THE WALLINGFORDS OF ENGLAND

But it is not the Southends, Blackpools, and Bournemouths which will be excluded by too rigorous a definition of `town', because places which enjoyed a dramatic rise inevitably force themselves to the historian's notice. Rather it is places which remained small and relatively undeveloped, that nonetheless furnished for their dependent rural areas some urban services, primarily a market, additionally specific industrial or technical facilities. The ancient Berkshire borough, Wallingford, is an example. The historian of the early twentieth century may easily ignore Wallingford. Statistically unexciting, the town contained 2,808 inhabitants in 1901, 2,840 by 1931. There seems little to be gained by making sentimental allusions to Wallingford's status as the most important town in Berkshire at the time of Domesday. In modern times Reading was indubitably the principal town in the county, with 15,000 people in 1851, 84,000 in 1901. An important railway and river junction, with a significant trade in agricultural seeds and machinery, Reading was 'biscuitopolis' foremost, the town where the firm of Huntley and Palmer alone employed over 5,000 people by 1914, about double the entire population of Wallingford. Elsewhere in Berkshire Windsor, Newbury, Wokingham, Maidenhead, and Abingdon were all of greater size than Wallingford. But Wallingford was not civically destitute. True, its two Members of Parliament, a continuous privilege since 1295, had been reduced to one in 1832, and separate representation was lost by merger into the county following the 1885 redistribution. Wallingford's borough organization, however, continued. The original charter dated from Henry I and, after several revisions, a town council survived into the twentieth century in the shape of a mayor, four aldermen, and twelve councillors. The castle had been demolished during the Commonwealth; but a grammar school and town hall, which had arisen shortly afterwards, remained. If political traces of Wallingford's past importance lingered, both ceremonially and actually, the same applied to its economic role. In the larger regional or national economy Wallingford was doomed to insignificance from the early fifteenth century, when the main London-Gloucester road was diverted by new bridges across the Thames near Abingdon; but Wallingford's ancient markets and fairs persisted. The 1663 renewal of the borough charter provided for two markets and four annual fairs; by 1900 only the weekly Friday market and one annual fair continued, although a corn exchange had grown meantime.

Wallingford's surviving fair was the Michaelmas hiring fair or `mop'. This was both labour exchange - for farm-hands and domestic servants - and occasion for festival. The traditional character was preserved as men seeking new positions sported emblems of their occupations in hats or hands - woven straw for the thatcher, a curl of wool and

crook for the shepherd, cow-hair for the cowman, whipcord for the carter, and so on. The Great War finally put an end to the Wallingford hiring fair. Already mops in the rest of the country had died, as the agricultural sector contracted or changed from arable to pasture, as a more regular labour force farmed the land, and as newer techniques of hiring workers - through formal bureaux and newspaper advertisements - were preferred. Wallingford, however, provided other services which maintained its position in the economy of the northwest Berkshire and south-east Oxfordshire countryside. The town stood on the Thames and was the terminus of a branch line from the main Great Western Railway. There was an active grain trade and some malting; and carriers' carts linked Wallingford with nearby villages. These carts plied a regular two-way traffic of passengers and goods, fetching farm produce into the town and conveying outwards newspapers and shop wares. Wallingford was also the location of a steam-tackle firm whose engines were hired to work the fields of the district, ploughing, drilling, reaping, and threshing.

The purpose of this digression is plain. Statistically stagnant, Wallingford nevertheless had not surrendered its claims as a town. No urban historian can leave the Wallingfords of England out of account. Cumulatively these tiny towns mattered. There were 686 towns each with fewer than 10,000 inhabitants in 1901. Together they represented 11.4 per cent of the urban population of England and Wales. In other words, one of every nine urban dwellers lived a life bounded by small-town horizons.

[From P.J.Waller, *Town, City and Nation. England 1850-1914* (1983), pp. 5-6]

Local towns have attracted considerable attention from urban historians, historical geographers and sociologists. Alan Everitt chose Banbury as archetypical of the 'primary towns' of England ('The Primary Towns of England', in A.Everitt, *Landscape and Community in England* (1985). Barrie Trinder has written some of the best history of 19th-century urban Oxfordshire in his *Victorian Banbury* (1982). In the mid-20th century the sociologist Margaret Stacey made a study of Banbury, a rural market town undergoing the introduction of large-scale industry (M.Stacey, *Tradition and Change: a study of Banbury* (1960); M.Stacey et al., *Power, Persistence and Change. A Second Banbury Study* (1975).