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Reassessing the towns of southern Wales in the later middle ages

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ABSTRACT: On the basis of an emerging reassessment of the medieval urban experience in southern Wales, this article seeks to challenge the predominant view of Wales as being overwhelmingly rural before the nineteenth century. The study of Welsh towns has been limited by the survival of sources that in other regions have generated a renewed interest in the study of medieval urban society. Employing unusual sources that are available, generalizations are made here from the findings of case studies of two towns, Haverfordwest and Chepstow, in order to contribute to a regional synthesis of the urban experience in southern Wales. From this regional synthesis it will be possible to compare urban society in late medieval southern Wales with other regions in Britain and Europe in order to determine its particular characteristics, and with implications for later developments.

The dominant perspective of pre-industrial Wales is that of an overwhelmingly rural country. One recent early modern historian has gone so far as to say that 'To speak of urban history in Wales before the nineteenth century is perhaps to misuse the term.'[1] As will be seen below, while Wales may look relatively non-urbanized compared to England in 1750, from the medieval end of the telescope things look rather different. A reassessment of the medieval urban experience in Wales and its implications for later developments is therefore long overdue. Applying recent developments in approaches to urban history in pre-industrial Britain and Europe, and developing some of my own recent research into medieval Welsh towns, I sketch out the shape such a reassessment might take.

Much of the renewed interest in urban society and economy in the medieval period stems from the desire to understand and explain the divergent economic trajectories among European countries by the close of the middle ages. Until recently, analyses of levels of pre-industrial urbanization in particular regions or countries only took account of towns with populations over 5,000. So compared to the continent, throughout the late medieval period and much of the early modern period, and despite the unprecedented growth of London, even England was seen as backward

[1] P. Jenkins, 'Wales', in P. Clark (ed.), *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain*, vol. II: *1540–1840* (Cambridge, 2000), 134.

in comparison: urban Wales was not even on the map. A broadening of focus is now well under way, and the many thousands of small towns in Europe in the pre-industrial period are now incorporated into accounts of urbanization, doubling previous estimates of the proportion of the population living in towns.[2] Small towns are defined as containing roughly between 300 and 2,000 inhabitants, and are fundamentally distinguished from villages with markets and industrial villages by the diversity of non-agrarian occupations within them. Small towns are now regarded as significant as the larger ones in the circuit of exchange relations within regional and wider urban hierarchies, as well as in terms of their contribution to overall regional urban populations.[3] Following the period of rapid urbanization between *c*. 1100 and 1300, Wales contained some 80–100 small towns, including possibly a handful breaking the 2,000 limit. The broadening focus should therefore take in Wales as well, not in the least because Wales was one of the first regions to industrialize in the modern sense. As Christopher Dyer has recently stated, the later English industrial centres such as Liverpool, Manchester, Leeds and Birmingham were all previously small medieval towns, and one can equally point to Swansea and Cardiff in southern Wales.[4]

The focus here is on late medieval *southern* Wales because it is a distinct region in terms of both its urban evolution and its geographical imperatives. Although there are number of native Welsh towns in southern and northern Wales as described elsewhere in this volume, the majority of towns in northern Wales, like those in Gascony, were the product of Edward I's invasions in the 1280s. This is in contrast to those in the south that were developed much earlier by the Anglo-Norman lords following the conquest of England in the eleventh century. The southern towns were founded particularly on the fertile coastal plains, with the Welsh uplands to the north and, to the south, the Severn estuary, with its extensive opportunities for inland, coastal and overseas trade.

The problem is, how to approach late medieval urban southern Wales as a whole in order to derive comparative information with regard to what was or was not distinct about its urban character. Because of the independence from the English Crown of Marcher lordships in Wales, the period for southern Wales is not punctuated by comparative national tax assessments with which we can trace overall demographic change; and borough court rolls from which much good work is done on

[2] C. Dyer, 'How urbanized was medieval England', in J.M. Duvosquel and E. Thoen (eds.), *Peasants and Townsmen in Medieval Europe*(Ghent, 1995), 169–83; S.R. Epstein, 'Introduction. Town and country in Europe, 1300–1800', in S.R. Epstein (ed.), *Town and Country in Europe, 1300–1800* (Cambridge, 2001), 1–29.

[3] C. Dyer, 'Small towns, 1270–1540', in D.M. Palliser (ed.), *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain*, vol. I: *600–1540* (Cambridge, 2000), 505–41.

[4] R.A. Griffiths, 'Wales and the Marches', in Palliser (ed.), *Cambridge Urban History*, vol. I, 681–714; C. Dyer, 'Small places with large consequences: the importance of small towns in England, 1000–1540', *Historical Research*, 75, 187 (Feb. 2002), 1–24.

English towns with regard to occupational specialization and diversity, trade hinterlands and networks are virtually non-existent in the archives for southern Wales. Alternative avenues are available: the comparative analysis of the topographies of towns for size, urban function and patterns of development; the generation of urban hierarchies to assess the maturity and autonomy of urban networks; and the analysis of the royal chamberlains' accounts for Wales which reveal the sources of food and equipment for the castles in Wales and from which marketing networks can be derived.[5] However, because not enough is known about the towns in terms of their individual attributes, it is difficult to construct urban hierarchies on the basis of their functions and therefore marketing networks adequately. So what has been attempted here is to focus on particular towns where useful, if unfamiliar, sources or sets of sources survive from which one can cautiously generalize about the other towns and contribute to a synthesis in this way.

The unusual survival of over 700 property deeds and other related sources for Haverfordwest in Pembrokeshire, south-west Wales, between *c*. 1270 and 1550 has influenced the use of this town here as an exemplar for the reassessment of the themes of urbanization, urban function and urban autonomy.[6] Chepstow in Monmouthshire, south-east Wales, is used here as an emerging exemplar of the extent and nature of Welsh commerce and trading networks thanks to a recent find of a unique Marcher lordship customs account of 1535 for the port, and the frequent appearance of the port and its ships in royal records and customs accounts of Bristol and Bordeaux.[7] It will be noted that the focus here is on two ports, and that this may distort an analysis purported to be aiming at a regional synthesis. Nevertheless, they are a good place to start, not simply because of source survival but because ports formed the predominant urban experience in southern Wales.

Urbanization and function

It is important to begin by clearing up misleading estimates of the level of the urban population of Wales in the sixteenth century. Recently, because of increasing scrutiny of demographic sources for England, the population estimate for towns and therefore the level of urbanization has been revised upwards to double its previous level, that is, up to a maintained 20 per cent

[5] K.D. Lilley, 'Understanding urban Wales', conference paper at University of Wales Swansea in September 2003; P. Courtenay, *Medieval and Later Usk* (Cardiff, 1994); M. Rhys (ed.), *Ministers' Accounts for West Wales 1277–1306* (London, 1936).

[6] For sources and an extensive analysis of Haverfordwest, see S. Dimmock, 'Haverfordwest: an exemplar for the study of southern Welsh towns in the later middle ages', *Welsh History Review*, 22 (2004), 1–28. For Chepstow's custom book see S. Dimmock, 'The custom book of Chepstow', *Studia Celtica*, 38 (2004), 131–49; for Bristol customs accounts see The National Archives (TNA) E 122; for Bordeaux constable's accounts see TNA E 101.

[7] S. Dimmock, 'Chepstow, Severnside, and the ports of southern Wales', in *Archaeologia Cambrensis* (forthcoming).

of the total English population between 1300 and 1525.[8] Philip Jenkins has stated that the urban population in sixteenth-century Wales was 'barely 11%' although he does not state his source.[9] Leonard Owen has produced a useful set of figures for Pembrokeshire in the mid-sixteenth century, based upon lay subsidies and the Bishops' Census of 1563.[10] Basing calculations on the towns of Haverfordwest, Tenby and Pembroke alone (the other towns are hidden in general territorial assessments), the urban population of Pembrokeshire was 15 per cent. The overall figure was therefore nearer 20 per cent, and similar therefore to that of England. To his significant underassessment of the Welsh urban population Jenkins adds that 'the towns that mattered most were not located on Welsh soil': 'the specifically Welsh towns' were of 'limited importance' and that 'in Tudor Wales we find barely a dozen "real" towns with 1,000 people or more, a small increase from the nine that met this criteria in 1400'. As indicated above, these definitions and formulations bear little resemblance to those currently employed in studies of pre-industrial European urban history.

The question of urban growth and decline is an important one because it has implications for the maturity and resilience of medieval urban society and commerce in Wales generally. There is a strong tendency in Welsh studies (influenced by declining recorded returns from customs, and aspects of lordship income such as market and fair tolls) to argue that the urban population, like that of the countryside, must have been severely affected by the Black Death, and then dealt a devastating blow by the Glyndŵr uprising which focused its energies on the towns. It has been suggested that Haverfordwest's population and prosperity peaked in the early fourteenth century. It then apparently suffered a particularly serious attack by the French, Glyndŵr's allies, in 1405, and, according to this analysis, was in serious decay from then onwards, with very little recovery before the 1470s.[11]

However, close scrutiny of the available burgage rentals of the town in the lordship ministers' accounts across the period suggests that the town was still growing well after the Black Death, another 20 per cent by 1377 taking it over the 2,000 mark, and that there was probably no significant decay of burgages before the 1450s at least.[12] Neither the Black Death nor Glyndŵr had a significant immediate effect on Haverfordwest's population therefore. Along with Carmarthen, which as a centre of royal government was growing throughout the medieval

[8] Dyer, 'How urbanized'.
[9] Jenkins, 'Wales', 134.
[10] L. Owen, 'The population of Wales in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries', *Transactions of the Cymmrodorion Society* (1959), 99–113.
[11] T.A. James, 'Haverfordwest', in R. F. Walker (ed.), *Pembrokeshire County History*, vol. II: *Medieval Pembrokeshire* (Dyfed, 2002), 430–60.
[12] H. Owen (ed.), *A Calendar of the Public Records relating to Pembrokeshire*, Cymmrodorion Record Series, no. 7 (3 vols.) (London, 1911), vol. I, 61–5, 85–9; National Library of Wales (NLW), Badminton MSS 1565–6.

period, this kind of increase in burgages after the Black Death can also be seen in Tenby and Swansea, and did not slow down until the mid-fifteenth century. An unusual record of the number of Brecon's burgesses reveals they increased in number from 86 to 121 between 1411 and 1443, as did the farm of the borough. Apart from Brecon this apparent increase in population paradoxically coincided with a reduction in other aspects of lordship income, similar to the situation at Haverfordwest.[13] There is a strong suggestion here that this reduction in lordship income is indicative of increased urban autonomy from lordship rather than economic decline. Lack of population pressure in the countryside from which towns gained most of their recruits must have been a factor in declining urban populations in the fifteenth century, and the declining income of lords in this period which reduced demand for luxury urban-produced and traded goods must have been another. But the onset of decay in rentals in Wales from the mid-fifteenth century may have another more specific cause: the knock-on effects of the general slump in overseas trade stemming from the English aristocracy's loss of Gascony in 1453.

Small towns have been shown to take on more importance in different regions,[14] and this is likely to be the case in less-populated and jurisdictionally independent regions such as southern Wales. Haverfordwest's institutional role as a military, judicial and administrative centre of the major Marcher lordship of Haverford can be cited; it also had a priory and convent, three parish churches, a grammar school, various chapels and holy wells and a friary – the last in particular being seen as 'an emblem' of a larger town in England.[15] Mapping the origins of those involved in the property market gives an indirect indication of a commercial hinterland by pointing to the range of locations from which Haverfordwest was able to attract migrants and investors. The deeds reveal a density and geographical breadth of origins in the boroughs and rural settlements throughout Pembrokeshire, and therefore suggest a broad sphere of influence in that county as a centre for exchange and administration. The town's influence also stretched over the county border to the boroughs of Laugharne, Kidwelly and Carmarthen to the east, and Cardigan in the north-west. Further afield, the connections were with south-west England rather than the Welsh uplands to the north and north-east. The involvement in the deeds of people from the Low Countries betrays trading links, and an analysis of surnames before 1348 reveals an

[13] See the following studies in R.A. Griffiths (ed.), *Boroughs of Medieval Wales* (Cardiff, 1978): R.A. Griffiths, 'Carmarthen', 152–7; R.F. Walker, 'Tenby', 311–13; W.R.B. Robinson, 'Swansea', 269–71; R.R. Davies, 'Brecon', 64–8; and the last's, *Lordship and Society in the March of Wales, 1282–1400* (Oxford, 1978), 91–8.

[14] C. Dyer, *Making a Living in the Later Middle Ages: The People of Britain 850–1250* (New Haven and London, 2002), 190–1.

[15] James, 'Haverfordwest', 435, 499; *Episcopal Registers of St Davids*, Cymmrodorion Record Series, no. 6 (London, 1917), vol. III, 525; Dyer, 'Small towns', 531.

array of names of French and Flemish origin, though some of these could have stemmed from early settlers.

Small towns are known to have contained up to forty non-agrarian occupations, although the majority of small market towns probably had little more than twenty. From the chance survival of deeds alone, over forty trades can be counted for Haverfordwest before 1549. A petition by Haverfordwest shoemakers in 1499 reveals 13 master shoemakers.[16] One or two are usually found in the majority of small towns in England. There were only 18 in Bristol. All these factors reinforce the significance of Haverfordwest, and other towns like it in southern Wales, beyond that based upon calculation of populations alone, although the latter also require a rigorous reassessment.

Social-property structures

Though urbanization is regarded as an important dynamic in agrarian specialization and economic growth this was in no way an onward and upward process. Epstein has recently reiterated on the basis of compelling comparative evidence that there was no *long-term* correlation between high levels of urbanization and sustained economic growth in pre-industrial Europe. Witness the unprecedented development of England in the early modern period following on from having only half the level of urban population than France, the Netherlands and Italy at the end of the middle ages.[17] It is recognized, therefore, although with varying degrees of emphasis, that social-property structures, embodying social and political relations, had a mediating role in conditioning the course of economic developments.[18]

Medieval Welsh towns appear to have been comparatively well blessed in terms of political autonomy from lordship controls. The attractive liberties and extra-mural property, as well as opportunities for lucrative and influential office-holding in Marcher administration, would have encouraged non-Welsh migrants to risk taking part in the consolidation of the conquest of Wales.[19] Haverfordwest's incorporation charter of 1479 is misleading because it masks a significant measure of self-government already in place, with implications for elsewhere.[20]

[16] Glamorgan Record Office (GRO), Cardiff, CL/Deeds/I/3741.
[17] Epstein, 'Introduction'.
[18] R. Brenner, 'The Low Countries in the transition to capitalism', in P. Hoppenbrouwers and Jan Luiten van Zanden (eds.), *Peasants into Farmers? The Transformation of Rural Economy and Society in the Low Countries (Middle Ages – 19th Century) in Light of the Brenner Debate* (Turnhout, 2001), 275–338.
[19] R.R. Davies, *Lordship and Society in the March of Wales 1282–1400* (Oxford, 1978), 328–37. Davies detects an unusually large agrarian content in the liberties of Marcher boroughs compared to towns in England: substantial access to food supplies was a necessity in hostile Welsh territory.
[20] Dimmock, 'Haverfordwest', 9–13.

It has been suggested that compared to the inherent conflict over liberties in English towns, the towns of Wales may have been characterized by co-operation between lords and townspeople, a possible result of their common English origins and mutual dependence in hostile territory.[21] It is difficult to find evidence in the record to support this hypothesis. However, if applied before the mid-fifteenth century when the towns – including the large border towns – were becoming increasingly Cymricized, it carries some weight and should be investigated further, together with the relationship between the urban elite and the rest of the townspeople. In Haverfordwest's case, there is more than an indication of a situation similar to that in England. Two petitions to the Crown dated between 1282 and 1290 allege that the 140 free burgesses were outlawed *en masse*, imprisoned, excessively fined in court and had goods (allegedly worth £500) taken by the earl of Pembroke, because they continued, eventually successfully, to assert their right to be tried only in their town court at Haverfordwest rather than in the earl's court at Pembroke.[22] Moreover, 'the men and burgesses' of Haverfordwest committed 'rebellions, insurrections, felonies and misprisions' against the lord of Haverford and his servants over three days in 1415. The burgesses required the Crown's pardon in 1417, a measure of the seriousness of the conflict.[23] In March 1356 Queen Isabella who at that time had come into the possession of Haverfordwest, ordered a commission to make an inquisition touching all trespasses and felonies against the king and people of the lordship. Seven months later in October the queen learned that fourteen of the leading burgesses who had been indicted by the commission had withdrawn to London and elsewhere like vagabonds so that they could not be 'chastized' in the lordship.[24] The term vagabonds does not adequately describe these substantial merchants many of whom also had significant landed interests, and the case rather indicates the wider commercial and kinship connections and mobility of these people. The coalescing of references in the second half of the fourteenth century to other Haverfordwest men in trouble suggests a period of heightened tension before the major, post-Glyndŵr, rebellion at Haverfordwest in 1415. During the English Rising or Peasants' Revolt of 1381, among one of the prisoners set free from jail in London by the insurgents was one John Reynolds of Haverfordwest. He immediately gave himself up and promised to name his accomplices and own up to all his crimes if pardoned. These subsequently ran into pages of accounts of his terrorizing of the English Home Counties prior to his capture in 1374.[25] In 1384 a rebellion broke out on a ship engaged in the king's

[21] S. Rigby and E. Ewen, 'Government, power and authority, 1300–1540', in Palliser (ed.), *Cambridge Urban History*, vol. I, 298; Davies, *Lordship and Society*, 321–2.
[22] W. Rees, *Calendar of Ancient Petitions relating to Wales* (Cardiff, 1975), 88, 366.
[23] *Calendar of Patent Rolls, 1416–22*, 62; P. Sudbury, 'The medieval boroughs of Pembrokeshire' (unpublished University of Wales MA thesis, 1946), 156.
[24] *Calendar of Patent Rolls, 1354–58*, 395–6, 493.
[25] *Calendar of Patent Rolls, 1381–85*, 568–9.

works. Four Haverfordwest men had 'frustrated the completion of the expedition' and they were now under arrest.[26] The following year two of Haverfordwest's leading men were outlawed and had forfeited 100 marks of their goods and property for the murder of Howell ap Gryfydd Vachan, vicar of Llansilio.[27] Up to the early fifteenth century at least, therefore, the lords of Haverfordwest seem to have had enough to contend with their *English* burgesses, as indeed did authorities elsewhere. The question of the relationship between English and Welsh must, however, have complicated the relationship between burgesses and lords in Wales as contexts and alliances changed over time.

The deeds reveal that urban government office in Haverfordwest in the fourteenth century was dominated by merchants, although there was a minor measure of craft and other involvement. By the early sixteenth century the merchants were sharing a central government of twenty-four common councillors equally with craftsmen and gentry. During the course of the sixteenth century the gentry would increasingly dominate as they did at Carmarthen. The already significant landed element in Haverfordwest's government was swelled by incomers such as the Perrots who were established rural gentry.[28] This domination coincided with widespread enclosure in Pembrokeshire, and the significant reduction of the cloth industry in Haverfordwest and the county in general. The property deeds in the fifteenth century, the well-known Haverfordwest ordinance of 1557 and Henry Owen's 'description' of Pembrokeshire in 1603 argue for a substantial cloth industry at Haverfordwest before the mid-sixteenth century. Owen laments its replacement by the production of wool and later corn, the ordinance describing the making of friezes and 'fullclothes' as formerly 'a great commodity to the common wealth of the town but also to the inhabitants in times past [that] have had their living thereby'.[29] Owen complained that 'thousands' were previously maintained by the industry in Pembrokeshire and he blamed enclosures for the de-skilling and pastoralization of the youth there:

> A third want ys want of enclosures, whereby a Multitude of towardly yong wyttes are spoyled by imployeing them to be heardes, spoyling in that idle trade, both outwardlye their shape of body, and inwardlye the guiftes of the minde; of which sort I finde by just accompte, that there is three thousand and more yong people imployed in this idle education.[30]

[26] *Ibid.*, 494.
[27] *Calendar of Patent Rolls, 1385–89*, 36.
[28] B.G. Charles (ed.), *Calendar of the Records of the Borough of Haverfordwest, 1539–1660*, Board of Celtic Studies, University of Wales History and Law Series, no. 24 (Cardiff, 1967); R.A. Griffiths, 'Medieval Carmarthen', in R.A. Griffiths, *Conquerors and Conquered in Medieval Wales* (Stroud, 1994), 169–92; R.K. Turvey, 'The Perrots and their circle in south-west Wales during the later middle ages' (unpublished University of Wales, Swansea, Ph.D. thesis, 1988).
[29] Charles (ed.), *Calendar*, 29
[30] H. Owen (ed.), *The Description of Penbrokeshire* by George Owen of Henllys (London, 1892), 146–8; for the chronology of change to wool and lamb fells, see the introduction in E.A.

Comparable English towns and the larger provincial towns in England reveal a measure of gentrification by the early sixteenth century although certainly not to this extent, and there may be a clue here to Wales' subsequent development in the early modern period. It is possible that developing industrial and agrarian specialization in the English regions from the late fifteenth century, and a growing national market centred on London, may have stimulated the reversion to production of raw materials in much of southern Wales by the second half of the sixteenth century. There is indeed a noticeable influx of Londoners into the land market of southern Wales in the second half of the sixteenth century.[31] In turn, this specialization in southern Wales would have contributed to industrial development in England. This may have been facilitated by the increasing dominance of gentry in the commercial centres. It is possible that these processes had their roots in the distinctive conditions of early migration and settlement in Wales: for example, the necessity for townspeople to have direct access to subsistence agricultural production in territories under military conquest, and for soldier-burgesses to be rewarded with knight's fees in the surrounding countryside. Both of these factors ensured a greater measure of agrarian production in urban household economies and within urban jurisdictions, and also ensured a more agrarian-based urban elite.

Commerce and trading networks

In contrast to the other towns mentioned, by the time of the surviving custom account book for Chepstow in 1535, Chepstow's population of between 1,500 and 2,000 in the fourteenth century had declined to about 1,000 with little sign of recovery.[32] Yet the custom book reveals a significant trade in raw and processed materials from Wales and Severnside in exchange for continental luxuries such as wine and woad. Even in such a small port, numerous wealthy individuals can be found, a mark of the extent of trade in which the port engaged. For example, David Atkyns was assessed at over £100 per annum income in goods, a figure comparable with the most eminent merchants of Bristol.[33] The 1535–6 custom book reveals trading connections with merchants and ships from

Lewis (ed.), *Welsh Port Books 1550–1603* (London, 1927); for widespread enclosure by 1600, see B.E. Howells, 'Studies in the social and agrarian history of medieval and early modern Pembrokeshire' (unpublished University of Wales, Aberystwyth, MA thesis, 1956), 80–8.

[31] For Haverford lordship, see TNA E210/10210, 10215, 10223, 10233; for Glamorgan and Monmouthshire, see GRO, D/D F.

[32] For ministers' accounts, inquisitions and extents, see TNA SC 6/921/21–9 (1270–71 to 1285–89), 922/1–10 (1286–87 to 1311–12); TNA C 133/127/13–14 (1306 inquisition); British Library (BL) Additional Charter 26052 (1310); TNA C 66/272 m.3 (royal extent of 1366); NLW Badminton MSS 1508 (1477–78), 1510 (1482–83), 1511 (1525–26), 1512 (1540–41), 1513 (1541–42); TNA SC 6/HENVIII/7148 (1519–20), 2490 (1542–43), 2491 (1543–44); TNA E 315/448/17 (1532–27).

[33] J. Webb, 'Parliamentary taxation in Monmouthshire 1543–4 and 1661–2' (unpublished University of Wales, Cardiff, MA dissertation, 1987).

Cardiff, Swansea and Carmarthen on the Welsh coast, with Gloucester and Bristol in south-west England, Jersey, the Breton and Gascon ports of France, Iberia and the Azores. Debt cases at Westminster in London and petitions from the late fourteenth to the early sixteenth centuries reveal that Chepstow merchants had Severnside connections with those of Herefordshire, Worcester and Shrewsbury, and also traded between the continent and London.[34] With London we are reminded here of our Haverfordwest merchants. Other connections are revealed in the Bristol customs accounts in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries in the form of the origin of trows shipping merchandise from Chepstow to Bristol. For example, they came from Aust, Gatcombe, Tewkesbury and Henley in Gloucestershire, Bewdley and Worcester in the west midlands, and Milford and Tenby in Pembrokeshire.[35] Small craft such as trows were used to ship the wine from Chepstow and other Welsh ports to English ports such as Bristol and Gloucester and further up the river Severn to the west midlands,[36] thereby avoiding the royal prise of two tuns per ship carrying over twenty tuns.

Throughout the fourteenth century, there were attempts by the Crown to make appointments of royal customs officials for Chepstow, the port being officially included in an association of English west-country ports centred at Bristol.[37] But the Crown normally had no jurisdiction in this independent Marcher territory, and as Marianne Kowaleski has noted in her recent survey of British ports in the medieval period, 'the lordships of Glamorgan and Gwent seem always to have been entirely outside the royal customs system'.[38] The Crown desired this jurisdiction because Marcher lordship custom on merchandise was often only a small fraction of that charged as royal custom in English ports and so English and continental merchants used Welsh ports, particularly Chepstow, as a means of ensuring more profitable trade (see Table 1).

For example, in 1392 the Crown complained to the mayor and sheriff of Bristol that 'a great number of merchants who ought to come to the port of Bristol, there unlade wine, and pay such prises and customs, draw to the port of Chepstow in Wales, where they pay but 3*d*. upon every tun, there and elsewhere along the sea coast unlade it in smaller ships and bring it after for sale in Bristol and elsewhere' and that ships with wine and goods 'do touch day by day at Chepstow'. In 1343 it was pointed out that 'a great

[34] *Calendar of Patent Rolls, 1385–89*, 419, 452; *Calendar of Patent Rolls, 1391–96*, 243; E.A. Lewis (ed.), *An Inventory of Early Chancery Proceedings concerning Wales* (Cardiff, 1937); TNA C 1/512/56.

[35] E.M. Carus-Wilson, *The Overseas Trade of Bristol in the Later Middle Ages*, Bristol Record Society, vol. 7 (Bristol, 1937), 224, 288 (1479–80); TNA E 122/20/9 (1492–93), E 122/21/1 (1513–14), E 122/199/2 (1518–19).

[36] For Severnside links between Bristol and the west midlands see C. Dyer and T. R. Slater, 'The Midlands', in Palliser (ed.), *Cambridge Urban History*, vol. I, 609–38.

[37] *Calendar of Patent Rolls, 1381–85*, 185.

[38] M. Kowaleski, 'Port towns: England and Wales 1300–1540', in Palliser (ed.), *Cambridge Urban History*, vol. I, 467–95.

Table 1: *Customs on merchandise: the ports of Bristol and Chepstow compared*

	Wine	Woad	Wheat	Malt and beans	Tanned leather	Salt	Fruit	Herring	Whole cloths
Chepstow 1535–36[a]	3*d*. per tun	1*s*. 8*d*. per ton	3*d*. per wey	3*d*. per wey	3*d*. per dicker	3*d*. per ton	3*d*. per ton	2*d*. per barrel	4*d*. each
Bristol 1533–42[b]	3*s*. per tun	6*s*. 8*d*. per ton	1*s*. per wey	10*d*. per wey	3*s*. 4*d*. subsidy and 8*d*. custom per dicker	6*d*. per ton	2*s*. per ton	3*d*. per barrel	1*s*. 2*d*. each

[a] TNA E 122/212/17.
[b] TNA E 122/21/7, 199/3, 21/10.

part of the wool in England passes to Berwyk and other places in Wales, as at Chepstow or elsewhere', and a few years later the sheriff of Gloucester was ordered to stop merchants taking 'wool, wool-fells or hides out of the realm . . .to no small quantity at the town of Chepstow and other places in Wales, defrauding him of custom'. In 1345, the government of Bruges in Flanders sent a request to Edward III for a ship to be released that had been detained at Chepstow. Bruges was the major continental staple port for English wool exports in the first half of the fourteenth century, and there are indications here of the extent of the wool trade passing through Chepstow.[39] Much of the wool of the Severn Valley and Cotswolds must therefore have been carted overland or by river to Chepstow for export rather than down the Severn as far as Bristol. When the Crown tried again to close this loophole in the late fourteenth century it was resisted in parliament.[40] The significance of this for the development of Chepstow and other Welsh ports in the fourteenth century can hardly be overstated.

As indicated earlier in the debt and petition cases, the influence of Chepstow merchants was not confined to re-shipping imports from the continent in small trows so that other merchants could avoid tax. The constable's accounts of Bordeaux in the century between the Black Death and the loss of Bordeaux to the French in 1453 show that Chepstow ships traded there along with other Welsh ships. In the late fourteenth century and the 1440s many of the Chepstow and Tenby ships carried over 100 tuns each – a tun containing 252 gallons.[41] Kowaleski has calculated that the proportion of the wine shipped in Welsh ships was 2.3 per cent in

[39] *Calendar of Close Rolls, 1389–92*, 528–9, 542; *Calendar of Close Rolls, 1343–44*, 217–18; *Calendar of Close Rolls, 1346–47*, 176; TNA Ancient Correspondence, 37/203.
[40] R.A. Griffiths, 'Medieval Severnside: the Welsh connection', in Griffiths, *Conquerors and Conquered*, 12.
[41] TNA E 101/179/10, E 101/195/19; BL, Additional MSS 15,524.

1372–86, and 5.6 per cent in 1442–49.[42] These figures are almost certainly significant underestimates because burgesses from major Welsh ports were exempt from paying tax in the king's domains, of which Bordeaux was a part before 1453. Those ships that are most frequently recorded in the surviving Bordeaux accounts were from Chepstow, Milford and Tenby. There are no recorded exemptions for the burgesses of the first two ports at all. As far as Tenby is concerned, it petitioned as late as 1376 for its merchants to gain freedom from toll in English ports, like its neighbours Pembroke, Carmarthen and Haverforwest – the last two with Cardiff being the largest towns and ports in Wales in the later middle ages. It achieved this in 1402, but the latter charter does not appear to have been renewed.[43] The merchants of Haverfordwest are known to have been substantially involved in the wine trade and yet ships from that significant port are never recorded in the surviving Bordeaux accounts, and hardly ever in those of Bristol.[44]

Conclusion

In the absence of familiar sources, the reconstruction of individual Welsh towns with a regional synthesis in mind can be a profitable approach, as historical sources found in particular towns complement those in others. In the light of this method, the findings for Haverfordwest and Chepstow begin to alter impressions of towns in pre-industrial southern Wales. There was a flourishing urban and commercial culture by the late thirteenth century, with resilience in many places and in some cases further development despite the fourteenth-century context of crisis. Moreover, the small towns and ports of Wales seem to have had wealth, institutions and functions which belie the size of their populations. Furthermore, the regional and international context of trade as well as the level of trade engaged in by burgesses of Welsh ports can be seen to have been significantly underestimated and work has only just begun on this. Finally, in southern Wales, as in all regions, the nature of lordship and settlement significantly determined the course of economic development, and reasons for the relative lack of economic development in Wales in the early modern period may be profitably sought here: for example, the landed nature of burgesses due to the redistribution of conquered territory, and the probable

[42] Kowaleski, 'Port towns', p. 490. She is making the assumption that ships named after a particular port are trading from or for that port. It should be borne in mind, however, that ships were often engaged by merchants of other ports.

[43] Owen (ed.), *Records relating to Pembrokeshire*, vol. III, 101, 227–39. Renewing such charters was expensive, possibly in order for the Crown to recoup some of what it was going to lose in custom. The burgesses of Carmarthen were charged £140 in expenses by a London mercer to undertake a suit for a new charter at the beginning of Edward VI's reign in 1547: Lewis (ed.), *Early Chancery Proceedings*, 52.

[44] Dimmock, 'Haverfordwest'.

over-reliance of the Welsh ports on jurisdictions independent from the English Crown in the late medieval period.

Detailed research into the towns of late medieval southern Wales and their relationships therefore illuminates our understanding of the subsequent development of a region famous for its role in modern industrial development. It adds to a framework of comparative urban studies in Britain and in Europe generally, and to the debate on the causes of divergent economic developments within pre-industrial Europe.