle was planted at each one in order to consolidate the power base of the new Norman overlords (at West Derby, Newton and Warrington). However, the influence of the castle does not appear to have been of primary importance in the rise of the town. The market places do not grow up at the gates of the castle as occurred elsewhere in the late 11th and 12th century (eg Newcastle-under-Lyme) and the town plans indicate that purely commercial considerations were of paramount importance in the location of the market places. The castle at West Derby was still occupied in the early 13th century, before the removal of the garrison to Liverpool c. 1235, by which time the borough charter had already been granted and the presence of a garrison may have provided an additional stimulus to the provision of goods. It is not known whether the castle at Newton was still occupied at this date but Morris has suggested that none of the Norman castles occupied at an early period in the Manchester area still remained in occupation by the 14th century, and the same is true of Newton and West Derby (Morris 1983, 17). The castle at Liverpool was not incorporated as an integral part of the newly founded town, but may have been erected over burgages. Most of the other towns were created in more tranquil conditions when the need for fortification was reduced.

### Parish Centres

Parishes in the area were very large, reflecting the dispersed population, and parishioners attending church would often travel a considerable distance. Before the creation of the dependent chapelry of Farnworth in the late 12th century, Prescott church, for example, served no fewer than fifteen townships in a parish covering 36,500 acres. With the growth of the market economy after the conquest, the informal sale or exchange of surplus agricultural produce would have been a natural development among those who had congregated in the parish centre. The spontaneous growth of trading at Prescott and Ormskirk was acknowledged in the obtaining of a formal market charter by lords of the manor who were eager to take advantage of an additional source of revenue from market tolls. A similar process can be observed in the hundredal centres where attendance was required either at courts or for taxation or other administrative purposes and the early hundredal capital manors at Newton and West Derby appear to have been pre-eminent in the early market system over their adjacent parish churches at Winwick and Walton-on-the-Hill.

**Table 1: Markets and Boroughs in the Merseyside Area**

	Earliest Market	First Record of Burgage	R/S	No. of Burgages	Possible Origin	Survivors
Liverpool	1256	1207	R*	150/168	P	*
Warrington	1283	1220s	S		C/A	
West Derby	pre 1237		S	31	A	
Wigan	1245	1246	R		C	*
Ormskirk	1286	c. 1286	E*		C	
Newton	1257	1311/12	S	36?	A/M	*
Hale	1304	1323	S	18	S/M?	
Widnes		1355/6	S			
Roby	1304	1372	S*		S?	
Newburgh		1385	S			
Farnworth	1426	1395	S		C?	
Prescot	1333	1537	S/E	45?	C	
Markets only:						
North Meols	1219	Tupling 1936, 102				
Tarbock	1257	Tupling 1936, 107				
Formby	1322	Tupling 1936, 94				

### Notes:

- 1) Founder: R = royal; S = seigniorial; E = ecclesiastical. Prescott is anomalous in being a foundation presumably established by the lord of the manor, who was probably at the time the vicar. An asterisk after this letter indicates that the borough charter survives.
- 2) Origin: the factors which appear to have been predominant in the rise of the borough are as follows: C = church focussed; A = administrative centre; M = market; P = planted new town; S = speculative venture.
- 3) Survivors: towns which retained their burghal status throughout the medieval period.

## Communications

Many settlements in England and Wales grew into towns because of advantageous situations. Their location on major routeways, or their importance as defensive strongpoints, ecclesiastical or administrative centres ensured a constant flow of people into the centre from the rural hinterland and further afield. This was often sufficient to allow a flourishing market to develop which then became a prime candidate for elevation to the status of borough.

The initial growth of markets and their subsequent development into boroughs depended on ease of access from both the rural hinterland and further afield and the location of boroughs in southwest Lancashire shows a close correlation with the major routes in the area. Good communications also helped to ensure the survival of a borough through the late medieval period as a market. Newton, for example, lay on the line of the main road to the north of England west of the Pennines, although competition from neighbours Wigan and Warrington on the same road may have prevented Newton ever becoming a major town. Medieval road maps of England show that Prescot lay at a junction on the main road west from Liverpool to Manchester, while an important local route through the mosses of southwest Lancashire linking Liverpool and Preston passes through Ormskirk. The situation of Hale, near to a crossing point over the Mersey by ferry and ford, benefitted from traffic along the southern route from Liverpool to Runcorn, while both Roby and West Derby were close to the main routes east from Liverpool.

## Planted New Towns

For a variety of motives, settlements were deliberately founded as new towns. Royal foundations, which were predominant in the 11th and early 12th century, were founded for reasons of defence or as instruments of political control as much as profit. By the mid 12th century in England as a whole the emphasis was changing towards the establishment of towns for purely commercial reasons.

The town of Liverpool was the only newly planted town in the area, founded in 1207 by King John as a base for pursuit of his Irish campaigns, although probably on the site of an existing minor vill. The advantage of royal patronage provided a major stimulus to the success of the borough which achieved a measure of autonomy and self-government not found in the smaller seigniorial boroughs. In addition the good natural anchorage of the Pool and coastal location ensured the development of trade across the Irish Sea.

## Speculative Boroughs

Income from rent of burgages in a prosperous town could be a lucrative source of revenue for an entrepreneurial landowner. The small and late boroughs, such as Roby, Farnworth and perhaps Hale, appear to have been an attempt by landowners to establish a local centre within the wider market network. The charter for Roby still survives and shows that the manor was granted a charter in 1372 by the lord, Sir Thomas de Lathom, making his vill of Roby a free borough for ever. However, by comparison with the royal borough of Liverpool, the burgesses of Roby were subject to considerable restrictions, such as the obligation to grind at the lord's mill and to render services like other tenants of the vill (Farrer and Brownbill 1907, 175).

In many parts of England, the great religious houses were instrumental in the foundation of boroughs. In south Lancashire such institutions were neither richly endowed nor common and only one borough, Ormskirk, was an ecclesiastical foundation. The borough of Ormskirk was founded by the Prior and Canons of Burscough Priory who obtained a market charter in 1286 and probably later the same year a borough charter (Webb 1970, 48-49).

A study of the distribution of boroughs in south west Lancashire reveals a good correlation with the availability of fertile arable land. Even today a town such as Ormskirk acts as a central point for its agricultural hinterland, providing services and a local redistribution centre. Its importance in the region, with a local monopoly, ensured the survival of the market until the present. However, the failure of some towns as boroughs may have been in part due to their inability to capture a significant part of the market due to competition from stronger and more advantageously located neighbours. Roby in particular lay less than three miles from the well established market at Prescot, and if we consider that in the early 14th century the townspeople of Wigan had been concerned about the consequences of competition from the new market at Prescot some twelve miles away, the chances of a new speculative market succeeding in the shadow of the old were very remote. With the late medieval decline in both the population and also in prices for agricultural products, these small, late boroughs were the first to fail.

## Town Plans

The layout of medieval towns frequently reflect the circumstances of their origin. Although in most Merseyside towns the earliest surviving plan is 18th century in date, documentary evidence frequently suggests that the late medieval street plan has remained largely unchanged until the 19th century. The layout of streets once established was resistant to change and in

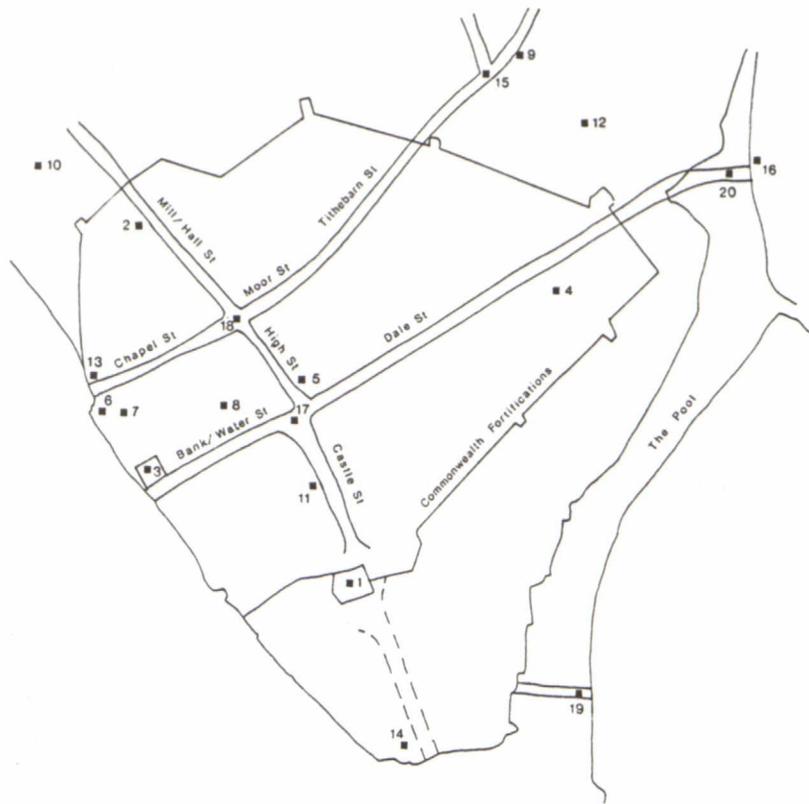


Figure 2: Liverpool medieval street pattern (after Nicholson 1981, Figs 3 & 7, for key see Philpott 1988, 37).

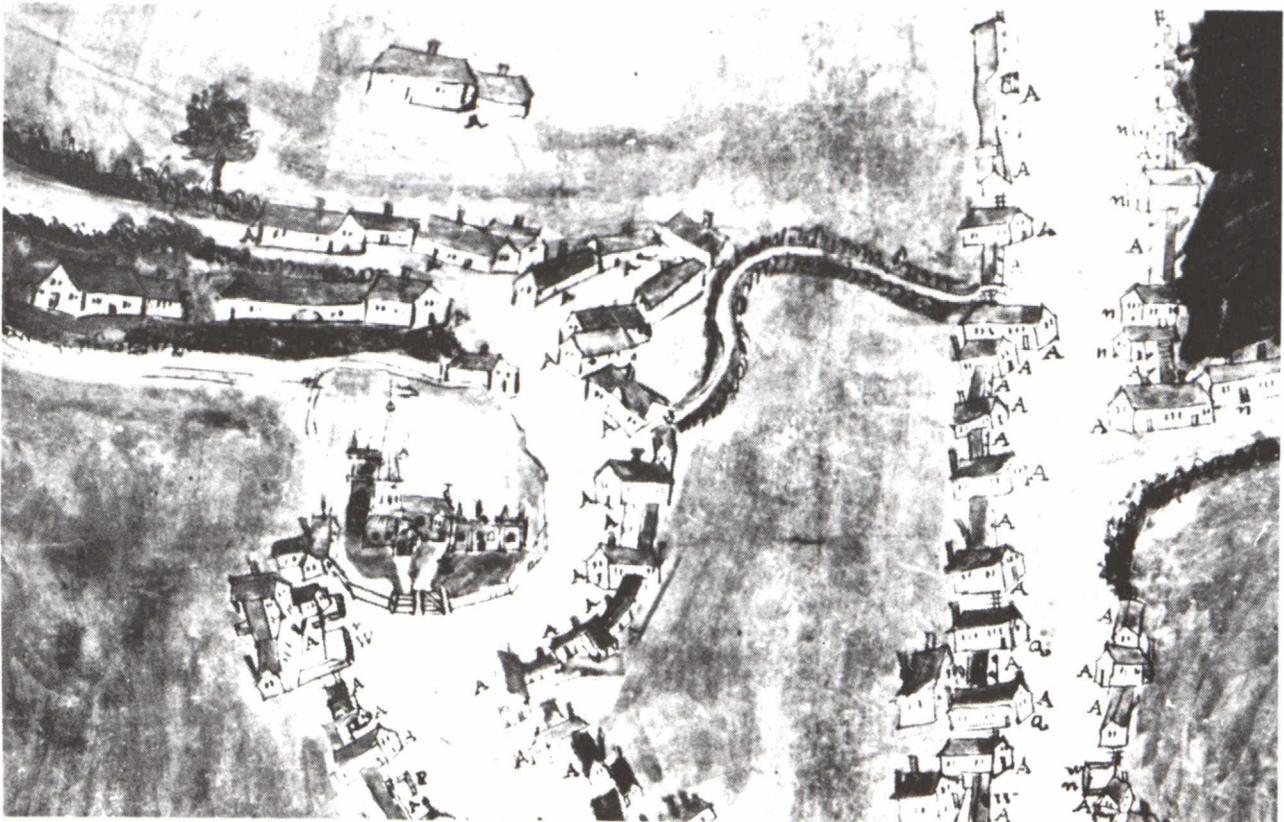


Figure 3: Central part of Ormskirk, detail from 1609 map (PRO M4), courtesy of Public Record Office.

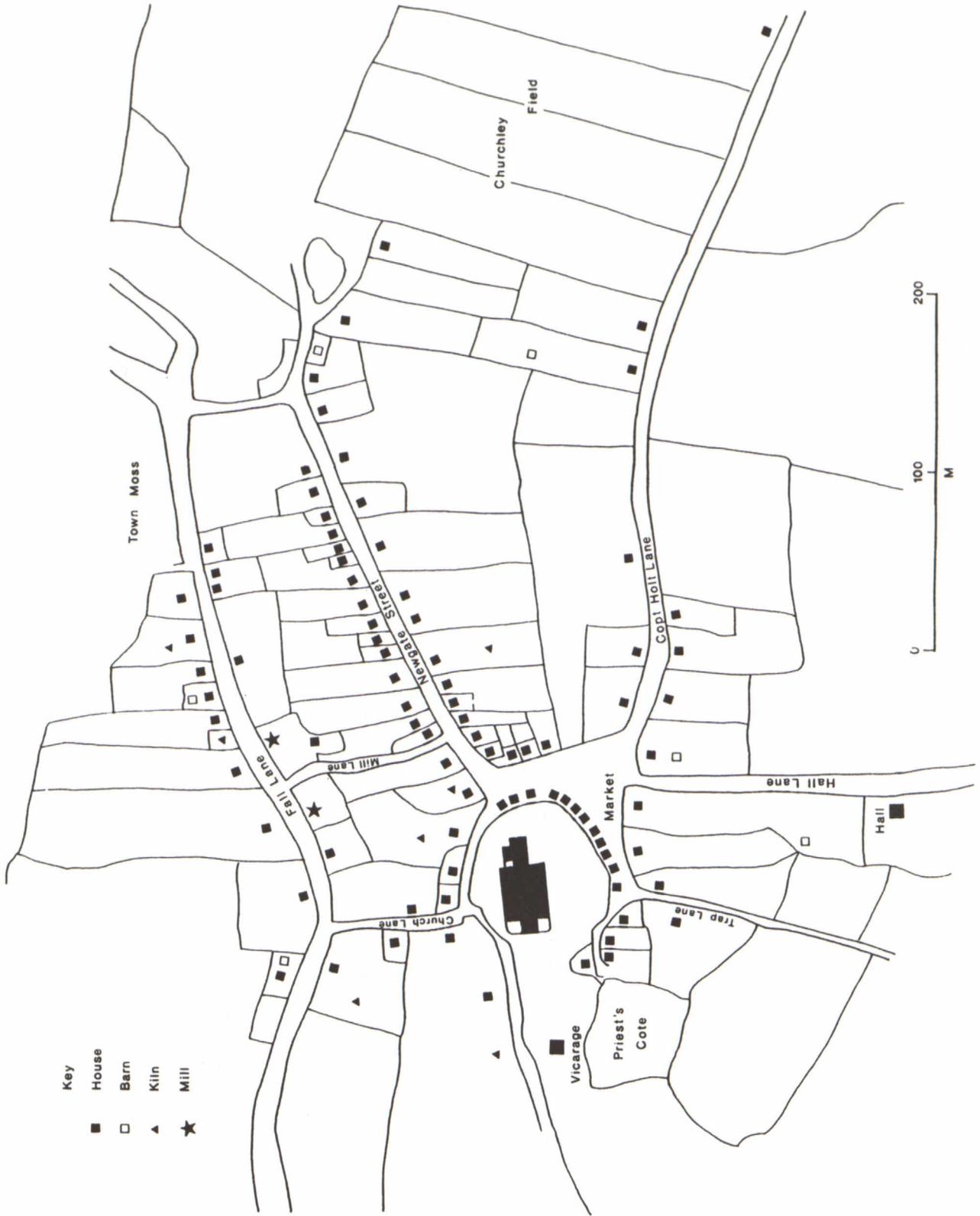


Figure 4: Possible layout of burgages in Prescott (after Bailey 1973; Davey 1978, 2).

many cases the modern street plan appears to preserve the structure of the medieval settlement. This can be seen clearly in the case of Liverpool which has the rectilinear street plan typical of planted towns laid out *de novo* (Fig. 2). The main axis of the town, Juggler Street (now the High Street) runs along the sandstone ridge between the Mersey shore and the inlet of the Pool. Juggler Street was crossed at right angles by two side streets which led to the Mersey, now known as Water Street and Chapel Street, and in the other direction, Dale Street and More Street. The castle, erected c. 1235, did not form a primary component of the plan and may have led to the destruction of some burgages on what became Castle Street. The medieval town had only six streets and little expansion beyond this took place until the 17th century.

As regards settlements that grew into towns by virtue of their location, the layout reflects the predominant features. The earliest plan of Prescott is that of Richard Edge of 1743 which only shows part of the town (Merseyside RO DX/109). However, confirmation of the structure of the town in the late 16th century comes from the minutely detailed survey undertaken by King's College, Cambridge in 1592. A subsequent survey in 1721 used the same plot numbers and enabled a detailed reconstruction to be made of the plots and streets in the early post-medieval town (Bailey 1937). The main elements of the plan are the church, probably on a pre-conquest and possibly pre-Anglian Christian site, and the main road west from Liverpool which divides at Prescott towards two other pre-conquest settlements, Wigan and Warrington (Fig. 4). The key role played by the church in the growth and development of the market is emphasised by the location of the market booths against the churchyard wall, forming one side of the triangular market place. There are hints that at an early stage the town of Prescott expanded eastwards over existing open fields. Plot and alley boundaries on the north side of Eccleston Street have a reversed-S configuration and the 16th century name of Eccleston Street, Newgate Street (Newgate meaning 'new street') indicates a secondary stage in the growth of the town and this may have been a deliberately creation, perhaps at the time of the grant of the borough charter.

Ormskirk is particularly fortunate in having a fine plan dating to 1609 (PRO M4; Philpott 1988, Fig. 3). By far the earliest town plan for this area, it shows not only the streets but also apparently accurate representations of many, if not all, the buildings along street frontages in the town, and forms a valuable record of late medieval and early post-medieval cottages and houses. The plan demonstrates that little change has taken place in the structure of the town since the 17th century, apart from linear expansion along the main roads and infill in the rear of plots.

The origin of the settlement at Ormskirk appear to lie

in the probable pre-conquest church on its hilltop site a little above the market place. The early settlement may have concentrated around a green adjacent to the church but with the rise in market activity a shift took place to the junction of the local routeways down the slope on the site of the medieval and later market place. Here the wide market streets, Aughton Street and Moor Street provided room for temporary stalls as well as more permanent frontage space in the burgages lining the streets.

The plan of West Derby is not recorded in detail until the Tithe map of 1838 (Fig. 5), by which time the settlement had long since reverted to a rural village (Lancs. RO DRL 1/84). If this late map bears any relation to the medieval structure of the town, the line of rectangular plots along the main street might be seen as the location of the burgage plots. However, the early demise of the town here makes any identification of medieval features such as burgages particularly hazardous and archaeological confirmation of the early occupation and layout of certain plots would be highly desirable.

The plan of Hale as revealed by the Tithe map of 1843 shows a triangular green at the junction of Halebank and Liverpool Roads with the principal street lined with long narrow plots, which resemble burgage plots in form but may equally be village tofts (Fig. 6). The winding extension of the main street leading to the church also has a fairly regular series of plots but further work is required to elucidate the sequence of development of the plan. An enclosure map of 1803 (Lancs. RO DDXX 1171) indicates that the irregular back line of plots south west of the present High street came about through expansion of the grounds of Hale Hall and previously a back lane ran behind the plots, matching that behind plots on the other side of the street.

At Newton, a study of maps and documents suggests that the present High Street formed the main wide market street of the medieval town (Figs 7 and 8). The church which stands at one end of the High Street is probably to be equated with the chapel at 'Rokeden', first mentioned in 1284. There is no evidence to support suggestions that the early nucleus of the town lay in the Dean Valley on the boundary of the township with Haydock (Cole 1912, 45). By 1465, and probably rather earlier, a green had developed to the north of the church and another, triangular, green appears on the earliest map of 1745 south of the church on Church Street, which is a continuation of the High Street.

### Burgages

The evidence for the number, layout and location of burgages in the towns is variable. Burgages usually lined the principal streets of the town and were

characteristically long narrow plots, with the short side fronting the road, to make the most efficient use of valuable street frontage space. In newly founded towns burgages were often of considerable size to act as an incentive to prospective inhabitants. At the new planted borough of Stratford-on-Avon, for example, each plot measured three and a half by twelve perches.

The size of burgages in Merseyside is less well documented. At Newton the 1745 map shows the town centre with several groups of plots of different size (Figs 7 and 8). The size of plots which were almost certainly burgages and are referred to in the 1465 Legh Survey gives an area of about half a statute acre. The burgages of medieval Newton can be seen from the 1465 Legh Survey to lie along both sides of the High Street and onto the north end of Church Street. Analysis of the 1465 Legh Survey in conjunction with the early maps has revealed several distinct blocks of burgages, those on the north side of the High Street and east of Rob Lane furthest from the church perhaps being laid out over pre-existing ridge and furrow, while others nearer the church were probably part of the existing vill of Newton before its elevation to burghal status. The late medieval disposition and ownership of some plots near the church has been tentatively reconstructed from maps and documents (Fig. 8; Philpott 1988).

For Prescott the layout of the town as reconstructed from the 1592 survey indicates that the burgages lay along the main streets (Fig. 4). Certain plots were still referred to at this time as burgages, although they had by then reverted to copyhold tenure.

Detailed work on the location and size of burgages in the other medieval towns is yet to be done. At Liverpool burgages are recorded in all of the six streets which together comprised the medieval town and further work would certainly enable some individual plots to be identified. The late 18th century plans which show the detailed structure of plots in the town would serve as a basis for analysis of plot size and distribution.

Tentative locations for burgages in other towns can be proposed. The tithe map of Ormskirk shows a relatively straightforward distribution of long narrow plots on all the principal streets, which although subject to much 18th and 19th century subdivision and infilling preserves the appearance of burgages. As regards the smaller boroughs such as West Derby, Hale and Roby (Fig. 9), their early decline and extensive later redevelopment makes impossible categorical statements about the location of the early town focus. However, on the tithe map each is shown with a main street lined with a regular series of short rectangular plots, which may correspond to the original burgages.

## The Townspeople

By virtue of its royal foundation, Liverpool was the largest and wealthiest town in south west Lancashire. At the foundation, the burgesses numbered around 150 but this had increased to 168 by 1296. However this total includes only the burgess heads of households. The list of householders paying rent to the lord of the manor in 1346 records 190 names, while the presence of burgesses with substantial holdings who may have had additional dependents suggests a figure of around 1200 for the overall population (Farrer *et al.* 1911, 8). However, the Black Death in the mid 14th century reduced that to a level from which it did not recover until the 16th century.

The majority of the local towns seem to have had small burgess populations. There is no direct evidence for the medieval burgess population of Prescott but the number of plots in the town which are named as burgages, although then held by copyhold tenure, in the 16th century documents suggests around 45. For Newton there is only the statement of Aikin in 1795 that the free burgesses, in whom the right of electing the two members of parliament was vested, then numbered about 36 (Lane 1914, 20-21). At that time the burgesses were 'occupiers of certain houses', indicating that the privilege of burgage tenure still rested on possession of clearly defined plots. At the lower end of the scale, the small and short lived seigniorial borough of Hale had seventeen and a half burgages in 1323 probably indicating no more than eighteen burgesses.

The total population of the towns in the medieval period is more difficult to estimate. For the smaller towns, the evidence of the early 14th century exchequer lay subsidies and medieval rentals gives approximate numbers of tenants and an indication of their relative wealth but these are very patchy. Ormskirk has perhaps the best evidence of population in that the evidence of the 1332 lay subsidy, which names only six or seven individuals each for surrounding townships in the parish as possessing sufficient wealth to be included, is supplemented by a list of contributors to the support of the parish priest of Ormskirk, dated 1366, which gives 71 names for Ormskirk alone, and is a much closer approximation to the total number of heads of households for the whole town. If this is multiplied by a factor of five or six for dependents the total is between 350 and 420. For Prescott we have only the late evidence of a letter written by the vicar in 1591 which states that the population is about 400 individuals (Bailey 1937, 300, n. 1).

## Subdivision of Burgages

One of the principal attractions of burgage tenure was the freedom with which the plot could be sold, rented, devised or subdivided without reference to the lord of

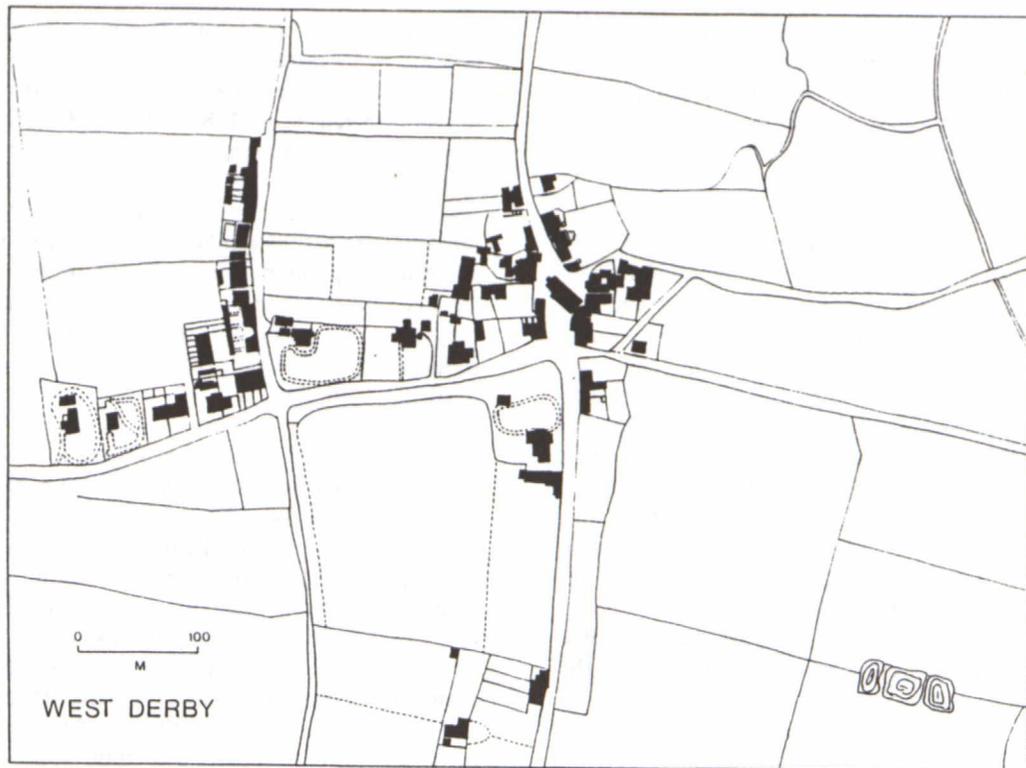


Figure 5: West Derby from the tithe map of 1838 (Lancs. RO DRL 1/84).

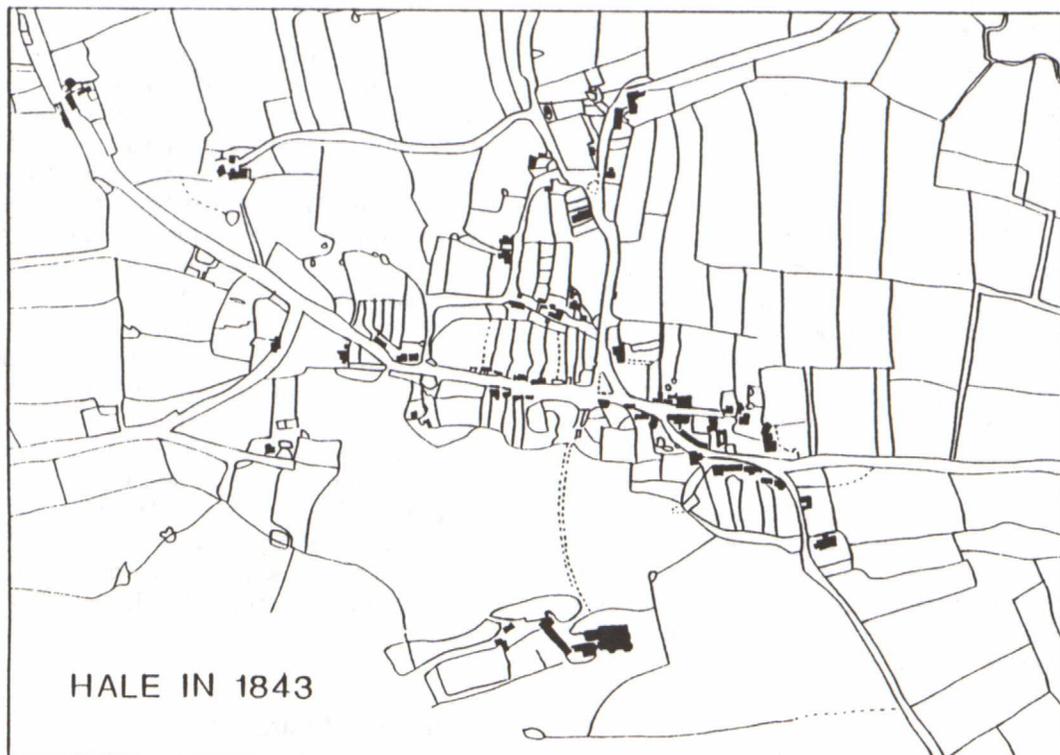


Figure 6: Hale from the tithe map of 1843 (Lancs. RO DRL 1/31).

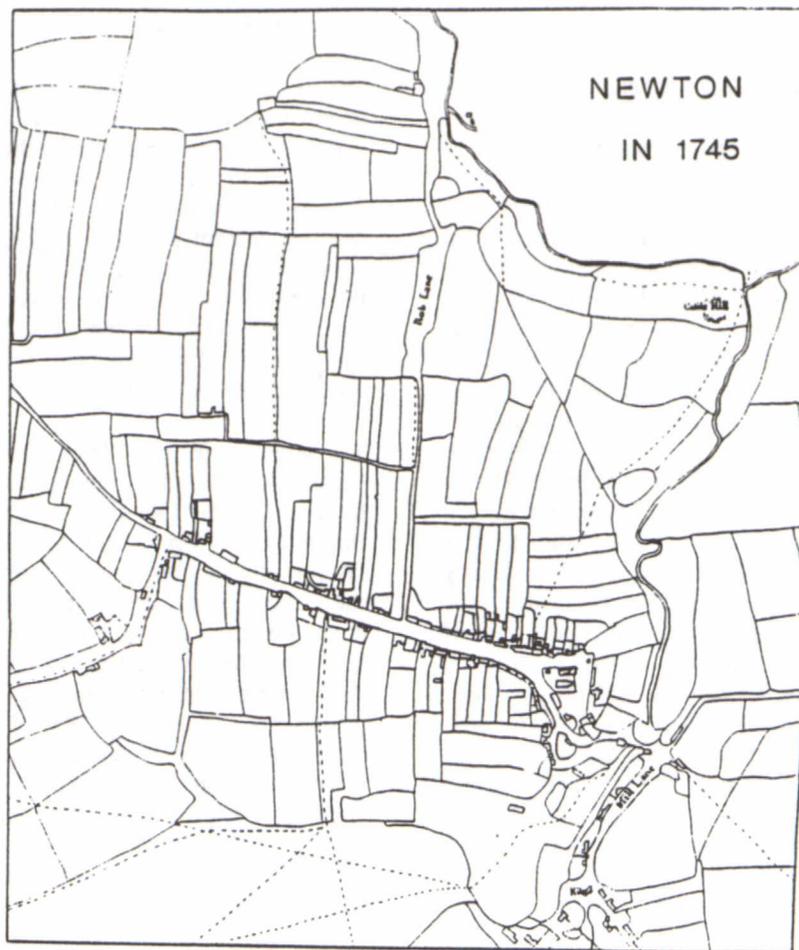


Figure 7: The town of Newton from a map of 1745.

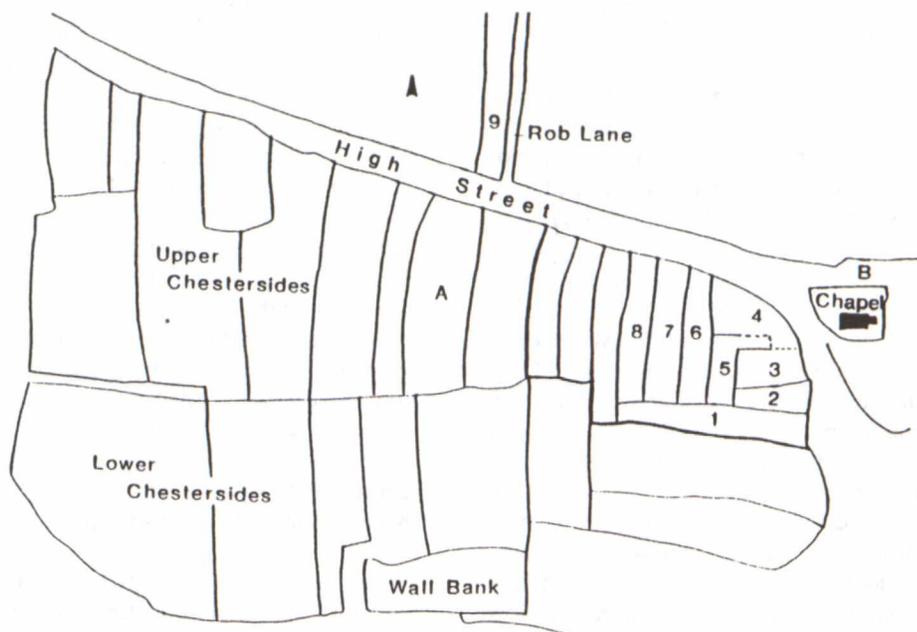


Figure 8: Possible reconstruction of burgages in Newton from 1465 Legh Survey and 1745 map (for key see Philpott 1988, 13, Fig. 4).

the manor. To some extent, the degree of subdivision of burgages provides an indication of the economic fortunes of a borough, although other factors notably inheritance may have led to the subdivision of plots. In a thriving town such as Liverpool competition in trade led to intense pressure on burgage plots so that by 1346 only 21 plots remained intact. The others had been subdivided into fractions as small as one forty-eighth, although half, quarter and eighth plots are more common. The process of amalgamation of plots was also found and powerful Liverpool families such as the Moores illustrate the consolidation of holdings as large as eight burgages. At Newton pressure to take up burgages seems to have been less intense. Two burgages are recorded in 1322-23 as 'altogether destroyed in times past' and yielding no profit unless rebuilt (Farrer 1907, 241). The Legh Survey of 1465 records only a single subdivided burgage, a half, and another former burgage had lost its status. The borough of West Derby appears to have been in decline by the early 14th century. An inquest of 1298 of lands belonging to Earl Edmund records 30 half burgages, while a rental of 1323 notes that rent was received from 27 burgages but four had no head (Farrer 1903, 284; Farrer 1907, 83-85). However, by this time considerable subdivision and amalgamation had taken place. Only eight are still intact, while fourteen halves and seven quarters are noted; one double and one triple plot indicate consolidation of holdings was in progress. By 1346 smaller fractions still are found, down to one twenty-fourth (Farrer 1915, 82-83).

### The Field Systems

The medieval town had an intimate relationship with the rural hinterland. Not only did towns function largely as market and redistribution centres for agricultural produce, but they provided specialist services to the local rural populace. The involvement ran deeper than that. Even in the larger towns, many of the townspeople retained a direct interest in agriculture. A burgage plot in a Merseyside town would consist of a piece of land with a building in the town itself but attached to it would be a plot of land, often an acre, in the open field surrounding the town which the burges would often cultivate himself. The extent of agricultural involvement in the most 'urban' of Merseyside towns, Liverpool, can be assessed from the activities of the townspeople. Although in Liverpool at first they had equal shares in the townfield, the transfer of land began soon after the foundation of the borough. Over half the burgesses listed in the lay subsidy of 1378-79 have occupations concerned with trade, victualling or small scale manufacturing, for example brewers, cobblers, drapers, smiths and fishmongers, no fewer than fifty have their occupation described as *cultores/cultrices* (husbandmen) (Stewart-Brown 1916, 55).

Almost all Merseyside boroughs have some evidence

of open field agriculture, as would be expected in nucleated settlements of this period. Stewart-Brown (1916) has reconstructed the townfield of Liverpool from medieval and later documents. The standard allocation here was an acre in the open field, consisting usually of four strips or selions but occasionally three or two depending on size. The land in the open field was free of rent to the lord even when sold separately from the burgage to which it was originally attached. In the early 14th century, by which time much transfer of land had taken place, deeds often specified the burgage that plots in the open field initially belonged to and acquitted the new holder of rent.

The large township of West Derby included extensive tracts of woodland, maintained as royal forest for hunting. By the 13th century documents indicate that the nucleated settlement farmed on the open field system. Here as elsewhere the burgesses held land in the open field alongside the free tenants. The documents indicate that the method of assessment of land was different for the two groups; the free tenants' land was rated in acres and rods, that of the burgesses in oxgangs (Farrer 1907, 83-85). The 1323 rental for West Derby suggests that approximately four selions or three acres were allocated to each burgage, for which additional rent was due. Here only one free tenant was recorded as holding a burgage and the distinction between borough and manor appears to have been carefully maintained.

Medieval documents show that attached to each burgage plot at Newton was an acre of land in the open field, mostly situated close to the town in the area of Newton Field called Bamfurlong or Bentfurlong. The documentary evidence here is supported by visible remains. A small area of ridge and furrow survives east of the lake in Newton Brook north of the church, while air photography in 1988 revealed traces of ridge and furrow in fields north of the church. In addition, the 1465 Legh Survey of Newton gives an excellent insight into the late medieval tenurial pattern in Newton (Philpott 1988, Appendix 1).

Air photography has provided evidence of ridge and furrow in Hale, which although undated, combines with the late 18th and 19th century references to the 'townfield' and the 'south townfield' (the former in a map of 1837) to support the hypothesis that the local towns, along with other nucleated settlements, operated an open field system. For Roby we have the explicit statement of the borough charter of 1372 (Farrer and Brownbill 1907, 175) which records that a rood of land lying in the open field was granted to each burges.

Prescot is the only town that may have lacked a sound agricultural base, due to the small size of its associated land (estimated in 1591 as just over 60 statute acres: Bailey 1937, 300, n. 1), much of which was held as a separate estate attached to Prescot Hall, and was

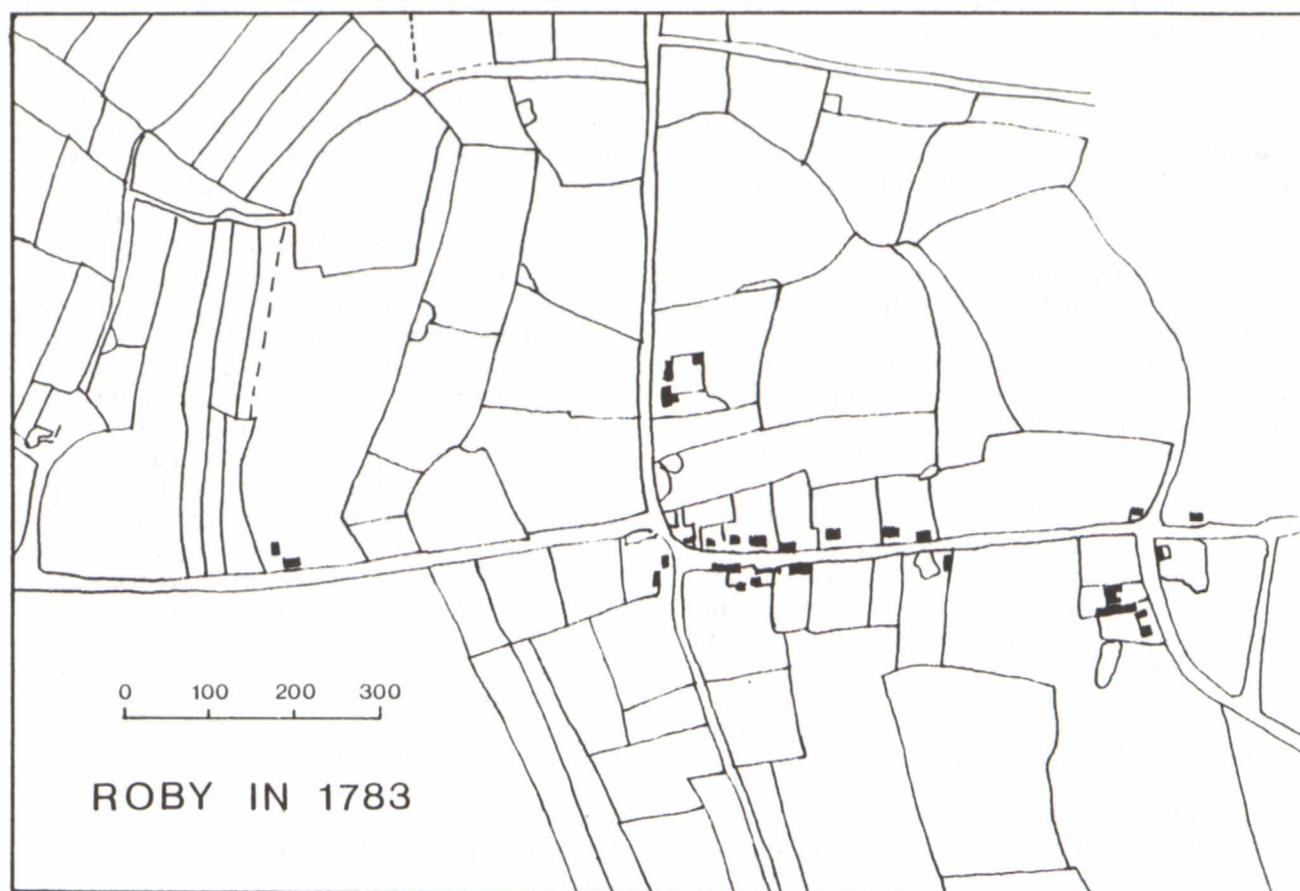


Figure 9: Roby, from the Derby estate map of 1783.

probably unable to support a large population engaged

from early on as a town with only a small open field system, and a growing proportion of the population may have always been involved in trade. In the post-medieval period, an analysis of 225 wills dating from 1560 to 1720 shows that 19% have occupations recorded as husbandman or yeoman (Cleaver 1982, 52). However it is likely that the majority of the remainder would have grown food and kept some livestock on their burgage plots within the town itself.

Elsewhere the town or borough existed side by side with the manor, and although a few of the burgesses held land at will in the manor at Hale and West Derby the separation of burgesses from the other tenants was marked. At least during the height of town prosperity in this area, the early 13th century, the town should not be seen as a mere adjunct to the manor but with a separate existence and legal framework. In some

cases, however, this separation did not last long, and the town soon lost its privileged burghal status and reverted to a simple manor.

The diversity of the origins of burgesses, indicated by the surnames, is related directly to the status of the borough. The prestigious royal borough of Liverpool attracted burgesses from long distances, as far as London and Caernarfon, while the smaller and later foundations had an overwhelmingly local burgess population drawn almost entirely from neighbouring townships.

### The Decline of the Boroughs

During the mid 15th century a general decline in trading was responsible for the demise of many small boroughs. The later medieval period was a time of conflict and natural disaster which profoundly affected

both agricultural production and commercial activity. The Black Death in the middle of the 14th century hit the northwest hard, greatly reducing the population and leading to a shortage of labour in some areas. During the 15th century conflict between the houses of Lancaster and York both before and after the execution of Earl Thomas led to unsettled conditions which were most unfavourable to trade (Cunliffe-Shaw 1956, 405). In this economic climate many of the smaller and less successful seigniorial boroughs were forced out of business while the more prestigious, independent and larger royal boroughs survived (Platt 1976, 74).

The national pattern of commercial decline in the late medieval period was mirrored in southwest Lancashire. The tithe valuations show that both arable and stock farming had expanded considerably in the period from the late 12th to late 13th century, with an increase in corn production in West Derby hundred. In West Derby hundred the vills show a partial recovery with an increase in prosperity from the wool trade and arable economy by the 15th century, but all areas declined in the latter part of the 15th century at the time of civil war between the houses of York and Lancaster. This was followed by a tremendous rise in agricultural growth between the mid 16th and the mid 17th century (Cunliffe-Shaw 1956, 424).

In the towns of southwest Lancashire the dearth of documents for the 15th century makes it difficult to trace the continuity of urban institutions from the relatively well documented 14th century through to the post-medieval period. However, several towns in the area appear to have lost their privileged status as boroughs by the 16th century. Prescott seems to have received its borough charter and lost its borough status between the 14th and early 16th century, but maintained many of the privileges enjoyed by burgesses elsewhere through a charter conferred as tenants of Kings College, Cambridge in 1447 (Bailey 1937, 64-73). Ormskirk too had declined to a simple market town from a borough by the 16th century (Farrer and Brownbill 1907, 263). Roby, West Derby and Hale all appear to have lost their burghal status after the end of the 14th century. Roby had only received its borough charter in 1374 but no more is heard of burgages after then. West Derby is thought to have lost its urban population to the neighbouring borough of Liverpool after the construction of the castle in the early 13th century (Cunliffe-Shaw 1956, 33). Liverpool's liberties were more extensive and the burgage rents probably more favourable than those of West Derby, but the latest reference to the borough at West Derby, in 1346, shows that not only had it survived but over the preceding fifty years had experienced a slight rise in the number of burgages. The demise of West Derby as a borough then may have occurred as much as a result of the wider decline in trade in the later 14th and 15th century as the transfer of population to Liverpool.

By the 14th century a network of boroughs had been established over the fertile agricultural land of south west Lancashire which acted as an essential mechanism for the marketing of agricultural produce and provision of services through the later medieval period and beyond. The development and survival of the towns depended not only on a favourable situation with easy access from both the rural hinterland and from further afield, most Merseyside towns significantly lying on the major through routes, but also sufficient trade to support a resident population of merchants, artisans and suppliers of services. In this area as elsewhere in England the towns that declined, or failed, most rapidly were the small late seigniorial foundations which were unable to secure a local monopoly over trade. Therefore the minor boroughs of Hale and Roby may have suffered from the widespread decline in population and consequent decline in agriculture in the 15th century which depressed prices for agricultural produce (Postan 1975, 265, 272). The lack of a local monopoly in trade will have acted as a decisive factor in the failure of these smaller boroughs in the economically stagnant years of the 15th century. Roby in particular was almost certainly overshadowed by its near neighbour Prescott and lacked the focal point of the parish church to attract trade from the surrounding manors. In addition, the smaller seigniorial boroughs were vulnerable to the whim of the lord of the manor who at times wished to regain control over the borough to minimise the loss to their revenue of the liberties granted in the original charters, as occurred at Warrington in the late 13th century (Farrer and Brownbill 1907, 319). By contrast, Liverpool, which thrived as a disembarkation point for the Irish and Scottish wars of the 14th century, as a port for the trade with Ireland and to a much lesser extent with the continent, was less vulnerable to competition, having trading connections beyond the purely local areas that the smaller boroughs served.

Although several towns lost the privileges of the borough, nevertheless many of the markets appear to have continued to function throughout the later medieval period. The markets at Ormskirk and Prescott survived beyond the 16th century because these towns formed nodal points in the marketing system.

The early importance of a settlement by itself was no guarantee of success as a town in the later medieval period. Both Newton and West Derby were important pre-conquest administrative centres, but the latter was largely replaced by Liverpool, while Newton, although able to retain its burghal status throughout the period, may have suffered adversely from competition from Wigan and Warrington which lay to either side of Newton on the same major road. Newton was clearly affected by the general sense of decay prevalent in the 15th and 16th century. Leland who visited the town in 1536 described it as 'a little poore market town' and

the town never regained its early importance as in 1795 Aikin could describe it as 'once a small market town, and ... now but a village' (Lane 1914, 20).

Although the royal boroughs appear to have weathered the late medieval period best, even they did not escape decline during the 16th century. The preamble to an Act of Parliament of Henry VIII states: 'there had been many beautiful houses in Lancaster, Preston, Lyrepool and Wigan, but that they are falling into ruin' (Baines 1870, 178). Wigan and Liverpool were to contribute £50 and £25 respectively for the Ship Money of 1636, as against £7 10s for Newton (Baines 1870, 179), but these royal boroughs had exceptionally favourable charters, the benefit of royal patronage and a measure of self government which rendered them independent of the great landowners to an extent denied to the smaller boroughs.

### Conclusions

One of the most obvious conclusions to emerge from a study of the medieval towns of south Lancashire is the limited scale of urban development. Many of the urban features characteristic of the larger towns, such as the merchant guilds, urban churches and borough corporations, were with the exception of the royal borough of Liverpool, absent from the south Lancashire towns. The degree of control exercised by the local lord may have thwarted any attempts at self-government in the minor boroughs, and the essentially agricultural basis of their economic life, serving a narrow local market, made towns vulnerable to the decline in both arable cultivation and population during the later medieval period. At this time many markets in the Midlands and north ceased to operate and the wider decline in economic activity could lead to the loss of burghal status, as occurred at Prescott, Hale and Roby (Philpott 1988).

Archaeological evidence for the medieval period in the towns of Merseyside is still sparse. Excavation in Prescott, which has been the subject of the most intensive archaeological activity, has so far failed to reveal more than a few minor features of medieval date. Behind the street frontages the burgage plots seem to have been devoted very largely to minor agricultural or horticultural activities and so far no sign has been recovered of the small scale industrial functions such as brewing, pottery production, blacksmithing and baking which are certain to have been practised there.

Much of the historical evidence outlined above, for the burghal status of the settlements and for town populations and plans, is partially or wholly inaccessible to archaeological techniques. Recognition of the status of the settlements has therefore relied on documents and early maps, supplemented in some cases by archaeological fieldwork. The chronology of urban

development in the Merseyside area relies heavily on documentary sources, but the degree to which market or borough charters actively stimulated the growth of towns or merely recognised their development after the event is amenable to archaeological solution.

It is hoped that a survey of the evidence for the medieval towns of the area will provide a framework which will not only help to determine and refine future archaeological strategies but also provide a model against which the archaeological data can be tested.

The archaeological study of medieval towns in Merseyside is still at an early stage. The origins and early development of the towns are very obscure. We know virtually nothing about the size or type of structures erected in medieval towns in Merseyside, and despite documentary references, there is little archaeological evidence of industry or manufacture. Even the durable waste from medieval pottery manufacture has so far been recovered only from Prescott, despite documentary evidence for manufacture in Liverpool.

The burgage plots remain almost completely unexamined and large scale excavation of whole single plots or groups of plots is required where preservation of archaeological features is likely to be good, in, for example, Newton, Roby or Hale. Details of the plot size and the date of layout, the activities practised there and evidence of reorganisation and amalgamation would all benefit from archaeological excavation. The recovery of imported artefacts would give an indication of the trade patterns both within southwest Lancashire and also further afield, while the environmental sampling for contents of cess pits and other negative features may provide evidence for local diet and the state of health of the inhabitants, examination of animal bones may throw light on husbandry practice, while pollen analysis may illuminate vegetational conditions within the vicinity of the town. If answers to some of these problems are to be found, a co-ordinated and adequately funded programme of excavation and documentary research is urgently needed to take advantage of rescue opportunities offered by the current pace of redevelopment.

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#### Abbreviations

Lancs. RO	Lancashire Record Office, Preston
Merseyside RO	Merseyside Record Office, National Museums and Galleries on Merseyside
PRO	Public Record Office