

A TALE OF TWO CITIES: CHESTER AND COVENTRY IN THE 1490s

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The second half of the fifteenth century witnessed a severe decline in the English economy. Population had been reduced by disease, overseas trade had slumped, which affected especially the hitherto buoyant trade in wool and cloth. J. Hatcher has demonstrated, with abundant evidence, that in the middle decades of the fifteenth century: 'an extraordinary range of powerful depressive forces combined to impose an enduring and wide-ranging slump of precipitous proportions upon the long-term recessionary trend' from which recovery can be clearly established only in the following century.¹ A corollary to this decline was urban decay as local trade slumped. It would seem on the face of it likely that such decay might be mirrored in the ceremonial activity of the towns, but is this demonstrable?

In this paper I seek evidence of change in the sparse drama records of the 1490s of Coventry and Chester² and postulate that the different forms that these changes take in Coventry and Chester may reflect differences between the towns in their sense of civic identity and their attitude towards the future.

Coventry and Chester to the mid-fifteenth century

But first, why compare the two? There was a well-established link between Coventry and Chester. Today we call that link the A51, but it runs along the line of the original Roman road. Coventry merchants both traded in Chester and also embarked to Ireland, carrying cloth, dyes and wines, and returning with raw wool, yarn and dyestuffs.³ Up to the mid-fifteenth century the names of Chester merchants appear among the members of Coventry's Trinity Guild and those of Coventry merchants among the freemen of Chester.⁴ Moreover, Chester was in the diocese of Coventry and Lichfield and the ecclesiastical link produced a further consolidation of the two.

Both towns were centres of their particular regions, but they were not alike. Coventry had expanded in the fourteenth century with the growth of the wool trade. By the start of the fifteenth century it was among the largest of the cities in England, allegedly the third in population numbers. But its reliance on the woollen cloth trade made it particularly vulnerable