

SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS IN KENT 1480-1660

I. BRIEF NOTES ON THE COUNTY

KENT ranks ninth in size among the counties of England. During the whole of our period it was economically and politically one of the most important of all the counties of the realm, possessing a particular significance because of its nearness to London and its situation athwart the principal lines of communication between the capital and the Continent. It enjoyed a special esteem because it was the seat of two cathedral cities. At Canterbury, until the Reformation swept away the rich monastic establishments clustering around the cathedral church, was to be found as well the richest concentration of monastic wealth and activity in any one community in the realm.

The county likewise possessed natural resources sufficient in our period to make it one of the most prosperous in all England. A fertile and varied soil and terrain made it a famous agricultural region, where farm lands and parks were much prized as investments by London merchants, whose steady purchases produced an almost continuous inflation in the value of the land. As early as the beginning of our period specialized fruit farming had begun, with very heavy and certainly very profitable capital outlays, which by the close of the sixteenth century had made its orchards renowned throughout Europe. Kent's agricultural prosperity grew as London's population rapidly increased, since its geographical position and relatively good network of roads gave it a most important competitive advantage in the London markets.

The Kentish gentry were at once numerous and rich, though Lambarde thought them not for the most part of ancient stock or so firmly seated in this county as elsewhere. This shrewd Elizabethan observer very correctly suggests that the gentry was a fluid class, being recruited from London, "(as it were from a certeine riche and wealthy seed plot) courtiers, lawyers and marchants" continually taking their place by the sanction of purchase among the rural aristocracy of the county.¹ At the same time, Kent was remarkable for the number, the independence, and the wealth of its yeomanry. This class remained prosperous and important throughout our period, giving to the county a stable system of small and independent holdings derived rather more

¹ Lambarde, William, *A Perambulation of Kent* (Chatham, 1826), 6. Lambarde wrote this account in 1570. A recent writer on the subject suggests that this generalization does not hold for all of Kent. He believes that the infiltration of merchant wealth was largely confined to the area nearest London, while in eastern Kent and the Weald the gentry were principally sprung from indigenous stock (Everitt, A. M., "The County Committee of Kent in the Civil War", University College of Leicester, *Occasional Papers*, IX [1957], 8).

from the fertility of the region, the proximity to London and the Cinque Ports, and the opportunities for the employment of younger sons in the numerous small industrial towns than from the peculiar merits of Kent's traditional system of landholding.¹

Of these industries, the clothmaking trade was by far the most important and widely dispersed. Its renaissance in Kent dates from the fourteenth century, when Flemish craftsmen and masters laid the basis for the high reputation which Kentish cloths were to possess for a full three centuries. The weaving industry became centred on Cranbrook in the course of the fifteenth century, and the whole clothmaking trade was by the close of that century becoming specialized, with some ten towns gaining a more than local reputation for particular products. The entire industry received a saving competitive impetus during the sixteenth century when in three successive waves skilled Protestant weavers from the Low Countries found refuge in various communities within the county. Sandwich became famous for its "bays and says" and attained a great new prosperity based on the skill and energy of these refugee families, who as late as 1600 outnumbered the native-born inhabitants of this ancient town. Canterbury, which had suffered serious economic damage from the ruin of its great monastic houses, became a thriving manufacturing town with its new-found prosperity resting on its woollen industries and its probably unrivalled skill in the manufacture of silk.² Maidstone rapidly acquired what was almost a monopoly in the manufacture of thread, an industry giving employment to some hundreds of persons.³ The woollen industry supported a large and wealthy group of clothiers throughout the sixteenth century, the rich landholders of the Weald often combining the direction of their estates with this profitable commercial activity.⁴ The cloth trade began to languish in the seventeenth century, but it remained throughout our age an important element in the balanced economy of this fortunate and prosperous shire.⁵

The county likewise retained during the whole course of our period some importance as an iron-manufacturing region. In the mid-Elizabethan era it possessed six forges and eight furnaces, all centred in the Weald, which was still thought to provide inexhaustible resources of wood for smelting. A considerable works was set up at Brenchley

¹ Lambarde's comments on the yeomanry of the county are most perceptive (*Perambulation*, 7-8).

² Hasted reports that in 1665 there were 126 master weavers in the city and that the silk industry gave employment or support to as many as 2,000 persons (Hasted, Edward, *History of Kent* [Canterbury, 1797-1801, 12 vols.], XI, 94.)

³ *Ibid.*, IV, 267; *VCH, Kent*, III, 408.

⁴ *Ibid.*, III, 409.

⁵ For a particularly helpful account of the economic history of Kent in our period, *vide* Jessup, F. W., *A History of Kent* (L., 1958), 98-109.

in the early seventeenth century by John Browne, who in 1619 employed as many as 200 workmen in the production of ordnance. In 1637 Browne built an even larger works at a cost of about £1,700, though by this date Kent, Sussex, and Surrey were becoming marginal producers of iron, and the industry was shortly to languish in this whole region.¹ But other specialized industries were rising to replace the iron foundries, such as the large mill established at Dartford early in the Elizabethan period by John Spilman, a jeweller to the Queen, which employed some hundreds of workmen in the manufacture of white paper, the glass works successfully established in several centres, and at least locally famous breweries in various towns.

Kent was an old, a stable, and throughout our period a relatively populous county. No persuasively accurate estimate of its population at any time during the era under consideration can be advanced, though certain at least roughly drawn suggestions may be made. Of all the southern counties, Kent ranked next after Gloucestershire in the number of men who might be mustered out for the defence of the realm in the great year of the Armada. Usher believed, on the basis of his study of subsidy returns and certain other data, that its population density was of the order of 82 to 101 per square mile in 1570 and that the number of its inhabitants had increased to 93 to 112 per square mile a generation later. If we may average the extremes of these estimates, we should have a population in the neighbourhood of 140,000 in 1570 and of perhaps 160,000 in 1600.² There is, however, evidence to suggest that the lower of these estimates is more nearly accurate, which would give us a population of something like 145,000 in 1600.³

We may be even more certain of the fact that Kent was relatively one of the most urban of all the English counties. There was no single dominating urban complex in the county, as was so frequently the case, but there were throughout the two centuries of our study a considerable number of prosperous and economically significant towns with a fair degree of corporate life and identity which were much larger than the village so typical in the English scene of this age. Our own totals of the amount provided locally for charitable uses, unusually full returns of numbers of communicants, and other scattered evidence would suggest that there were in 1600 as many as ten or twelve such towns in the county with populations of 1,000 or more. Canterbury, which

¹ *Arch. Cant.*, XXI (1895), 308-314; *VCH, Kent*, III, 386-387; Jessup, *Kent*, 105-106; Furley, Robert, *History of the Weald of Kent* (L., 1871, 1874, 2 vols.), II, ii, 483-487.

² Usher, A. P., *An Introduction to the Industrial History of England* (Boston, 1920), 97-98.

³ Dr. Felix Hull, the Kent County Archivist, has suggested in private correspondence on the point that the population of Kent may not have exceeded 150,000 in the Restoration period.

Usher estimates as having had a population of slightly more than 4,000 as early as 1377,¹ had grown steadily, after a severe depression in the years following the Reformation, and numbered 5,000 to 5,500 in 1600, being by far the largest town in the county. Greenwich, Rochester, Sandwich, and possibly Cranbrook would seem in the same year to have had populations ranging from 2,000 to 3,000, though Sandwich by this date was beginning to decline. The larger group of towns with populations of the order of 1,000 to 2,000 included Maidstone, Faversham, Dover, Dartford, Deptford, and possibly Gravesend, Folkestone, and Tonbridge.² The total population of these essentially urban communities we have estimated at 21,900, which would mean that in 1600 Kent possessed a relatively very high urban population of something like 15 per cent. of the whole.

This fact bears importantly and immediately on the relative wealth of the county and on the size and structure of its charities. The total of its charitable benefactions exceeded that noted in any other rural county save Yorkshire, even if adjustments are made for the very large gifts made by London donors in this, their favourite county. Rogers and Buckatzsch, in their study of the several subsidy rolls, would seem to agree in ranking the county as the eighth or ninth in England in wealth in terms of the average over the whole course of our period, whereas our evidence suggests that it may well have ranked fourth or fifth in the realm in terms of its disposable wealth.³

¹ Usher, *Industrial History of England*, 106.

² Jessup (*Kent*, 90-97, 104) treats this question with care.

³ Rogers, J. E. T., *History of Agriculture and Prices in England* (Oxford, 1866-1902, 7 vols.), V, 104-113 ; Buckatzsch, E. J., "The Geographical Distribution of Wealth in England, 1086-1843", *Economic History Review*, 2nd ser., III (1950), 180-202.