Northern English industrial towns: rivals or partners?

S.A. CAUNCE

Department of Historical and Critical Studies, University of Central Lancashire, Preston, PR1 2HE

ABSTRACT: By 1974, northern England had become one of Europe's most urbanized areas, though it had had very few towns in 1500. However, the dense population of the industrial regions lived in towns which were unusually crowded together and which had not developed conventional hierarchical structures. No dominant northern metropolis ever emerged, and this unusual urban system displayed intense rivalry at all levels. Was this coincidental, or can it help explain the region's nineteenth-century dynamism?

In northern England towns were few and very small by European standards around 1500, for even York and Newcastle had less than 10,000 inhabitants.[1] Today, in contrast, an intense but discontinuous urban belt stretches across Britain's narrow waist, from Liverpool to Hull, and resort towns spread along both coasts. Here, on only about 5 per cent of the island's surface area, live nearly a fifth of the British population, about 10 million people. A central zone only 70 miles long by 30 wide, bounded by Preston, Liverpool, Chester, Leeds, Doncaster and Sheffield, forms one of Europe's greatest population concentrations.[2] The M62 motorway and its feeders now visibly and symbolically unify this important economic corridor, but the fact that it cuts across long-standing administrative and cultural boundaries, which tend to stress north–south linkages, has led to a conventional but unlikely view that it is simply a coincidental alignment of the active zones of several separate northern regions.[3] This impression is reinforced by the central discontinuity caused by the existence of the

[1] Populations *c*. 1520 from E.A. Wrigley, 'Urban growth and agricultural change: England and the continent in the early modern period', *Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies*, 15 (1985), 686. London had 55,000, which was moderate in European terms – see, for instance, table 10.1, p. 316, in P. Clark (ed.), *Cambridge Urban History of Britain*, vol. II: *1540–1840* (Cambridge, 2000).
[2] Drawing regional and sub-regional boundaries is difficult: this is explored in more detail in S. Caunce, 'Urban systems, identity and development in Lancashire and Yorkshire: a complex question', in N. Kirk (ed.), *Northern Identities* (Aldershot, 2000), 47–70.
[3] Even M. Hebbert, 'Transpennine: imaginative geographies of an interregional corridor', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 25 (2000), 379–92, assumes that the Pennine crossings developed late, as a product of industrialization, rather than recognizing how long these links have existed.

Pennines, even though the many road and rail connections across it, and especially the volume of heavy goods traffic on the M62, demonstrate the reverse.

By 1850 contemporaries saw this near-northern region as a serious rival to the metropolitan south-east's ancient demographic, commercial and political primacy within Britain.[4] However, Glasgow and Birmingham both achieved greater populations than any individual near-northern centre and no real threat to the metropolis ever materialized. Indeed, no conventional urban hierarchy headed by a regional capital ever developed to formalize relationships between its various components, and internal rivalry is widespread and apparently endemic.[5] Lancashire and Yorkshire almost epitomize the concept of regional competition with their spurious but much relished rhetoric of a perpetual War of the Roses. Liverpool and Manchester often seem deadly enemies, and Leeds vies with Bradford and Sheffield east of the Pennines. The myriad smaller towns have always relished a multiplicity of local antagonisms and resisted formal incorporation into wider local government groupings before the general administrative reorganization of 1974.[6] This was deeply resented and its new units forged neither the legitimacy that produces spontaneously unified action, nor the sense of inevitability that overrides its lack, despite claiming to reflect economic reality. They have proved essentially unworkable in the near north, my name for this region since no other exists, a sign that no coherent identity has ever been recognized.

This rivalry deserves serious consideration by historians since it accompanied a period of regional dynamism and innovation strong enough to help redirect both British and global economic history. Northern Italy and the Netherlands, two other regions which at different times also enjoyed periods of economic dynamism strong enough to change the direction of European development, also then displayed fragmented and overtly antagonistic urban systems, suggesting more than coincidence. The investigation that follows explores how real this rivalry was between 1500 and 1974, how it expressed itself and what its effects were, through an examination of the evolution of the region's urban system; economic competition within it; and civic rivalry.

---

[4] Though the rhetoric lingered: W.H. Chaloner, quoted with approval from Sir John Clapham, 'it is not surprising that Britain's foreign trade presented itself almost as a problem in cotton, or that Manchester claimed a great share in the determination of the commercial – and industrial and social – policy of the country', 'The birth of modern Manchester', in C.F. Carter (ed.), *Manchester and its Region*, British Association for the Advancement of Science (Manchester, 1962), 137.

[5] The frequent assertion that Manchester became the capital will not stand examination: it exercised no authority outside its own part of Lancashire, and little influence across the Pennines.

[6] The amalgamation of several small Yorkshire towns to create Aireborough (population in 1951: 27,500) and Spenborough (37,000) are exceptional, and created nothing but administrative units.

Rebuilding the north's urban system

Most of the north's ancient defensive and administrative centres were located badly for trading functions, and the region's dismal economic performance in the late middle ages meant that most planted towns achieved very little. Manufacturing shifted into the erstwhile barren and barely populated Pennines, rendering even previously well-placed towns like York largely redundant. Thus, in 1500 northern England, uniquely in Europe, was not only about to rebuild its urban hierarchy almost completely, but it did so without strategic direction from national or regional government, and no business organization had more than a local impact before the twentieth century.[7] Turnpike roads, canals and railways, which contributed so much to urbanization, all began as responses to local needs rather than reflecting a national strategic plan. The frequent assertion that leading northern industrial towns grew from nothing in the century after 1750 also misleads, however, since most had played significant commercial and organizational roles in the regional economy long before this date.

It reflects, rather, the fact that these functions had led to astonishingly limited population growth in the urban nuclei, and little desire for formal self-government despite Slack's recent reaffirmation of Maitland's belief in a sixteenth-century English transition 'from rural to urban habits and the evolution . . . of that kind and that degree of unity which are corporateness and personality', and that it was this mechanism which took 'responsibility for the common weal'.[8] That explains the apparent paradox embodied by routinely dismissive statements like that of Youings, who said that 'there were no new towns in early-sixteenth century England except perhaps for some of the former villages which had recently embraced cloth manufacture and were beginning to develop the outward appearance of towns'.[9] Economic opportunity for ordinary people in the north lay in the countryside, so that, as Timmins has remarked, 'industrial development began to quicken in Lancashire from the mid-Tudor period and . . . had become well advanced by the early eighteenth century. As a result, much of the county lying to the south of the Ribble . . . showed a marked degree of industrialisation', as did equivalent parts of the West Riding of Yorkshire.[10]

The region's new towns emerged in a strictly pragmatic fashion, with Camden noting that in Halifax 'the industry of the inhabitants, who, notwithstanding an unprofitable soil, not fit to live in, have . . . flourished by the cloth trade', an assessment recently endorsed by Hey. Their primary

---

[7] The standard account for the region is now J.K. Walton, 'North', in Clark (ed.), *Urban History*, vol. II, 111–32.

[8] P. Slack, *From Reformation to Improvement: Public Welfare in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 1999), 27. The reference is to F.W. Maitland, *Township and Borough* (Cambridge, 1898), vi.

[9] J. Youings, *The Penguin Social History of Britain: Sixteenth-Century England* (Harmondsworth, 1984), 76.

[10] G. Timmins, *Made in Lancashire: A History of Regional Industrialisation* (Manchester, 1998), 9.

purpose was to offer the various market facilities appropriate to local needs.[11] Few had borough charters, and even fewer could claim continuous existence as functioning towns since gaining a charter.[12] Growing within a stable, well-established state with law codes that applied to all, they had no walls, few or no civic buildings, often no parish church and sometimes not even a chapel of ease, and no statutory privileges that mattered. Some, like Saddleworth, near Oldham, and Birstall, near Leeds, never coalesced as unitary towns, despite long and successful records of textile manufacturing and acquiring urban institutions like banks and even a major cloth hall in the latter case. What seems to have energized these two fascinating places, and others like them, was precisely their lack of regulation, for they both grew up within ramshackle, dysfunctional manors. This all deserves much more research, for it challenges our whole idea of what a town is and does.

In contrast, Doncaster, located on the Great North Road in fertile lowlands, was described in 1822 as

a town of great antiquity . . . [that] has never been a manufacturing town, and several attempts to establish manufactures in it have failed. Neither is it a place of much general trade, though it enjoys the advantage of a fine inland navigation, and has coals at a moderate price. The inhabitants have many advantages rarely to be met with in other places. They have no assessments for lighting or paving the streets, the expense of which is defrayed by the corporation . . . The air is remarkably pure and salubrious . . . There are few towns in the kingdom in which so great a portion of the inhabitants possess independent fortunes, and the neighbourhood is remarkable for opulent families.[13]

Such corporate towns could not take the opportunities on offer, and had no powers or privileges that could hinder or stop the new growth, despite uttering vociferous complaints.

The early modern near north thus seems an ideal setting for rivalry: the centres that best met customers' needs would flourish at the expense of the rest. However, the need for access to well-connected ports, vital to developing export trades, really constrained the apparently free choices quite severely. If Liverpool seemed like an upstart, it had actually assumed Chester's ancient role as the western gateway to Ireland as the river Dee silted up, for the two places are only 15 miles apart, and a creek running off the Mersey gave Liverpool a natural safe haven for shipping that was lacking elsewhere. The outfall of the river Hull similarly provided the safest port on the mighty Humber, and the town of Hull grew steadily

---

[11] This issue is discussed most fully in J.A. Hargreaves, *Halifax* (Edinburgh, 1999). Quote is from W. Camden, *Britannia* (1695; republished Newton Abbot, 1971), reproduced in L. Cooper, *Yorkshire, West Riding* (Hale, 1950), 41. D. Hey, *Yorkshire from AD 1000* (London, 1986), 7, 96.

[12] J.J. Bagley, for instance, notes that despite a charter being issued to Liverpool in 1207, 'it is an industrial boom town . . . Of its first 500 years of existence nothing now remains but an armful of historical records', new introduction to R. Muir, *History of Liverpool* (Wakefield, 1970), v.

[13] E. Baines, *History, Directory and Gazetteer of the County of York*, vol. I (Leeds, 1822), 169.

as a European gateway.[14] The two ports never really competed with each other, and London was the real commercial rival of both. It is, of course, true that Hull and Liverpool both served the Midlands, access to which increased their advantages over any northern rivals, and even the south. However, it is striking that the channels of communication to distant areas remained just that, channels, and little or no urbanization was stimulated along them, with the possible exception of the Potteries.

In this sense, the transpennine corridor clearly stands out and demands explanation. The existence of relatively easy and long-established crossing points over the Pennines more or less in line with Hull and Liverpool naturally produced a linear urban system, especially as the location of northern manufacturers among the Pennines was a key element in their dynamic early performance. The combination of farming and making gave them much greater security and lower costs than comparable urban-based industries, but it also prevented either Liverpool nor Hull drawing to itself the range of mercantile and manufacturing activities that made London so dominant in the south, and both remained quite isolated. The hilly terrain discouraged aggregation in the manufacturing districts, and so Manchester, Leeds and Sheffield, located on the interface between the Pennines and lower ground, all became prime intermediary centres, with places like Bolton, Wakefield, Halifax and Rotherham feeding off them and supporting them, and in turn creating networks of subsidiary centres for themselves. The pool of London, in contrast, formed a primary focus for the south since the Thames opened up a vast hinterland and Bristol, London's obvious partner to the west, was stunted as a result.

Towns and industrialization

These relationships were of usefulness rather than dominance, but historians often confuse the two. Manchester may have enthusiastically led northern espousal of free trade and competition, but in the expansive eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the regional business community never had to beggar neighbours just to survive. More successful distant rivals were the real competition, while also serving as sources of inspiration. Thus, in the sixteenth century, Ryder said of Halifax that 'they despise theire olde fashions if they can hear of a new, more comodyus, rather affecting novelties than allied to old ceremonies'.[15] Northern edge tools, cutlery and textiles were all originally low priced and low in quality, which gave enormous scope to extend their range, to exploit new markets that merchants were opening up and to move steadily upmarket. In the older manufacturing areas of the south, merchants had generally

---

[14] Both estuaries are massively tidal, and therefore difficult to use in a natural state.
[15] Letter of James Ryder to Lord Burghley, 3 Jan. 1589, Lansdowne MSS, v. 119, quoted in Cooper, *West Riding*, 41.

traded established products through established London firms, and both primarily sought stability and predictability, unlike the new northern system.

Moreover, domestic industry hereabouts was not run from towns, and also concentrated as it prospered, contrary to proto-industrialization theory in both respects. Thus, the heartland of traditional woollen production, the ancient mother textile trade, shrank from an early low-intensity identification with a substantial part of east Lancashire as well as west Yorkshire, to become largely confined to the area between Leeds and Huddersfield, with an extension over the Pennine top to Saddleworth.[16] Diversification was evident even within this heartland as Leeds in the eighteenth century began superfine broadcloth production and Dewsbury specialized in blankets, both at the expense of the West Country, while nearby towns continued with the original cheap, heavy cloth.

In the eighteenth century Halifax abandoned woollens altogether for worsteds, with Leeds also taking a share, seizing East Anglia's trade so successfully between them that it de-industrialized. When Bradford became in turn 'Worstedopolis' a few decades later, however, it did not destroy the economy of either Leeds, which already had many more lucrative activities to pursue, or Halifax, which developed carpet weaving and machine-tool manufacture in a renaissance whose success remains visible in the grandiose Victorian buildings of the modern town centre. This was despite the Ramsden family's determined and very successful promotion of Huddersfield as yet another textile rival, just 6 miles south of Halifax. There the Jacquard loom invented by French silk weavers was adapted for the production of fancy woollens, which were elaborate and ephemeral designs for waistcoat fronts, a niche market others did not compete in. The arrival of cheap Indian cotton cloth inspired Lancashire to detach itself from its linen and very low-quality wool textile tradition, an unpredictable, exogenous opportunity which linked an existing reservoir of textile skill to a rapidly expanding sector, whereas it could have become trapped in one that was dwindling. Competition with India encouraged an incremental but rapid development of new technology, mostly devised locally, which could be deployed without causing disaster or sustained opposition because markets grew so rapidly and there was no established organization within the industry. Assertive workers sometimes transformed themselves into minor entrepreneurs, but more commonly they encouraged employers to economize on labour, a key motive for innovation.

Clustering is almost the hallmark of such manufacturing systems. Units, whether we mean towns or firms, looked separate and mutually antagonistic, but were involved in creative rivalry rather than feuding.

---

[16] Saddleworth lies west of the main Pennine watershed, but was a Yorkshire parish and still vociferously resists the 'logic' that included it in the new Oldham borough in 1974.

Small firms focused on particular products and bought in specialized services, thus diminishing risk as is again fashionable today, and perpetuating a local commitment to a particular trade by such specialist provision. Winning large contracts could be handled by sub-contracting production rather than risky expansion. Even in the 1870s, the state of trade between merchants and manufacturers in the cloth halls of Leeds, classic open markets that acted as nerve centres for domestic woollen production, was reported across the north.[17] Into the twentieth century, the crowded Royal Exchange in Manchester showed that internal trading was very extensive within cotton despite its capitalist image and global reach. It is now recognized that really large firms were never particularly successful in British textiles. Too often, economic historians make a basic, largely unconscious assumption that most manufacturers aimed at gigantism and wished to dominate their trade, whereas actual behaviour in the near north suggests the reverse.

Instead, a town, or a group of towns like the Heavy Woollen District of Yorkshire, was often the real organizing unit of these trades, a phenomenon recognized by Alfred Marshall in his famous concept of the industrial district where trade knowledge was simply 'in the air'.[18] In a unique achievement, the Hallamshire Cutlers' Guild got 'Sheffield' accepted as an enforceable collective trademark for its membership of small, mostly rural producers, though Sheffield was itself unincorporated and dominated by the aristocratic Howards of Arundel through their extensive land holdings.[19] The progressive specialization of Lancashire towns into spinning and weaving, and in coarse or fine cloths for different markets, is well known. The commitment of firms to their towns or areas was usually heavy; because it was the owner's home, the business was their sole source of income and selling up in bad times meant a ruinous loss. Individual factory owners had every incentive to think creatively, and if even one succeeded, as with the start of slipper manufacturing in Rossendale, rivals would copy them.

A network structure might not suit trades like heavy engineering, but it was found in more economic sectors than is generally recognized. Thus, small family farms serving open markets remained the rule both in the Pennines and in industrial areas where arable was the rule, and during the transition to full urbanization local food production by such farmers was vitally important. The very varied terrain and increasingly effective transport facilities later encouraged micro-specialization as outside competition grew, including such exotic enterprises as rhubarb production, concentrated between Leeds and Wakefield. Lancashire was

[17] *Lancaster Guardian*, 12 and 26 May 1877.
[18] A. Marshall, *The Economics of Industry* (London, 1932), ch. X.
[19] D.M. Higgins, '"Made in Sheffield": trade marks, the Cutlers' Company, and the defence of "Sheffield"', in C. Binfield and D. Hey (eds.), *Mesters to Masters: A History of the Company of Cutlers in Hallamshire* (Oxford, 1997), 85–114.

the only county in England to increase its arable acreage in the late nineteenth century, when the old agricultural heartlands were deep in depression, and small arable farms near Liverpool pioneered contract growing of vegetables, facilitated by proximity to customers.[20] Even in mineral extraction and processing, similar patterns persisted for a surprising time. In the original manufacturing districts coal was widely available near the surface in thin seams; it was often closely associated with excellent iron ore deposits, and both iron and coal were chemically very pure. Coalfields were landlocked, however, and therefore developed slowly at first, with family operations working shallow seams for purely local demand.

Technical expertise in mining had been bought in from the north-east as operations became more sophisticated in the eighteenth century, notably through John Curr in Sheffield, but very soon mines in the region were developing their own methods and technology. Clay seams also frequently accompanied coal, stimulating an extensive range of specialized ceramic manufacturing. Coal also provided the fuel to turn sand into glass cheaply. Matthew Murray, another north-eastern migrant who was drawn to Yorkshire in 1788 by the expansion of mining and the availability of good iron, built and ran a successful pioneering steam-powered railway carrying coal into Leeds, and proved a more flexible and innovative developer of the potential of steam than Watt once the latter's patents expired. The engineers Murray trained spawned a cluster of local firms, and Cookson has shown that they consciously diversified to minimize direct competition with each other over markets that were as yet restricted.[21] This in turn created a wide-ranging industry, which built up an enormous commitment to textiles and the railways, but also included such unlikely outgrowths by 1900 as Fowlers of Leeds, the leading manufacturer of steam ploughing sets. Lancashire's textile base formed a similar springboard for general engineering, producing firms like Harrison McGregor of Leigh, who made the famous Albion range of horse-drawn harvesting equipment. Diverse chemical industries grew from similar origins on both sides of the Pennines. Thus, complex economies were created that again do not fit the proto-industrial model.

The results of such progressive diversification can be seen even in smaller towns. Cleckheaton, for instance, was an obscure township west of Leeds which effectively missed out on early textile manufacturing due to restrictive manorial policies. It conducted, however, a long-standing manufacture of locally produced iron wire into card clothing, used at

---

[20] S. Caunce, 'A golden age of agriculture?', in I. Inkster and S. Rowbotham (eds.), *The Golden Age. Essays on Industrial England, 1851–1870* (Aldershot, 2001), 46–60; F.M.L. Thompson, 'An anatomy of English agriculture 1870–1914', in B.A. Holderness and M. Turner (eds.), *Land, Labour and Agriculture 1800–1929: Essays for Gordon Mingay* (London, 1991), 212–40.

[21] G. Cookson, 'Millwrights, clockmakers and the origins of textile machine-making in Yorkshire', *Textile History*, 27 (1996), 43–57.

first on the hand cards and later on the large machines that successively prepared wool for spinning. By the mid-nineteenth century it dominated a global trade in this specialized but significant product, and as production had become highly mechanized, local firms also made the necessary machinery.[22] Other towns involved in the trade whose share declined had not depended on it, and it helped to create in Cleckheaton a broad, unspecialized engineering capacity. Even less damage to others was done when asbestos belting, woven for power transmission via shafts and pulleys in mills, another niche activity consequent on a late industrialization, turned out to form acceptable brake linings for the infant motor car industry. British Belting and Asbestos Ltd went on to enormous success far away from conventional textiles and mills. Cleckheaton thus prospered by serving textiles rather than trying to make a late entry into it, and by following wherever opportunity led.

A contrasting case across the Pennines shows outside investment substituting for pre-existing trades. Newton-in-Makerfield was among the worst performers in Lancashire's early urban network, and though a parliamentary borough until 1832 it then had a population measured in hundreds; it still lacked even a parish church, as well as any urban institutions except a market.[23] Located north of Warrington and halfway between Liverpool and Manchester, it lay on the line of Stephenson's pioneering railway between them, and formed the point of junction with the first main line south due to geographical chance. This led in 1833 to the opening of a locomotive manufacturing plant by Robert Stephenson himself, and then in 1855 to an enormous railway company-owned factory for making wooden freight wagons. Meanwhile, in 1846 McCorquodales, again to serve the railway, had established what became 'the largest and most splendid printing premises in England [which employed] nearly 200 hands in the various departments of the trade' by 1854.[24]

The proprietorial attitudes of the manorial lord again initially caused problems, but a separate model village housed the first foundry workers, and in the 1850s, Earlestown, a whole new town for the wagon builders, was initiated with the building of 500 cottages a mile from the ancient nucleus, but still within the township boundaries.[25] The three settlements that resulted have never really merged. Parallels to any part of this could be found elsewhere, but proximity to other industrial centres

---

[22] G. Cookson, 'The mechanization of Yorkshire card-making', *Textile History*, 29 (1998), 41–61. Card clothing is not cloth, but a heavy, composite sheet used to hold and support many small, bent staples with their points raised up so as to catch and then pull anything rubbed across them. Nailed either to small hand cards, or to large cylinders in carding machines, this process loosened matted wool without combing it straight.

[23] J. Stobart, 'An eighteenth century revolution? Investigating urban growth in north-west England, 1664–1801', *Urban History*, 23 (1996), 26–47.

[24] J.H. Lane and P.M. Campbell, *Newton-in-Makerfield: Its History with Some Account of its People* (Newton-le-Willows, 1914), 26–32.

[25] Named after Sir Hardman Earle, a director of the railway company which built them.

prevented Newton becoming an island of specialized railway engineering like Crewe. Glass making, sugar refining and general engineering followed, and the coalfield eventually extended into Newton. Women's work became available as well as men's, but the population stabilized at around 20,000 in the late nineteenth century and nearby Warrington's ancient superiority was never challenged despite some anxiety there.

All these trades in turn required a great deal of other activity to support them, from the building of houses and premises, through the production or provision of raw materials, tools and equipment, and on to financial and mercantile services. The near north thus took full advantage of its varied and accessible mineral endowment, but according to local circumstances and shaped by local entrepreneurship. This is obviously true of any expanding industrial complex in general terms, but the extent and diversity of these needs was very unusual, as was the extent to which they were met locally, raw cotton aside. In the Potteries, in contrast, production technology was simple and undemanding, and even steam power came in slowly. The Birmingham metal trades were more London-oriented and based on craft methods, and although very diverse in themselves, there was obviously a great dependence on 'metal bashing' taken as a whole.[26] The metropolis was different again, getting fuel from distant Newcastle, food from the whole UK, and increasingly supporting manufacturing innovation far away, rather than incorporating it into its own fabric. This distinctive, differentiated economic base of the near north explains a great deal about the urban structures that developed with and through it, and the undestructive rivalry it displayed.

However, by 1900 developments such as bigger firms, limited liability and the issue of shares had solidified the pattern of northern manufacturing. The obvious loss of dynamism perhaps reflected both diminished flexibility and the end to perceptions of being outsiders and underdogs, especially in cotton. Moreover, its diversification had all taken place within the limits of an economy based firmly on coal and iron, and within a society dominated by localized working-class consumption. Both of these foundations became restrictive rather than developmental long before the economy actually began to experience difficulties, yet they were so fundamental that it took decades to accept that they were dying. With eyes too focused on neighbours and traditional rivals, and with a legacy of success, the need to pay attention to global trends had been lost sight of, and rivalry became a conservative force.

---

[26] In 1966, for instance, 78% of West Midlands manufacturing workers were employed by metal industries, while no other group reached 7%. P.A. Wood, *Industrial Britain: The West Midlands* (Newton Abbott, 1976), table 13, p. 99, and tables 15–19, show how this breaks down by sector. Coal mining employed about 5%, table 20.

Hierarchy and dependence

Understanding the development of the near-northern urban hierarchy thus depends on close examination of the actual processes involved, but the existence of effective models from elsewhere has discouraged this. The towns themselves are often misrepresented in all respects. Away from the ports, truly urban cores were usually long embedded in sprawling, industrializing parishes made up of several townships, each of which might consist of several hamlets. Original populations were so small that large percentage growth rates around this time should be handled cautiously.[27] Engels, for instance, made Manchester, the classic 'shock city', feel vast, but its maximum linear extent was about 4 miles when he wrote in the 1840s and that represented enormous physical growth since 1770.[28] In that year Leeds was a loose cluster of streets less than 1 mile across in any direction and it was still only 2 miles at its maximum in the 1840s. Most people could then easily walk out of it in half an hour. Neither town produced much ribbon development, but instead other concentrated, independent settlements emerged all around them, for which they were simply the organizing centre. These were definitely not dependent suburbs, and in fact their existence inhibited true suburbanization since they effectively 'spoiled' large parts of the surroundings of the larger towns. Even the common description 'satellite' is often doubtful.

The landscape itself, with its combination of hills, bogs and marshes, often not only reinforced this fragmentation, but also gave it an organic rather than an arbitrary character. Towns had relatively immobile populations compared to London, in terms of initial migration, secondary movements after arrival and also travelling to work, and surname patterns even today confirm a highly segmented urbanization process.[29] Thus, despite Irish immigration and some other distant arrivals, localized cultures, dialects and accents survived as links with a pre-existing sense of place. If anything, separatism became more pronounced, since towns were the natural organizing units people looked to, and increasing populations supported separate breweries and craft sectors, for instance. The wholesaling of food developed slowly and remained extremely

---

[27] Halifax parish was originally about two-thirds the area of the county of Rutland, for instance. London grew by virtually 250% between 1801 and 1851, compared to Liverpool's 480%, or Bradford's 800%. That represented the addition of 1.4 million people, compared to 0.3 million in Liverpool and 0.09 million in Bradford, B.R. Mitchell and P. Deane, *Abstract of British Historical Statistics* (Cambridge, 1962).

[28] F. Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, trans. and ed. W.O. Henderson and W.H. Chaloner (Oxford, 1958).

[29] This was demonstrated in A. Redford, *Labour Migration in England 1800–1850* (Manchester, 1968), but has still often not been recognized by historians. See also S. Caunce, 'Not sprung from princes: the nature of middling society in eighteenth-century West Yorkshire', in D. Nicholls (ed.), *The Making of the British Middle Class? Studies in Regional and Cultural History since 1750* (Stroud, 1998), 19–41, a local study that illustrates this for Yorkshire.

fragmented.[30] The remarkable success of the Co-operative movement, born locally, reflects this pattern, for though Manchester became its centre, it merely co-ordinated the supply of services and goods through a multitude of local branches direct to consumers. Co-operators got guaranteed quality without having to travel, delivered through fiercely independent societies they initiated, owned and ran.[31]

The towns themselves became, of course, more than simply places where trade and manufacture were located. For the most part, post-manorial structures, ad hoc organizations, voluntary associations and improvement commissions combined, sometimes in unusual ways, to organize life until the early nineteenth century, and whatever their shortcomings, this self-evidently did not restrict growth. Thus, as cloth halls replaced open markets in all the major wool textile centres in the eighteenth century, they were generally provided by the users rather than by the town, reinforcing confidence in them. Public houses provided most or all of the public accommodation needed in the region.[32] The Hallamshire Cutlers' Guild sounds medieval, but it was only created by Parliament in 1624, and was adopted because it suited the producers' needs, whereas a similar textile guild imposed upon Leeds never functioned at all. Yet, sometimes corporations were essential, most obviously in Liverpool where dock building could not be initiated by family businesses and we must not ignore their role.

Self-reinforcing patterns of dependence normally emerge rapidly in such developing urban systems, and cement its structure at maturity, but here economic, social, political and ecclesiastical hierarchies failed to integrate. Liverpool only acquired a parish church in 1699, and its cathedrals are twentieth-century edifices. Leeds was subordinated ecclesiastically to Ripon, was socially inferior to Harrogate and had to accept Wakefield as the administrative centre of the West Riding. No primary northern towns became administrative centres before 1974, in fact, and none established a range of services that would attract people from beyond its own hinterland. Instead of diverging, whatever one near-northern town achieved, others of comparable size copied, leaving London to act as the dominant regional centre and to supply high-level services, on a strictly commercial basis, where northern towns might have expected to seek regional provision. It is important to see that London thus played an ambivalent role for northern towns, in some senses an external place, but in others a key part of the regional system, and another source of rivalry.

---

[30] R. Scola, *Feeding the Victorian City: The Food Supply of Manchester, 1770–1870* (Manchester, 1991).

[31] J. Birchall, *Co-op: The People's Business* (Manchester, 1994).

[32] G.H. Tupling, 'Medieval and early modern Manchester', and W.H. Chaloner, 'The birth of modern Manchester', both in Carter (ed.), *Manchester*, provide a clear miniature study of such a system, and its origins, see esp. 126–8 and 135–6.

Thus, linkages with the excellent commercial facilities of the capital were vital for northern growth. In modern times, no northern city exceeded a tenth of the capital's population. Like a giant, densely foliated tree, London made it hard for new growth beneath it to get beyond a certain point both in size and range of services, for it had reached a level of population and sophistication by 1801 that they would never equal. The same can be said of the metropolitan conurbation in the 1850s when compared to the urban clusters that grew around near-northern cities. The transport systems around them were primarily there to move goods, and the near-northern system as a whole was always multi-centred and confusing. That of the south is always the archetypal spider's web, and promoted huge commuter flows. London-based newspapers always dominated news dissemination. London was accepted, however grudgingly, as the inevitable leader in high culture and fashion, and newspapers even in the leading centres regularly included advertisements like that from Miss Procter of Lancaster in November 1877, who 'had returned from London, [and was] now showing, and will continue to show during the Season, new designs in Millinery, . . . Bonnets and Hats, etc.'[33] As time went on, London was accepted as the natural venue for events like association football and even rugby league cup finals. It was, however, too far away to stunt northern towns completely, as it did in the south, or to shape geographical, economic or social structures, so the links are complex and intriguing.

Thus, whereas metropolitan London absorbed Westminster and Southwark and in the nineteenth century developed metropolitan institutions which clipped the wings of the growing suburbs, Liverpool became almost surrounded by independent entities such as Bootle, along the north bank of the Mersey, and Birkenhead, separated from it by the river's enormous width. Many were possible rivals as ports, and though they united under the free-standing Mersey Docks and Harbour Board in 1857, this was meant to serve all their interests, not to promote Liverpool at their expense. By 1951, Manchester was the centre of a fairly continuously built-up area of around 2.5 million people which would be unified as Greater Manchester County in 1974. However, the actual city then had a population of only 703,000, or 881,000 with Salford, in administrative terms a city in its own right but economically inseparable from its neighbour. It was closely ringed by six large, independent manufacturing towns whose own populations ranged from 81,000 to 142,000, and which totalled 683,000, as well as many smaller towns, whose aggregate population was about the same as the central core.[34] None of these had originated as suburbs, overspill or new towns, though all lay within 18 miles of the

---

[33] *Lancaster Guardian*, 12 May 1877.
[34] Warrington (81,000), Wigan (85,000), Bolton (167,000), Rochdale (88,000), Oldham (121,000), Stockport (142,000). C.B. Phillips and J.H. Smith, *Lancashire and Cheshire from AD 1540* (London, 1994), map 5–2, pp. 368–9, shows the intricacies of local government in this area.

centre of Manchester. Beyond lay Burnley, Blackburn and Preston, with a joint population of 315,000. Leeds and Sheffield, the West Riding's major centres were smaller and even less dominant, and West Yorkshire was officially classified in 1951 as a conurbation without a centre.[35]

The whole urban hierarchy thus always seemed to lack reinforcement, and hence to be capable of substantial change, but this actually became progressively less true, as Table 1 demonstrates.[36] After 1830, little dramatic relative change occurred in the top tier. All the leaders consolidated their positions and soon achieved city status, except for Bolton. It never dropped below ninth place, and maintained a kind of intermediate status above the true towns. Bradford's surge up the hierarchy was truly exceptional, though it is often cited as if it represents a wider experience, and it can be explained as the reassertion of natural potential that had been temporarily vitiated by almost total destruction during the Civil War. A good deal of swirling occurred among the middling group, but there was little fundamental change or replacement by others. A real sense of uncertainty undoubtedly existed, as when a Warrington newspaper in 1855 warned Newton-in-Makerfield acidly that 'trade is very coy; it takes to itself wings very often', clearly worried by its neighbour's unexpected growth, but Warrington was never really threatened. The manufacturing and commercial hierarchy was actually quite robust, with most towns growing and developing in step with their neighbours.[37]

The element which might seem to confirm the sense of uncertainty was the appearance at different times of a significant but far from overwhelming number of new towns, which literally grew from nothing. Obvious examples are St Helens, Blackpool, Southport, Widnes, Fleetwood, Nelson, Queensbury and Goole. They mostly fed off developments in coal mining, chemicals, port development and leisure, though a few, like Brighouse and Hebden Bridge, were actually old settlements relocated when changes to transportation networks left older places isolated. Some became heavily populated, though mining towns like St Helens never generated facilities like those of Southport, sustained by Liverpool commuters as well as a relatively high-class holiday trade, and very few carved out hinterlands from areas already attached to existing centres. Most were very specialized, and have suffered for it in the late twentieth century compared to the rest.

Models drawn from outside, especially from London, have to be considered when trying to analyse this system, but they easily mislead. Urban expansion around London took place outside the authority of the City of London, and suburbs initially ran their affairs through ad hoc

---

[35] *Census, 1961, County Report: Yorkshire West Riding* (1963), ix.
[36] The classic representation uses a map divided into interlocking hexagons of equal area for each layer of the hierarchy, with a town at the centre of each. The hexagons of any layer below the top nest within the hexagon of the higher-level centre they depend on.
[37] *Warrington Guardian*, 3 Mar. 1855.

Table 1: *Sample of northern English towns, 1801–1951, by rank and population size (000s). Date in brackets in first column indicates year of first known charter*

1801	Rank	Pop.	1821	Rank	Pop.	1851	Rank	Pop.	1881	Rank	Pop.	1901	Rank	Pop.	1951	Rank	Pop.
Liverpool (1207)	1	82	Liverpool	1	138	Liverpool	1	376	Liverpool	1	533	Liverpool	1	704	Liverpool	1	789
Manchester (1838)	2	75	Manchester	2	126	Manchester	2	303	Manchester	2	462	Manchester	2	645	Manchester	2	703
Leeds (1626)	3	53	Leeds	3	84	Leeds	3	172	Leeds	3	309	Leeds	3	429	Sheffield	3	513
Sheffield (1843)	4	46	Sheffield	4	65	Sheffield	4	135	Sheffield	4	285	Sheffield	4	409	Leeds	4	505
Hull (1440)	5	30	Hull	5	45	Bradford	5	104	Bradford	5	194	Bradford	5	280	Hull	5	299
Bolton (1838)	6	18	Bolton	6	32	Hull	6	85	Salford	6	176	Hull	6	240	Bradford	6	292
Stockport (1220)	7	17	Stockport	7	27	Salford	6	85	Hull	7	166	Salford	7	221	Salford	7	178
York (1396)	8	17	Bradford	8	26	Preston	8	70	Oldham	8	111	Bolton	8	168	Bolton	8	167
Chester (1506)	9	15	Salford	8	26	Bolton	9	61	Bolton	9	105	Oldham	9	137	Blackpool	9	147
Salford (1835)	10	14	Preston	10	25	Stockport	10	54	Blackburn	10	104	Blackburn	10	129	Birkenhead	10	143
Bradford (1847)	11	13	Blackburn	11	22	Oldham	11	53	Preston	11	97	Preston	11	113	Stockport	11	142
Halifax (1848)	12	12	Oldham	11	22	Blackburn	12	47	Huddersfield	12	87	Birkenhead	12	111	Huddersfield	12	129
Blackburn (1851)	12	12	York	11	22	York	13	36	Birkenhead	13	84	Halifax	13	105	Oldham	13	121
Oldham (1849)	12	12	Chester	14	20	Halifax	14	34	Halifax	14	81	Huddersfield	14	95	Preston	14	119
Preston (1179)	12	12	Wigan	15	18	York	15	32	York	15	62	Stockport	15	93	Blackburn	15	111
Wakefield (1848)	16	11	Halifax	16	17	Huddersfield	16	31	Stockport	16	60	St Helens	16	84	St Helens	16	110
Warrington (1847)	16	11	Warrington	17	15	Chester	17	28	St Helens	17	57	Wigan	17	82	York	17	105
Wigan (1246)	16	11	Wakefield	18	14	Birkenhead	18	25	Wigan	18	48	York	18	78	Halifax	18	98
Huddersfield (1868)	19	7	Huddersfield	19	13	Wakefield	19	23	Warrington	19	43	Warrington	19	64	Wigan	19	85
			Blackpool	20	1	Warrington	19	23	Chester	20	37	Wakefield	20	48	Warrington	20	81
Birkenhead (1877)	0	0				St Helens	21	15	Wakefield	21	31	Blackpool	21	47	Wakefield	21	60
Blackpool (1876)	0	0	Birkenhead	0	0	Blackpool	22	3	Blackpool	22	14	Chester	22	38	Chester	22	48
St Helens (1868)	0	0	St Helens	0	0												
Greater London		1,100			1,570			2,650			4,710			6,510			8,190

Note: Sample consists of nineteen largest towns in region 1801, plus three most successful entrants at later dates. London population is included for comparison.

Source: B.R. Mitchell and P. Deane, *Abstract of British Historical Statistics* (Cambridge, 1962).

bodies, as in the north. However, the conurbation was compact, the centre dominated economically, the ancient corporation provided leadership and excellent wholesale markets and the economy was quite different. The presence of the national government gave access to funds and impetus denied to the north, while the scale of the problems and their visibility forced it to involve itself.[38] Explicitly metropolitan organizations had no equivalent across the near north even as proposals. When the whole of outer south London could be dismissed as 'though by no means without their amenities, [the suburbs] are little more than dormitories for people employed in the City', internal rivalry inevitably had little to feed on, whereas in the north it flourished.[39] Yet, London was always been at least as effective economically as the near north, and its highly concentrated urban system did much more than just cope. The urban system that had stagnated was that of the old corporate towns, especially in the near north itself, and the industrial system that had failed was that organized in what would now be seen as a classic proto-industrial manner.

Identity and rivalry

Every county and conurbation is a mass of identities, all constructed in one way or another, but this fine detailing of social and cultural geography in the near north is incomparable. By the 1960s, the regional administrative map showed 33 county boroughs (out of a total for England and Wales of 83), which were all self-contained and free-standing local government units. The 41 non-county boroughs (out of 309), and 18 urban districts (out of 572), supplied services to their inhabitants in combination with a county council. Especially west of the Pennines, only a small percentage of the population had the county councils as the main service provider, though, until 1974, all the urban areas remained within the ancient county structure for ceremonial purposes.[40] The mid-twentieth-century housing boom saw cities and many towns approach or merge with neighbours, especially in the Manchester conurbation, but their sense of separation proved robust even then.[41] The regional middle class was always scattered

---

[38] C. Smith, 'The wholesale and retail markets of London, 1660–1840', *Economic History Review*, 55 (2002), 30–50.

[39] *Ward Lock's London* (1949), 255.

[40] All figures from *Whittaker's Almanack* (1953). Lancashire County Council's *Preliminary Plan for Lancashire* of 1951 (printed in Bradford, West Yorkshire) under the Town and Country Planning Act of 1947 shows the complex position that resulted, since it had to exclude matters within the county boroughs, but was dominated by their needs, and it expressed the hope that Cheshire and the West Riding would collaborate in later stages. The government seems to be returning to recognizing the primacy of traditional county boundaries for non-administrative purposes.

[41] T.W. Freeman, 'The Manchester conurbation', in Carter (ed.), *Manchester*, 47–60, discusses this at a crucial time when a Manchester conurbation had been designated, but Greater Manchester as a formal unit had not been thought of. M.W. Beresford and G.R.J. Jones, *Leeds and its Region*, British Association for the Advancement of Science (Leeds, 1967), gives similar insights for West Yorkshire.

and marked social mixing of housing was common, especially outside the big cities, until the spread of council housing estates. The Cheshire suburbs of Liverpool and Manchester remained totally separated both from each other, and from other suburbs of the same cities, and so never approached the critical mass required to support suburban or elite lifestyles comparable to those of London. The newspaper industry was also very fragmented, without any dominant regional titles.[42]

Widespread civic rivalry was therefore encouraged, and rather than dismissing it as a waste of money and energy, its consequences need careful consideration. Most accounts of the human side of the process of British urbanization highlight the shoddy nature of many of the buildings which were erected, and the lack of clean water, sanitation and other essential services, all real criticisms which caused great personal suffering. We have to ask what the alternatives would have been, however, and admit that in the long term essential services were gradually provided for all, along with education and parks, and gas and electricity. The vote was extended to all adults without significant violence, and most towns and cities eventually elected Labour administrations, often within a three-party contest. This contrasts with all previous experiences of urbanization, and many that have followed, so the approach adopted cannot be treated as either unexpected or perverse, however much we may deplore its immediate consequences. Amelioration was the result not of philanthropy, but the interaction of demands by the poorer majority with the fears of the wealthier minority, within a system that produced extremes neither of repression nor unrest. Northerners of all social classes felt they had rights and would assert and defend them robustly, and individual towns made a setting where change seemed achievable. The lack of enthusiasm for revolutionary groups suggests that their goal was improvement and involvement, not destruction, with the Co-operative movement again a powerful symbol since its membership dwarfed any radical party.

A class element in most struggles is clear, but it differed from place to place and over time. There was no automatic divide between all the comfortably off and all the rest, either nationally, regionally or locally. Many early factory owners, especially in textiles, had strong blood ties to some of their workers for several generations. Peterloo and later violent repression outraged a significant portion of the elite, and most reform movements were cross-class alliances of varying composition. The steady

---

[42] This again is often misunderstood. Neither the *Manchester Guardian* nor the *Yorkshire Post* ever achieved regional hegemony, but had very restricted circulation areas, see S. Caunce, 'Yorkshire Post Newspapers Ltd 1890–1990: perseverance rewarded', in J. Chartres and K. Honeyman (eds.), *Leeds City Business, 1893–1993: Essays Marking the Centenary of the Incorporation* (Leeds, 1993), 24–56, which draws heavily upon Political and Economic Planning, *Report on the British Press* (1938). The current position over evening titles is particularly illustrative: one title serves London, whereas the near north has a multitude, each based in a separate town, but with some covering wide areas.

publication of comparative statistics by government forced towns to look hard at themselves. Some inhabitants wanted to spend nothing, others wanted to create a superficial impression of civilization, a few wanted to do much more. Very few wanted their own town to be publicly denounced as worse than its neighbours, and criticism could not be suppressed for long. At its most grandiose, this civic pride produced impressive town halls one foot longer than that of a rival, or higher, or more decorated, and which did nothing for the poor directly.[43] Yet the process cemented the sense that towns were no longer just marketplaces run by voluntary associations from public houses. However grudgingly, community was acknowledged at a time when the free market manifestly would not provide what was needed.

Perhaps the clearest symbol of such coming together was in association football, the passion of so many working men, and it also demonstrates that the near north relished competition for its own sake, not as a process that would leave one or two teams dominating the rest. The wealthy oversaw the clubs as a hobby which they expected to cost them money, and though teams had many origins, in 1951 only two near-northern boroughs with 60,000 people or more were without either an association or rugby league football team bearing its name in a major competition, and most of those above 40,000 also had one. London, of course, has no team bearing its name (unlike any other European capital), showing the same desire for competition, but it has fewer clubs and only two, Fulham and Chelsea, have names that connect them to the boroughs they played in when they were named, while Arsenal and Crystal Palace are essentially placeless. The Liverpool conurbation, the most London-like element of the near north, provides all the region's exceptions, as the home to Tranmere Rovers and Everton (both named after places but not governmental units), and neither Bootle nor Birkenhead had teams playing either code. Geographical proximity married to these strong identities created a pattern of rivalry far more complex than that of the metropolis despite the large number of teams there. Even cricket had an odd character hereabouts, moreover, as the towns and industrial villages saw little virtue in the amateur ethos. Organized local leagues attracted large crowds, and the town- and village-based Lancashire League was able to pay professionals and even import foreign players in the twentieth century. That built enthusiasm for the county sides, the natural milieu of the gentry, but the strength was always lower down. Even less attractive was English rugby union's ideal, even at the highest levels, of clubs for players, attracting small audiences and often bearing non-geographical names.

Arguably, the sheer number of towns, their independence and their small size all played a part in humanizing industrialization. The nature of social interaction within such towns helped to force a slow evolution

---

[43] Though it might. Bolton's enormous edifice was consciously modelled on that of Leeds as a statement that this was no minor town, and formed an unemployment relief scheme.

of new solutions to urban problems, instead of denial. Once tried in one place, others copied them, and governments might promote them. Moreover, whereas many metropolitan infrastructure projects, notably water and sewage, had to be on a gargantuan scale to function at all, the scattered nature of northern urbanization and the small size of individual towns meant that most such projects could be conceived, funded (with professional help) and handled locally, without needing the government involvement often required to get things moving in London. The terrain helped here, for sewage and water systems could often be made to work largely by gravity. Also, sandstone and millstone grit provided underground aquifers with high capacities on and off the Pennines. Reservoirs were easy to construct in valleys that lay close to most towns, learning from pioneering construction by consortiums of millowners with water wheels to drive, and canal companies with cuts to fill. The peat blanket over the Pennines functioned as a massive natural system for storing and gradually releasing the plentiful rainfall into these reservoirs, giving them an effective capacity much larger than the water actually stored in them. Only the big cities eventually had to pipe water over great distances.

None of this is meant to imply that improvement happened automatically, quickly or easily, but simply to recognize that things could be done spontaneously. For many decades, moreover, gas, electricity and road transportation all made profits for councils, which saw themselves as natural providers of such services, with their clear catchment areas, and physical gaps between themselves and others which made wide networks too expensive even to contemplate at first. Often the first steps were taken by private enterprise, but the inadequacies of so many of the results, the perceived inequities and the possibility of reducing the rates led men of all political shades to accept the legitimacy of civic take-overs here and elsewhere. South Lancashire, in particular, was served in the mid-twentieth century by a jigsaw of corporation transportation systems, down to places like Leigh with only 40,000 people. Gaps were filled by operators such as Lancashire United and Ribble, which gained access to internal traffic only in the smallest towns, and railways provided strategic connections. Even small towns could exercise local patriotism, as when Halifax and Huddersfield considered proposals for a joint tram service to connect them. It would meet in Elland, which promptly asked both tramways to buy electricity from its generating plant. The near north became a particularly effective laboratory for such initiatives, though we should not exaggerate its influence or belittle the contribution of other centres.

Conclusion

We have thus seen how, over a period of five centuries, the near north of England became the home to a most unusual, and possibly unique,

configuration of urban centres via an equally unusual development process. In many ways, the patterns displayed are so varied that it resembles an urban kaleidoscope both chronologically and spatially. Moreover, between 1750 and 1850 the region played a very large part in such a substantial redefinition of the nature and scale of manufacturing that it has been generally termed an industrial revolution both by economic and social historians. It is as difficult to believe that two such unusual attributes could be attached to a region previously seen as a backwater and be unconnected as it is to accept the fortuitous location of four separate conurbations within a few miles of each other. On the other hand, no historian should ever be content to overlook the contribution of other places, or to imply a simple causal relationship in either direction. What does seem clear is that a relationship did exist, and that the continuing feedback between the developing urban and economic systems was a vital part of the dynamism of the area, of its temporary propensity to innovate not once, but repeatedly and in many different directions. It threw up many inventions of its own, but it adopted and refined many more made elsewhere for it really seems to have been, for a while, a region adapted to change and alive to opportunities of an astonishing variety.

Near-northern towns were too economically integrated by trade to ignore each other, even though people did not visit on any scale, and success in any town promoted general growth, rather than simply moving trade from one to another. No near-northern town experienced a significant loss of population before 1951 except for Salford, clearly a special case, and Blackburn: in that sense there were really no losers. Towns were not just governmental entities, but provided structures for individuals and small firms to seek their own way forward within what was essentially a collective endeavour, but without having to accept central direction. So many, so close together, interacting economically in a structured but permissive fashion, meant that one was always likely to come up with something new, and no vested interests could prevent its implementation, or its spread if it worked. No particular town or city ever had all or even most of the answers, nor did success at one moment prevent later failure. Seen from this direction, its many rivalries are the outward form of a lack of many constraints, set within a political and legal system that maintained order and prevented rivalry going further than poking fun, issuing insults, glorying in sporting rivalry and having the occasional brawl. Competition co-existed productively with co-operation, especially when pioneering development was in hand. This all contrasts very sharply with the relationships between late-medieval northern Italian cities and among their own inhabitants. They expelled dissenters, made war on each other, helped outsiders lay their neighbours waste and stole each other's trade whenever they could. Early modern Dutch towns were more peaceful, but they used legally entrenched powers to defend their economic positions, even when wider interests clearly required change.

Within near northern towns, firms came and went without harming an industry, rivalry helped to stop them drifting into somnolence and commercial pressures meant that mutuality never shaded into sentimentality. An alternative thus exists to the heroic model of progress during this crucial period, replacing the solitary gifted genius of legend with a mass of ordinary men, all trying to solve immediate practical problems, and thereby collectively pushing the boundaries back without becoming reliant upon the judgement of any individual. The tendency to avoid real confrontation in the near north has been largely missed, but it was crucial to strategies adopted in almost all areas. When it has collapsed for any reason, the consequences show why this was best avoided. Most obviously, the 1920s and 1930s saw Lancashire cotton firms compete desperately within a market no longer large enough to sustain them all, and far from emerging more efficient, the end of investment as part of cost cutting helped to seal the fate of the whole industry. Far more typical was the Manchester Ship Canal, opened in 1894, after overcoming ferocious rhetoric and appeals to Parliament by Liverpool, apparently fearing for its very existence. Manchester quickly did become the country's fourth biggest port on some measures, yet Liverpool saw no reduction in its own, much more general traffic, including cotton, while Trafford Park, next to the new docks, was turned into a centre of new industrial dynamism for Manchester.[44] Indeed, until the 1930s the different economic bases of London and the north also made their real relationship complementary rather than competitive. Thus, when Liverpool became the leading channel for British imports as a result of generally increasing trade, the actual traffic handled by London did not reduce. Today it would be hard to make a case for the near north as a particularly effective or innovative urban system, but for a time it did provide an unprecedentedly effective matrix for industrialization.

[44] Chaloner, 'Birth', 143–4.