

The First Industrial Region: North-West England c. 1700–60

Review Number:

424

Publish date:

Thursday, 30 September, 2004

Author:

Jon Stobart

ISBN:

719064627X

Date of Publication:

2004

Price:

£49.99

Pages:

269pp.

Publisher:

Manchester University Press

Place of Publication:

Manchester

Reviewer:

Stephen Caunce

British industrialisation lacks clarity as a national experience because we now recognise that some regions de-industrialised even as others grew rapidly. Furthermore, academic studies below the national level are often based on very narrow evidential foundations, sometimes a single town, firm or industry, and the North-West has been a particular victim of this despite its centrality to the development of modern industrial society. Here, Jon Stobart takes a broad view of the period between 1700 and 1760, just before classic industrialisation, analysing the interactions between thirty places in south Lancashire and Cheshire which were viewed by contemporaries as market centres. It deals with them primarily as an urban system rather than individual places, and, since the majority of late nineteenth-century north-western towns had not yet emerged, many that later became important are necessarily excluded. The importance of these centres for trade in raw materials and manufactured goods is investigated, and also their role in manufacturing. He re-asserts that, whatever the national picture was, the eighteenth century saw changes in the North-West that were profound and startling, and also, more contentiously, that the regional urban system was an essential prerequisite for industrialisation, not its accompaniment or product. Such a study is to be welcomed not only for its content, but also for attempting a genuinely regional analysis.

The most striking facet of both Lancashire and the West Riding of Yorkshire during industrialisation was the range of dynamic activities that they housed, and here mining, metal-working, chemicals, transportation and all the other activities found in this region are examined alongside textiles. From St Helens and Preston to Leeds and Sheffield, these multiple activities were not just neighbours, but overlapped each other and interacted. These were no lean, mean, specialised production units – the area had its aristocracy and gentry, while the growing middle class demanded services on a steadily increasing scale. Finally, the urban pattern that developed along with industrialisation was quite different from that of southern England. Neither fits

readily into conventional images of urban systems, the south being extremely concentrated in London, and the north tremendously fragmented but close-packed. Too often, studies of both industrialisation and urbanisation leave a sense that theory-based assumptions have influenced the analysis as much as intimate knowledge, and agendas derived from nineteenth-century experience determine earlier investigations of both towns and people, but later results should not be treated as inevitable. Stobart tries to compare actual interactions with the predictions of leading theoretical models, though his assertion that there is no point in treating this region as a special case seems to contradict his other arguments for its importance in breaking through to a new sort of economy. It may well be that models derived from elsewhere do not fit at all, and the rather fragmented comparisons between actuality and various theories make it harder to assess how good the fit really is.

Unusually, this was a time and place where urban and industrial systems both seemed essentially fluid, however much hindsight and research may suggest that solid foundations had been laid. Very little investment had occurred in this region's infrastructure, and pollution and environmental degradation were as yet slight and localised, making little impact on living conditions and urban patterns. The question had still to be decided of whether the remnants of medieval urbanisation, chiefly Chester and the towns along the strategic road heading north to Scotland, would revive, or be replaced by newcomers. There was enormous variety of experience here: Malpas and Frodsham would never get formal recognition as independent urban places while, despite being in Lancashire, Ormskirk and Clitheroe remained essentially country market towns. It is, however, harder here than over the Pennines to separate out some trends because the landscape was so much more compressed in the west. Most obviously, successful medieval towns in Yorkshire stood apart from the new economy and achieved very little, whereas in Stobart's North-West it lapped over some of them.

The British economy was changing steadily, especially due to new global contacts, and this relatively tight group of towns was always outward looking, even though strong evidence is produced that it functioned as a crucible within which powerful forces reverberated and strengthened, rather than radiating out and wasting their potential. Urban growth started so late that self-sufficient economic zones never seemed possible, and even Liverpool, for instance, could never have risen above its immediate surroundings as London had long since done. It ploughed enormous resources into creating an intense local network of transport links with the industrial areas around Merseyside which it served rather than dominated. This issue has resonance today when London sometimes seems to be recreating itself as a global city state that just happens to be in Britain, but sees little need to be part of it.

In presenting this case, the author's own empirical research is united to existing studies from Wadsworth and Mann to Timmins. The analysis of probate records is prominent, producing convincing and interesting geographical patterns, though the woollen precursors of cotton seem to be played down in the analysis more than the map symbols suggest they should. There is also quantitative and qualitative evidence on credit and business linkages, while the less tangible connections of trust embodied in nominations of executors are also demonstrated. Less secure is the contribution to understanding occupational structure, since the law prescribed probate only for those with significant personal possessions. Titles for tables, such as *Male occupations in north-west England, 1701–60*, imply that the distribution within such middling and upper income groups mirrored the whole exactly, which seems unlikely. This data is also clearly skewed in terms of life cycles, containing too many elderly people, many winding down their business activities. Since women were to be very involved in Lancastrian industrialisation, gender issues also arise.

Openly paradoxical results can also occur, as when analysis of various inter-urban linkages indicates Chester as the region's key centre (p. 207). However, this does draw attention to the odd nature of the system in general, as well as stimulating consideration of why that never particularly successful medieval town maintained so high a profile in some respects, and a stable economy if viewed in isolation, when it was dropping steadily down the urban hierarchy and becoming economically marginal. Indeed, all analyses of change need to be handled carefully in this complex and dynamic period, for low initial populations and levels of economic activity mean that relative measures of growth can mislead badly. Thus, Prescott recorded an above-average and impressive-sounding growth rate between 1664 and 1775 of 215 per cent. This,

however, only took it to 993 inhabitants, and from 30th place in the regional hierarchy to 25th. Similarly, care must be taken in distinguishing between activities that were important in the early years, such as the manufacture of pewter goods in a small corporate town like Wigan, and others which had incomparably more growth potential but which may not seem so dominant in more populous settings.

The whole of this system was clearly greater than the sum of its parts. It would be impossible to produce precise answers to most of the questions Stobart raises, since urban linkages are ghostly things for such a period, reflected in uncertain transport flows and unrecorded business interactions, and never as formalised as in a single, unified conurbation. What we get instead is an excellent stimulus to debate, and a framework to work within and build upon. The points made below are intended in that spirit, suggesting ways of taking interesting concepts forward and of clarifying some things that seem obscure.

The study area itself perhaps needs more introduction. The topography is neglected - an important matter for those unfamiliar with the area's great diversity. Its many natural barriers must have modified the patterns of urban interactions in ways not seen in the south, or allowed for in most models. I would argue that early turnpikes, for instance, are a very poor proxy for transport flows since much industrial traffic was located within the Pennines where packhorse causeys, built by township surveyors almost regardless of gradients, were most effective and wheeled vehicles mostly undertook only very local journeys. More generally, discussing the criteria that divide this region from others is essential since such boundaries are particularly hard to define to general agreement in England, and those placed along rivers rarely reflect real divisions of economic activity. Thus, a glance at any modern map will show that the Mersey has proved anything but a barrier to industrial activity. Northern English shires were administrative units imposed by kings comparatively late in English history, and Lancashire and Yorkshire proved themselves particularly unwieldy and impractical. This attempt to substitute an economically defined North-West for one based on counties therefore has a lot to recommend it.

However, official bodies define such a region in many different ways, and this is a particularly unconventional North-West that includes all of Cheshire but only those Lancashire towns between the rivers Mersey and Ribble. Preston is the only exception northwards, and as Lancashire's county administrative centre it played a key role as a node in the urban system. However, if it and the utterly obscure Malpas (population in 1775 c.680) in rural southern Cheshire were essential for this study, why not Lancaster and the Fylde towns? The eighteenth century was a time of renewal and optimism in Lancaster, reflected today in elegant stone buildings, and its port rivalled the infant Liverpool for a time. We see that rural Cheshire had connections with the industrialising area, and that Warrington played a key role at the lowest bridging point over the Mersey, but the analysis also shows that Preston provided similar strong links across the Ribble. The southward linkages are interesting, given the trade in Cheshire cheese to London that developed in the previous century, but asking why the Ribble, unlike the much bigger Mersey, became a decisive termination line for industrial south Lancashire seems no less likely to reward study. Also, why did so few links develop between this main grouping and the industrial zone of Furness (also in Lancashire), the Cumberland coast and the miniature metropolis of Kendal in Westmorland? Finally, the importance of transpennine linkages, hinted at here, suggests that automatic assumptions that looking north and south was the most natural thing need at the very least to be queried.

The other fundamental issue I would have like to have seen debated more directly is whether commercial activity is enough to make a place urban in a general sense. There was a European saying that 'God made the countryside but man made the town', but what population and institutions justified that feeling? De Vries said that towns with a minimum of 3,000 inhabitants 'would embrace very nearly all the functionally urban population of early modern Europe, and fixed 2,000 as his lowest possible threshold of urbanisation.⁽¹⁾ In 1720s France, Pounds counted almost 120 towns with over 5,000 inhabitants, the threshold for a medium-sized town under the classification of Mols.⁽²⁾ 385 small towns had populations of between 2,000 and 5,000 and five reached over 40,000. The Dutch Republic and northern Italy obviously had many more large towns, which are generally accepted as providing the key to their precocious economies in earlier centuries.

Of Stobart's thirty north-western towns, he estimates that only five exceeded two thousand people in 1664,

while seventeen did not then pass the thousand mark. Chester's 7,817 was more than twice the population of Manchester (3,690), and no other town topped three thousand. Of the top six, four were Cheshire towns, including Congleton with only 1,939 inhabitants. Of these four, only Macclesfield would really go on to industrialise. The future Lancashire industrial and trading complex already filled the upper middle ranks, but Preston reached only 1,890, and Liverpool was down in twelfth place with 1,273 people (maybe 300 households but quite probably fewer). By 1775, seven towns in the region had passed the 5,000 threshold, but although sixteen had reached 2,000, Leigh and Bury then hit the mark pretty exactly and so presumably the majority were still below it in 1760. Liverpool had by now risen to first place and reached 34,407, Manchester came second with 22,481, but Chester clung to third and Warrington needed only 8,000 inhabitants to take fourth. We should also remember that London had 400,000 people in 1650, and 650,000 in 1750, but that other English towns very rarely got past 20,000, so the yardstick of English urbanisation was unusual.

It is even unclear what proportion of apparent urbanites lived in a built-up core, for northern towns mostly lay within enormous rural parishes, several comparable to the county of Rutland in size. These were divided into townships for administrative purposes, which themselves often consisted of scatters of hamlets and isolated farms. The larger towns of 1760 had grown so fast that their institutions and physical structure always lagged well behind older equivalents. A pan-European urban definition would include institutions of political and economic self-government, defences, the location of religious, educational and cultural centres, and so on, and though only a few would tick off all or nearly all of such a list, many would have impressive credentials. Not so in the North-West, as Stobart partially shows in analysing leisure towns at (and after) the close of his period via eight indicators. Chester, Liverpool and Manchester hit them all, Preston got six and Warrington five. Twelve got one or two, and four got none at all. There can surely be no comparison between places like Ormskirk, whose attractions for the gentry were soon exhausted, and successful leisure towns like Bath or even Harrogate; and does a racecourse make a place urban on its own?

These towns possessed market charters, but only a handful had active corporations, even if we judge by the holding of regular meetings, and only Liverpool's demonstrably wielded constructive economic power. It used its thirteenth-century charter, but it had lain largely dormant since being granted, and whereas the classic ancient European town was crowded with urban parishes, it had gained parish status as a whole only in 1699. The 1840 Ordnance Survey map shows Newton-in-Makerfield, home to just 751 people in 1775, still as just one wide street (adapted to the need of the fairs held to sell cattle walked down from Galloway) which was lined by farmsteads and pubs. Its market was vestigial or dead; it was still a century away from getting a parish church when this study ends; courts leet and baron ran its affairs; and though it 'elected' two members of parliament, it was notoriously completely in the pocket of the Leghs of Lyme Hall in Cheshire. It later became industrial, but almost by chance, due simply to lying on the routes of both the Sankey Navigation and Liverpool and Manchester Railway, and most of the growth that resulted was carefully kept away from the old nucleus.

North-western towns as market centres clearly played an economic role disproportionate to their size, and definitely acted as nodes in an integrated commercial system, but throughout the early eighteenth century most employment opportunities lay outside these cores, and few institutions or government agencies offered the possibility of charity or preferment, so they were not destinations where the displaced would migrate to either in hope or desperation. Without their market functions, it is often hard to see that they would have had any significance at all, even locally. The issue raised here of whether the original rural population thickened or urbanised can thus be largely semantic. Many of the apparent disagreements with Timmins about the importance of urban places seem to hinge on defining the urban rather than disagreeing about geography or overall economic structure. This region therefore offers a fascinating challenge to conventional urban studies that could be taken much deeper.

Moreover, even though this was a dispersed urban system, particular towns could develop almost symbiotic links. Thus Liverpool and Chester seem outwardly to be rivals but the sequence of their development suggests rather that they formed two parts of a functional whole, detached and reluctant but inevitable partners in providing the main western gateway for the other towns. The trade available to both was the

same, and Liverpool had no pre-existing merchant community of its own. It is universally accepted that port facilities migrated down navigable rivers at this time, especially those that were shallow and prone to silting, as the Dee certainly was, and Chester tried to maintain its sea-going connections in this way by developing dependent harbours nearer to the sea. It asserted, unsuccessfully, that Liverpool must remain part of this port complex but its neighbour was far better placed than Chester (or Lancaster) to serve the Pennine industrial communities as they got into their stride. Yet it neither extinguished nor absorbed Chester despite its massive growth.

Salford poses different problems. It certainly was never an independent urban entity, but its existence makes understanding Manchester more difficult, even at the mundane level of including or excluding its population from the total of its larger neighbour – it is not stated whether this is done here. Bolton, however, was always undeniably its own town and its relationship with Manchester is frequently, but fragmentarily, alluded to. It has always occupied a high place within the north-western urban system, but one that is relatively ill-defined since it had no administrative or religious significance, and in trade its function as an independent mercantile centre eroded steadily. Here terminology could usefully be examined. Was Bolton ‘losing’ by this process when it continued to grow faster than average, and emerged as the largest nineteenth-century town in Lancashire, behind only the true cities and Salford? Equally, suppose it had emerged as a rival to Manchester – would this have fragmented the region’s commercial system and so weakened its performance? Could every town have stood alone and yet formed part of an urban system? Wigan remained arguably more in control of its own economy, but grew far less. Co-ordination is not necessarily at all the same as control, but conventional language often obscures the difference.

Similarly, the concept of proletarianisation is also redolent of exploitation and failure, even of the ‘immiseration’ of the individuals involved. Yet eighteenth-century Lancashire was moving away from an agrarian economy set in a landscape full of difficulties, whether due to the mosses of the plain or the moorlands of the hills. The evidence suggests that, in the eighteenth century, there was no need to coerce anyone into the new manufacturing economy, which proved capable of supporting large numbers of people by means of trade. It obviously had bad years, but so did agrarian economies, and fewer people stood at serious risk of starvation in the Lancashire of 1760 than two centuries before, despite a hugely increased population. Commercial chains inevitably formed between individuals, because otherwise the new commercial economy would not have worked, but we cannot assume that that process inevitably made most participants into industrial serfs. Wage work and personal independence were not incompatible as long as there were plenty of merchants, and there were, and as long as debt did not become a deliberate instrument of control (as under metayage), and mostly it did not.

This leads back to the question of models. It is wrong to say the region had no precursors, because the Italians and the people of the Netherlands had helped mark out this way forward, and other regions in England also contributed; but the actual transition seen in the north of England was novel in its use of coal, and later of factories, and its extraordinary rapidity. The Pennine matrix encouraged a completely new approach to town formation, and the inhabitants showed as yet no desire for greater formality, while external circumstances did not punish their lack of walls and government, as in the Netherlands. Later economic development experiences elsewhere, moreover, might reach a similar end-point, but they could only ever replicate part of the pioneer aspect. National statistics certainly obscure the intensity of the regional experience, and looking at this urbanisation through a lens built elsewhere may also obscure critical elements and combinations. Therefore, models based upon other experiences, before or after, or on generalisation across many experiences, are inherently unlikely to catch what made this one so special. Defining that will be very hard, but this book is a contribution.

Notes

1. J. de Vries, *European Urbanization 1500–1800* (1984), p. 22.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. N. J. G. Pounds, *An Historical Geography of Europe, 1500–1840* (Cambridge, 1979), p. 145.[Back to \(2\)](#)

Other reviews:

Economic History

http://eh.net/book_reviews/first-industrial-region-north-west-england-c-1700-60 [2]

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/424>

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/2092>

[2] http://eh.net/book_reviews/first-industrial-region-north-west-england-c-1700-60