

Mediaeval Birmingham

The period from 1086 to 1327 was unquestionably a time of both great importance and massive growth for Birmingham, however with the exception of the Domesday Book, two market charters, and a poll tax return, there is a dearth of evidence with which to flesh out this historical skeleton. This has meant that historians have had very limited documentary evidence to combine with geographical knowledge to get a picture of the development of Birmingham from an “insignificant agriculture settlement” in 1086 (Holt, 1985, p3) to the third largest place in Warwickshire by 1327.

The Domesday Book records Birmingham as a settlement of which the Manor was valued at 20s, a fifth of the value of the Manors of Aston or Northfield, with a mere nine peasant households, approximately a quarter of those in either Aston or Northfield. It therefore seems unlikely that such an unimportant place was granted a charter in 1166 allowing Peter de Bermingham to “hold a weekly market” and “to take tolls” there (Gill, 1952, p12). It was nevertheless granted and subsequently confirmed in 1189 with a minor, but perhaps critical, textual change which will be considered later. By the poll tax return of 1327 the number of taxpayers in Birmingham is third only to Warwick and Coventry in Warwickshire. Indeed in the same document, Northfield appears not to be mentioned, and Aston is referred to diminutively as being ‘next’ (*juxta*) to Birmingham.

The growth of Birmingham has been described in two contrary ways: in 1952 Gill published a theory that the expansion was a natural, organic process due in part to Birmingham’s geographical position and to the potential for manufacturing raw materials. Indeed, it is stated that these benefits “worked only gradually: there was no rapid growth of trade and population until the later years of the seventeenth century” (Gill, 1952, p20). The geographical siting was perceived as being an important factor due to the Rea crossing between Digbeth and Deritend which was seen to have “made it the focus of a regional road network” (Leather, 2001, p9). Gill (1952) describes it as a “natural centre of exchange for all the district within a radius of two dozen miles” (p19). While this appears a reasonable hypothesis, Gill does not attempt to

consider why, if the location of the crossing is of such great importance, the market did not grow around the logically favoured Aston, and indeed why a belated attempt to establish a market there failed. Gill's second benefit, the availability of raw materials – sand, charcoal, water, and grazing land – were able to come into their own when it is considered that a natural site for commerce is “also a promising site for manufacture” (Gill, 1952, p20), and it was this manufacturing that Gill felt “led to the growth of this town” (p13).

The second description of Birmingham's growth was published by Holt in 1985. He acknowledges the initial importance of the proximity to the Rea crossing, viewing it as a factor in Birmingham's “early popularity” (p5), but he then turns to the market charters to explain the rapid growth of the town. The first charter of 1166 grants Peter permission to “have market [...] at his Castle” (Barrow, 1912), the Latin *Castru* is readily interpreted as referring to his “moated manor house” (Leather, 2001, p9), but the confirmation charter of 1189 gives permission to “have a market [...] at his Town of Birmingham” (Barrow, 1912), the Latin *Castru* is replaced by *Villa*. This suggests that following the first charter Peter de Bermingham was responsible for the founding of a new town around the Bull Ring, so when the charter was reissued the site of the market was changed accordingly. This forthright attitude of Peter is also in keeping with the fact that a market charter was granted for the comparatively trivial settlement of Birmingham at all, rather than the larger Aston or Northfield. Gill dismisses the textural change as a correction to a mistake made in a careless duplication of a market charter granted to another settlement, as he feels the word *castru* is “clearly inappropriate” (p.30). Indeed, if viewed as classical Latin the military connotations of the word would be inappropriate, but in mediæval Latin ‘manor house’ is an agreeable translation. However, if the text of the charters is examined, a mistake seems unlikely as the rest of the language is very precise.

The choice of word could also be seen to contribute to confusion over the settlement, depending on the contemporary definition of a town. If a town is such because it has a market, the confirmation charter would not fail to use the word *villa*, and as the first charter is granting permission to hold a market,

thereby making Birmingham a town, it would have to be centred on another site. This interpretation can only be examined by the consideration of other contemporary market charters alongside the history of the venues which is beyond the scope of this study.

If Holt's theory is considered, it portrays Peter de Bermingham as a very prominent figure in the growth of the town. The increase in population led to the building, or rebuilding, of the Parish Church, St Martin's, on a "lavish scale" and the "foundation of the Hospital or Priory of St Thomas with many invaluable endowments from the townspeople" (Holt, 1985, p.4) around 1250. This foundation illustrates the size of the town as religious institutions were considered very important. While this single priory is incomparable to the many foundations in cities such as York or Coventry, it is indicative of the progress of development.

The extent of Birmingham's presence can be seen by implication in other contemporary records. A report from 1313 alludes to a document that was lost in the *magnam combustionem ville de Birmingham*, or the 'big fire in the town of Birmingham'; dates in the document suggest that the fire occurred between 1281 and 1313. A fire would be fuelled by many wooden structures, or houses, and Holt (1985) suggests the size of the town, by his use of the terms "urbanisation", and "high density of housing" (p4). The document is concerned with the manorial court of Halesowen, and while the distance by modern standards from Birmingham to Halesowen is negligible, for the fire to be so easily referred to suggests that it was an important local event about which proximate settlements were well aware.

An inventory of the possessions of the Master of the Order of the Knights Templar in England gives an implicit indication of the prominence of Birmingham as a manufacturing centre, through the mention of *pecie de Birmingham*, understood today to refer to 'Birmingham pieces' which are thought to be small items of jewellery. Gooder (1976/7) suggest that had the concept of 'Birmingham pieces' not been widely understood, it is likely that the cataloguer would either have not used the term, or would have included an explanatory marginal note.

While the full details of the growth of Birmingham will probably always remain elusive, the current archaeological excavations at the Bull Ring will help to add a great deal of weight to either Gill's or Holt's hypothesis. If Anglo-Saxon remains are found, however remote the likelihood is considering none have been found elsewhere, it will indicate that Gill's theory is closer to the truth as it would suggest an established settlement that has grown naturally over a period of time. Although if, as it currently assumed, no Anglo-Saxon remains are discovered, credence will be lent to Holt's proposal that the market was a new mediæval development initiated by Peter de Bermingham after he acquired the first market charter in 1166.

(1273 words)

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