

FOUR KENT TOWNS AT THE END
OF THE MIDDLE AGES

By A. J. F. DULLEY

BETWEEN 1915 and 1938 the late Arthur Hussey published in these pages and elsewhere abstracts of the surviving wills for eight Kent parishes down to 1558.¹ Four of them were towns, and for these the evidence of the wills is especially valuable, since the smaller, non-corporate market town is usually ill-documented so far as its early history is concerned. Of the four, only Hythe was corporate, and none was very large: Hythe had about 700-800 inhabitants c. 1570, Milton about a hundred less; Ashford was about the same size as Milton, and Sittingbourne rather smaller.² Except for Hythe, where the haven on which it depended was rapidly silting, all had probably grown in the previous century, the period in which most of the wills were made. The four rural parishes—Ash and Eastry, south-west of Sandwich, and Herne and Reculver with its chapelry of Hoath, on the coast north-east of Canterbury—because of their geographical grouping are not fully representative of the Kentish countryside. Their value for the present enquiry is principally as a foil to the towns, though Herne and Reculver have an independent importance when it comes to a consideration of the fishing industry, which is better attested than most in these documents and merits more detailed study than it has commonly received.

An enquiry of this sort, if it is not to be a collection of subjective impressions, must be based on statistical methods. Wills, full as they are of miscellaneous information, are not ideally suited to this purpose. They have two principal drawbacks. Firstly, only the richer inhabitants owned enough goods or property to justify their making a will at all. How far down the social scale the habit extended may be disputed: doubtless it varied from individual to individual. But it has been estimated with a good show of reason that between a third and a half

¹ Ash: *Arch. Cant.*, xxxiv (1920), 47-62; xxxv (1921), 17-35; xxxvi (1923), 49-64; xxxvii (1925), 35-47. Ashford: *Ashford Wills*, publ. Ashford U.D.C., 1938. Eastry: *Arch. Cant.*, xxxviii (1926), 173-82; xxxix (1927), 77-90; xl (1928), 35-47. Herne: *ibid.*, xxviii (1909), 83-114; xxx (1914), 93-126. Hythe: *ibid.*, xlix (1937), 127-56; l (1938), 87-121; li (1939), 27-65. Milton: *ibid.*, xlv (1932), 79-102; xlv (1933), 13-30; xlvi (1934), 36-51; xlvii (1935), 177-88. Reculver and Hoath: *ibid.*, xxxii (1917), 77-141. Sittingbourne: *ibid.*, xli (1929), 37-56; xlii (1930), 37-56; xliii (1931), 49-71.

² C. W. Chalklin, *Seventeenth Century Kent* (1965), 30.

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of townsmen lived at or near the level of bare subsistence, and few of these can have made wills.³ Confirmation of this can be derived from the wills themselves. Of the 57 testators other than farmers and priests who specify their occupations only one was a labourer. Yet out of 380 comparable entries among the lists of persons in Kent pardoned for participation in Jack Cade's rebellion in 1450 no less than 18 per cent. were labourers.⁴

The second difficulty is that wills never give exhaustive information. The fact that the deceased did not bequeath land, for example, does not imply that he did not possess any. But if one takes groups as a basis for study, it is possible to distinguish significant variations from what might be expected from a purely random mention of these things. The larger the group, the smaller the variation that will count as statistically significant and therefore the finer the comparisons that can be made. Thus, while it is impossible to infer from the wills alone what proportion of testators were landowners, it is possible to show that in one parish or period the proportion was higher than in another.

TABLE 1

	<i>Urban parishes</i>				<i>Rural parishes</i>			
	Up to 1500	1501- 1530	1531- 1558	Total	Up to 1500	1501- 1530	1531- 1558	Total
Males	248	276	219	743	181	148	73	402
Females	39	53	29	121	24	16	12	52
Total	287	329	248	864	205	164	85	454
Children per male	1.67	1.39	1.77	1.60	2.08	1.90	2.62	2.10
<i>Real estate (%)</i>								
Land (\pm house)	43.1	32.2	28.6	34.9	77.6	69.5	58.8	71.1
House only	34.9	25.6	30.2	30.0	8.3	4.9	4.7	6.4
None	22.0	42.2	41.2	35.1	14.1	25.6	36.5	22.5
<i>Cash Legacies (%)</i>								
All cash legacies	84.0	75.9	68.9	76.5	82.4	82.4	77.7	81.5
Legacies over £1	61.6	52.6	58.1	57.2	52.7	59.1	67.1	57.6
" " £3	48.4	33.1	42.0	40.7	34.6	42.1	50.6	40.3
" " £10	25.4	14.7	28.3	22.3	16.1	20.7	37.7	21.8
" " £30	8.7	5.5	16.5	9.7	3.9	4.3	24.7	7.9
" " £100	1.7	0.6	4.4	2.1	1.0	0.6	8.2	2.2

So far as town and country as a whole are concerned, it is in land ownership that the most obvious contrast lies. Real estate is the most likely of all forms of property to receive a mention in a will. In the rural parishes 71 per cent. bequeath farmland and a further 6 per cent.

³ Julian Cornwall, 'English Country Towns in the 1520's', *Econ. Hist. Review*, 2nd Series, xv (1962), 52-69.

⁴ W. D. Cooper, 'Jack Cade's Followers in Kent', *Arch. Cant.*, vii (1868), 233-71.

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houses only. For the towns the corresponding figures are 35 per cent. and 30 per cent. Even in Ashford, where the farming element is most evident, the number of persons leaving land is only 49 per cent. of the total. A large proportion of the townsmen who owned land must have been rentiers only. Less than one man in five can be proved to have been a farmer, sometimes in addition to following a trade, whereas in the country nearly one half left corn, cattle, tools or other evidence of farming. A good deal of the land owned by townsmen was marsh grazing, in Romney Marsh if they lived in Ashford or Hythe, in Sheppey or nearer home if they came from Milton or Sittingbourne. This could be stocked with sheep or store cattle or let to upland farmers while the owner gave his attention to some other means of livelihood. Of those who were definitely farmers many undoubtedly lived outside the towns. Hythe was the only parish to have an insignificant amount of agricultural land within its boundaries, and it had correspondingly the smallest proportion of farmers—22 out of 260 males. Altogether agriculture accounted for about a third of those townsmen whose occupation can be ascertained (44 per cent. of the total), and only 2 per cent. of that number combined it with another occupation. In the country only 36 men, apart from clergy, had occupations other than farming, and of these at least 16 farmed in addition to following their trade. The craftsman-smallholder was a feature of the countryside but not of the towns, at least so far as these eight parishes are concerned.

Comparatively little can be gleaned about farming practice. Sheep were everywhere important and outweigh the other livestock bequeathed in point of numbers in most parishes. At Ashford they were less prominent, but there were several legacies of horses, which, to judge from the number of mares and colts among them, were being bred for sale rather than used about the farm. The earliest Customs Port Books (1565+) show a thriving export trade in horses to France from Hythe and other ports along this stretch of coast. Wheat and barley are the only crops commonly mentioned, though there are occasional bequests of saffron gardens, which, like the sheep, doubtless owed their existence to the cloth industry. At Milton much of the land still lay in open fields of the Kentish type. Small plots, some of half an acre or less, are described as lying in Sayersfield, Buggesfield, Leyfield, Akirmansfield or Schamellisfield, of which the first two at least derived their names from local farming families.

The pattern of land ownership was not static. Both in town and country there was a pronounced and steady decline in the number of testators leaving land and also, though less pronounced and steady, in ownership of other forms of real estate. Only in a very few cases are details given of the area or value of the land concerned, but it would seem that land in East Kent was being concentrated in fewer

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and fewer hands, with a rising proportion of landless men being left to seek employment as labourers or drift to the towns.

The extent of that drift cannot be traced directly, but its existence is clearly implied by the number of children who receive legacies or are otherwise mentioned in wills. In the four country parishes they averaged 2.1 per male (childless included) as against 1.6 in the towns. These figures probably underestimate the numbers of children surviving their fathers, particularly in the poorer families, where it was impossible to provide for each separately, but the relative difference is noteworthy: families were undoubtedly smaller in the towns, whether through lower fertility or higher mortality rates. The crowding together of people even in small towns created problems of sanitation that did not exist in the countryside. Nor were they altogether unnoticed by the townsfolk themselves. John Edwey of Hythe left 3s. 4d. in 1473 'to making of one common latrine in the town'.

Family size shows variations not only between town and country but also from period to period, being lowest between 1501 and 1530 and rising later. This trend corresponds with similar fluctuations in the value of legacies expressed in cash terms. These provide a very rough and ready index to the wealth of groups. In tabulating them I have taken the maximum value possible where the terms of the bequest are conditional or ambiguous, and annual payments have been assumed to have been paid for an arbitrary seven years: possible errors in these cases tend to cancel each other out when only the relative wealth of groups is considered. The same fluctuation between generations is apparent, though there is no overall distinction between town and country. The towns, however, seem to have been wealthier than the countryside up to 1500, while in the recovery after 1530 the country outpaced the town. Throughout, those who left large sums of money tended to name more children than those who left little or none, and it is unlikely that this correlation is purely a product of the random variation in the amount of detail that different testators give about their family affairs, for there is evidence from other sources that in pre-industrial England the well-to-do succeeded in rearing more children than the poor.⁵ The chronological variations, particularly the general increase in the value of legacies after 1530, may in part be due to the declining value of money. But at any rate so far as the towns are concerned, taking the statistics for family size and wealth together, it would seem that in all of them there was a period of stagnation, if not decline, in the early decades of the sixteenth century.

The reasons for this fluctuation are not apparent. There was considerable variety in the economic basis of the individual towns. Trade was an important source of prosperity to each, but none was dependent

⁵ Peter Laslett, *The World We Have Lost* (1965), 69.

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TABLE 2

<i>Occupation stated in will</i>	<i>Ashford</i>	<i>Hythe</i>	<i>Milton</i>	<i>Sitting- bourne</i>	<i>Total</i>
Priest	2	2	3	3	10
Draper (incl. d. or weaver)	2			2	4
Smith (blacksmith)		3		1	4
Weaver	1		3		4
Butcher	1	1	1		3
Clothier (clothman, -maker)	2		1		3
Fisherman		3			3
Shoemaker		1		2	3
Tailor	2			1	3
Brewer	1		1		2
Fletcher (bow and arrow maker)	1			1	2
Glover				2	2
Miller			2		2
Servant	2				2
Waxchandler (candlemaker)	1			1	2
Bricklayer			1		1
Cooper			1		1
Cutler	1				1
Dyer		1			1
Fuller	1				1
Hermit			1		1
Innholder				1	1
Labourer				1	1
Parish Clerk		1			1
Surgeon	1				1
Tanner	1				1
Waterman			1		1
Total	19	12	15	15	61

TABLE 3

<i>Occupation Group</i>	<i>Ashford</i>	<i>Hythe</i>	<i>Milton</i>	<i>Sitting- bourne</i>	<i>Total</i>
Whole-time farmers	46	17	33	23	119
Seamen and fishermen	—	74	13	2	89
Textile workers	9	6	14	3	32
Clergy, etc.	2	3	4	3	12
Miscellaneous	21	21	18	14	74
Total	78	121	82	45	326
Occupation unknown	107	139	88	83	417
Total males	185	260	170	128	743

on trade alone. Indeed, to judge from the occupations stated in the wills, few townsmen were retailers pure and simple. Most were craftsmen or processors supplying the everyday needs not only of their fellow-townsmen but also of the inhabitants of the surrounding countryside. Nearly all the commoner crafts are named at least once.

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Carpenters are unaccountably absent. More significant perhaps is the absence of purveyors of luxuries and practitioners of the more highly specialized crafts and services, such as spicers, grocers and mercers, goldsmiths, scribes or notaries. As the list of Cade's followers shows, at the beginning of the period at least these were mainly concentrated in the larger towns, notably Canterbury, Sandwich, Maidstone and Rochester.

In each of the four towns trade centred round the weekly market. At Hythe this gave its name to one of the four wards, and here were located all the shops whose situation is specified. Neither here nor elsewhere are they mentioned often in wills. Only 5 per cent. of the men bequeathed shops or stalls, but as most shops were no doubt simply the front room of the house, many must have gone unmentioned. Milton had semi-permanent stalls or shambles in its market place, apparently arranged in accordance with the commodity for sale, for William Maas in 1465 left two fish shambles and two tanner shambles. The area served by these markets was not normally large. Kent was well supplied with market towns: Symonson's map, published in 1596, shows 27 cities and towns, and few parts of the county were more than five miles from one of them. Milton and Sittingbourne were in fact only about a mile apart, although as Sittingbourne's market was on a Wednesday and Milton's much larger one on a Saturday, they were probably complementary rather than competing. No tradesman has left any means of identifying the extent of his custom, but Thomas Norden of Sittingbourne, who acted as a moneylender, was creditor to three men in Borden, two each at Milton and Sittingbourne itself, and one at Rodmersham, Stockbury, Tonge and Tunstall, all of which lie within a four-mile radius. A study of all connections outside the testator's home parish—property, legatees, witnesses, etc.—shows that with the exception of Ashford there was no great difference in this respect between town and country. Two-thirds of the wills reveal none at all, and only a few had any beyond ten miles from home: 5 per cent. in the country and 10 in towns. For Ashford the corresponding percentages are 58 and 17; lying as it did at the junction between the predominantly pastoral and industrial Weald and the arable districts to the north, it probably served a wider area than the average market town.

This local market absorbed the products of most of the urban craftsmen, but there is one large group who formed part of an industry of national rather than local importance, namely the cloth trade. Though they were peripheral to the main centre in the Cranbrook district, all four towns had weavers and other textile workers among their inhabitants. It is not always easy from the wills alone to distinguish manufacturers from retailers, and even contemporaries some-

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times found the distinction obscure. Thus John Shavelok of Sittingbourne in 1486 described himself as 'draper or weaver'. For statistical purposes, therefore, drapers and all who left legacies of cloth have been classed as belonging to the industry, which, as so defined, accounted for 14 men at Milton (17 per cent. of known occupations), 9 at Ashford (12 per cent.), 6 at Hythe (5 per cent.) and 3 at Sittingbourne (7 per cent.). By comparison, in 1450 in the industrial villages of Smarden and Pluckley, where virtually the whole able-bodied male population seems to have joined Cade's revolt, the textile workers numbered 16 out of 98 in the former and 8 out of 50 in the latter. The towns seem to have concentrated on the finishing processes, and Milton in particular was surrounded by 'tenter grounds', in which the cloth was stretched and dried after fulling in the local mills.

The cloth trade and the weekly market were not the only sources of employment. Except for Ashford, all the towns under discussion were to some degree sea-ports. Milton and Sittingbourne shared the same creek, which, opening on to the Swale, provided a sheltered route for small vessels to London and one that was much used, particularly for the supply of grain from the fertile soils of North Kent to the metropolitan market. The earliest indications of the extent of this trade come from the last quarter of the sixteenth century. From Michaelmas 1573 to Michaelmas 1574, the Port Book for the Creek of Milton (which included Sheppey and the coast as far west as Rainham) recorded 111 shipments, 74 outwards (49 to London, 12 to other English ports and 13 overseas) and 37 inwards (18 from London, 9 from other English ports and 10 from overseas).⁶ The nature of all the cargoes is not stated, but from Easter to Michaelmas 1574 the 27 outward consignments included 15 of grain, mostly wheat, and 4 of fish to London, and 8, half of them malt, to other ports. About half were conveyed in local boats, 13 Milton vessels and 3 from Sittingbourne. All were small: the largest was of only 20 tons burden, and the average was 14 tons. According to a list of shipping compiled in 1566, there were then 26 vessels at Milton and 3 at Sittingbourne.⁷ The largest was of 24 tons, but 20 were of 10 tons or less. Four quays are named at Milton and two at Sittingbourne. Probably most or all were in private ownership, for they are mentioned several times in wills. Thus Hamond Key got its name from Ralph Hayman, who purchased it c. 1464 on the death of Joan Hert, the widow of its previous owner, and left it in turn to his son Ralph, who died in 1534, having acquired an additional wharf and a boat in the meantime. He was the only one of the four quay-owners to bequeath a vessel. The majority of ship-owners were mariners or fishermen rather than merchants, though

⁶ P.R.O., E.190/639/7, 10.

⁷ Brit. Mus., Cott. MS. Julius B iv, fol. 95.

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some might attain to moderate wealth. Robert Ruffyne, senior, who described himself as 'yeoman', in 1549 left six boats, one of them a 'dredging skeye', as well as three houses and £13 in cash. It was in fact normal to own more than one boat and to own them outright rather than in partnership. At least one was often a fishing-boat, and oyster-dredging probably alternated seasonally with transport of merchandise. Altogether mariners and fishermen made up a large section of the population at Milton. Among 29 followers of Jack Cade 13 were described as 'shipman', and the same number of fishermen and mariners occur among the 82 testators whose occupation is known. At Sittingbourne the proportion was much smaller: two wills out of 45. Situated as it was on the main road from London to Canterbury, traffic by road probably provided more employment here. The only innholder named among the wills was a Sittingbourne man, and a rippier (carrier of fish by pack-horse from the coastal ports to London) received a legacy.

The distribution of rippers among Cade's followers shows that Watling Street was not the only route by which fish reached the capital. The roads from Folkestone and Hythe via Ashford and from Rye via Tonbridge also had their share of the traffic, a traffic which does something to discountenance the criticisms sometimes voiced about the state of early Wealden roads. For the trade was essentially one in fresh fish, and speed of delivery was important. By contrast the fish sent by sea from Milton to London was ling and cod, not locally caught and presumably either salted or dried.

The sources from which the rippers drew their supplies were varied, and the variations are well represented among the published wills. The oyster fishery at Milton and Sittingbourne has already been discussed.⁸ It was only part of an industry that was widespread along the Swale and the Medway estuary from Rochester to Whitstable, and also in the Wantsum Channel behind Sandwich, where in 1467 the corporation, anxious to preserve the haven, forbade oyster-dredgers to throw back the stones dredged up.⁹ At the same time they legislated against 'werys, groynes and kiddles' erected by various owners of the foreshore between Sandwich Haven and North Mouth. The Sandwich authorities were not the only body to legislate, usually without effect, against these obstructions to navigation. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries the Corporation of London made several attempts to put down kiddles in the Thames Estuary. In 1237 they fined 28 men, including 7 from Strood, 4 from Rochester and 3 from Cliffe, the large sum of £10 each for erecting kiddles at the seaward end of Yantlet

⁸ See also R. H. Goodsall, 'Oyster Fisheries on the North Kent Coast', *Arch. Cant.*, lxxx (1965), 118-51.

⁹ W. Boys, *Collections for a History of Sandwich* (1792), 675.

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Creek, while in 1406 another confiscation of nets resulted in a riot led by men of Barking, Erith, Woolwich and elsewhere to the number of 2,000.¹⁰ Nor was the Thames shore the only place where they were to be found. They were also put up in the creeks behind New Romney, where a lawsuit was fought over them in 1358 and a part of the town was called 'Kydelmannehope'.¹¹

The nature and working of these structures is illuminated by the wills for Herne and Reculver, where they existed in some number. Altogether 31 men out of 197 in the two parishes bequeathed them, usually describing them as 'weirs'. They consisted of a stout wooden framework, the 'steddle', V-shaped in plan, to which were attached nets which guided the fish into a trap at the apex of the V. Fish were forced into the net by the set of the tide, and consequently we find both flood- and ebb-weirs, arranged to take advantage of the currents in either direction. They were set up several deep along the coast and a boat was needed to reach the furthest. The right to build them seems to have belonged to the owner of the adjacent cliff, and was regulated, at Reculver at least, by the manor courts, which exacted a nominal rent and forbade the extension of old or the building of new weirs. Working the weirs was only a part-time occupation, for the trap only needed emptying once per tide and the only other work required was routine maintenance of the frame and nets, and all the owners of weirs were farmers or at least smallholders. As a group, however, they seem to have been rather poorer than the majority of their fellow villagers.

The fishermen described so far were all inshore fishermen and formed a minority of the working population of their respective communities. At Hythe the situation was rather different. There 61 per cent. of the testators whose occupation is traceable left boats or nets. Not all were themselves necessarily engaged in fishing, for one man from Ashford left a share in a boat and fishing gear at Folkestone, and several Hythe men left gear to their wives or daughters, to be used on their behalf. But there are other reasons for thinking that a high proportion of the population were fishermen. The 1566 census of shipping reports that there were 122 houses in the town and 160 of their occupants were engaged in fishing. The same was true of fishing towns generally on this coast. At Hastings a similar list compiled the previous year estimated that 146 out of 280 householders were fishermen, and at Rye 225 out of 530.¹² This was a much higher percentage than could

¹⁰ *Munimenta Gihallae: I, Liber Albus* (Rolls Ser., ed. H. T. Riley (1859)), 500-1, 514.

¹¹ *Register of Daniel Rough* (Kent Records, xvi, ed. K. M. E. Murray (1945)), 142-4, 187.

¹² P.R.O., S.P.D., Eliz., xxxviii, No. 28.

have been found following any single occupation or group of occupations in either Ashford, Milton or Sittingbourne, or, probably, in other inland towns, even the larger manufacturing towns of the Midlands. Nor is it easy to find parallels in succeeding centuries. Seventeenth-century Tonbridge seems to have had an occupational structure very much like Ashford,¹³ and even at Chatham, almost exclusively dependent on the Royal Dockyard, its employees only accounted for one-third of those whose probate inventories have survived.¹⁴

Hythe had had a long history as a fishing port, for it had been a founder member of the Cinque Ports confederacy, which had been called into being in part to regulate the Yarmouth herring fishery. It also handled a certain amount of commercial traffic, but with the decay of the haven and the growth in the size of ships, it was steadily declining and had become insignificant by the end of the sixteenth century. At the beginning of the period covered by the wills it may have been of some importance. There are records of Hythe ships being engaged in passenger traffic with the continent and in victualling the garrison at Calais in the reign of Henry VIII. Two of the three masters so engaged in 1533 were also fishermen, and it is likely that most of the larger vessels were used for both purposes.¹⁵

Fishing continued to flourish, even though commerce declined. The number and proportion of men bequeathing fishing gear remained fairly constant throughout the period covered by the published wills—despite the fact that one source, probably tententious, reported a decline in the number of ships and fishing boats in the port from 80 in 1533 (the most in any of the Cinque Ports) to only 8 in 1563.¹⁶ The bequests made by fishermen often go into considerable detail and, taken in conjunction with other evidence, they make it possible to reconstruct the workings of the industry in outline.

The most valuable single item of equipment bequeathed was normally a boat. More than half owned at least part of one. Out of 39, 11 owned only a part share, 8 had a single boat, 3 had shares in two, and the rest had two or more. In contrast to Milton, it seems to have been usual for two or more to share the cost of a new boat, partly because the boats were generally larger, and also because, being involved in deep-sea work, they were exposed to greater risks. Shared ownership, which was normal at Rye and Hastings also, was a form of insurance. Many must have been built locally (one will mentions 'the house where the shipwright dwells'), but not all: John Clerke in 1487 left part of a boat bought in Normandy.

¹³ *Arch. Cant.*, lxxvi (1961), 159.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, lxxvii (1962), 162.

¹⁵ *Cal. S.P., Hen. 8*, iv, No. 6022; vi, No. 1530.

¹⁶ *P.R.O., S.P.D., Eliz.*, xxviii, No. 3.

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Several types of vessels are enumerated, both in the wills and in the list of 1566. In 1566 the largest were crayers, 4 of 40 tons and 3 of 30 tons. There were 7 shotters of 15 tons and 18 tramellers of 5 tons. The distinction between them, apart from size, was primarily one of function. The crayers were used for trade and deep-sea fishing, the other vessels for various methods of fishing. To what extent they differed in appearance as well is uncertain. The best evidence for the rig of sixteenth-century vessels on this coast is the chart of Rye harbour made by John Prowze in 1572, which illustrates at least four distinct types, from fully rigged ships to rowing boats.¹⁷ It has been suggested that the vessels of intermediate size shown off Winchelsea, apparently clinker-built with a raised deck or cabin at the stern, a sprit mainsail and in one case a small mizzen, should be identified with the crayers of written records, and the smaller, undecked boats, square-rigged on a single mast, with the shotters, tramellers and hookers of the documents. This may well have been generally true, but at least some crayers were fitted out as fully rigged ships, for in 1536 a crayer of Sandwich was attacked by pirates off Hythe and 'broke both his topmasts'.¹⁸

The smaller boats at Hythe were sometimes referred to by the generic name of 'stade boats', the Stade being the open beach where they were hauled up by means of 'vernes' or capstans worked by horses. These capstans, as well as lodges on the Stade, are a common item in wills. William Rust's seven 'sea horses' presumably earned their keep by turning them.

Much more widely distributed than boats, vernes or lodges were nets and lines. Six different types of net and two types of line were in use. Flews and shot-nets were bequeathed by a majority of fishermen; sprat and tramel nets were also in common use; and deepings and seine-nets receive an occasional mention, as do harbour hooks and small hooks.

The uses of these pieces of equipment and the routine of the fishing year can be gathered to some extent from comparison with the practice of the Brighton fishermen, which was described in detail in 1580.¹⁹ There the fishing year was divided into seasons called 'fares', some for local in-shore fishing and some in deeper waters. They may be represented in tabular fashion as follows:

¹⁷ H. Lovegrove, 'Shipping in a Sixteenth-Century Plan of Winchelsea and Rye', *Mariners' Mirror*, xxxiii (1947), 187-98. See also: *Rye Port Books* (Sussex Record Society., lxiv (1966), ed. R. F. Dell), xxxvii-xxxix.

¹⁸ *Cal.S.P., Hen. 8.*, xii, Part 1, No. 718 (iii).

¹⁹ C. Webb and A. E. Wilson (eds.), *Elizabethan Brighton: the Ancient Customs* (1952).

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<i>Date</i>	<i>Fare</i>	<i>Place</i>	<i>Catch</i>	<i>Tonnage of Boat</i>
Feb.-Apr.	Tucknett	Upon coast	Plaice	c. 3
Apr.-June	Shotnett	To sea	Mackerel	6-26
May-June	Drawnett	By the shore	Mackerel	c. 3
Summer	Harbour	—	Conger	c. 8
June-Sept.	Scarborow	Scarborough	Cod	18-40
Sept.-Nov.	Yarmothe	Yarmouth	Herring	15-40
Oct.-mid-Dec.	Cok	—	Herring	2-6
Nov.-end Dec.	Flew	—	Herring	8-20

Of these eight, at least four were followed at Hythe, viz. shotnet, harbour, Scarborough and Yarmouth fares, but plaice were caught with tramels and there was an additional season for sprats. Both these latter had been features of the Rye fishery since the thirteenth century but never spread further west. The sprat season was not particularly valuable, but tramelling was more important. The interests of the local tramellers were vigorously defended by the local authorities against various threats from foreign fishermen and English trawlers during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, and from their regulations and representations various details emerge. The season for tramels and draw-nets ran from 16th March to 31st October.²⁰ The boats used were small, of only five tons, as we have seen, and carried a crew of seven.²¹ The net consisted of a triple wall of mesh, resting on the bottom and of up to 18 furlongs in length, in which plaice, soles and other bottom-feeding fish entangled themselves.²² It was essentially a complicated, vulnerable and expensive adaptation of the drift-nets used for catching herring and mackerel, and it is a mark of conservatism that it persisted so long after the introduction of the more economical and effective trawl.

While the smaller boats were catching plaice in the bay, the larger boats drifted for mackerel until early summer, when some at least sailed north for the Scarborough voyage. Originally this seems to have been devoted to catching herrings. There are references to the herring fishery there in the fourteenth century, and in 1412 the earliest Hythe municipal records show that John Leghe paid local custom for five lasts of herring of 'Schardeburgh fare'.²³ In 1528 Hythe, Folkestone and Romney between them sent 20 crayers on this 'North Seas' voyage, and it is an additional sign of the traditionalism of Cinque Ports fishermen that though they contributed in all about half of the North Seas

²⁰ J. M. Baines, *Historic Hastings* (1955), 227

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² P.R.O., S.P.D., Jas. 1, xoi, No. 12.

²³ H.M.C., *Fourth Report* (1874), Appendix, 435.

fleet on this occasion, they sent not a single vessel on the newer and more distant Scottish and Iceland voyages.²⁴ The emphasis at Scarborough later changed from herring to cod and ling. In 1565 a memorandum about the proposed rebuilding of Scarborough pier stated that 'the moste store of this Coste, Lyng and Haberdyne, is there made and dried by reason the fyshers straungers and others that fishe in thes northe Seas do theare unlade theire ffishe new takyn and fishith agayne of newe once or twise and unladith theare before they departe awaye ladyn'.²⁵ In 1580 the Brighton boats took herring nets but probably used them mainly to catch bait for the lines with which they fished for cod—the lines of 'small hooks' that the wills refer to in contrast to 'harbour hooks' used at the same season for conger fishing in home waters.

After the Scarborough voyage followed the other expedition to distant waters, Yarmouth fare, which traditionally occupied the bulk of the Cinque Ports fishermen for the six-week season and was probably still the most profitable of the year's ventures. When the Herring Fair was over, the boats returned to Hythe and continued to fish for herring in the Channel until the end of the year imposed a brief lull in activity until the spring.

The profits of each voyage were distributed by a system of shares, so many to the boat, so many to the gear and so many to the crew. The system varied in detail from port to port and voyage to voyage, but some version of it seems to have been normal in all Channel ports and dates back at least to the twelfth century. The understanding seems to have been originally that each member of the crew contributed a proportion of the nets, a 'fare' or 'mansfare', which at Brighton was either three or four and at Hythe probably four for herring and mackerel nets (it apparently did not apply to tramels). Testators clearly regarded this as the minimum to set up a servant or apprentice as an independent fisherman, but many possessed a great deal more. Some were capable of fitting out a complete voyage with comparatively little aid. Thomas Staple in 1520 left a crayer, a new 'hoker', a boat, tramel and sprat nets, 30 mackerel nets, and 30 herring nets. A Brighton boat normally carried about 80 shot-nets for mackerel fishing and about 70 flews and norward nets on Yarmouth fare. Consequently a place had to be found for hands who contributed nothing but their labour. A medium-sized shotter required a crew of ten in addition to her master, and a Yarmouth boat about twelve. At Brighton it was forbidden to make up the complement by employing wage-labour, and crew and nets were counted separately in calculating shares, one man

²⁴ *Cal. S.P., Hen. 8*, iv, Part 2, No. 5101.

²⁵ *P.R.O., S.P.D., Eliz., xxxviii*, No. 47. Haberdine, according to the *New English Dictionary*, is a variety of large cod, salted or dried.

FOUR KENT TOWNS AT THE END OF THE MIDDLE AGES

receiving the same as three or four nets. In the Cinque Ports it seems to have been common for fishermen to hire 'servants' on a more or less permanent basis. At Hastings there were 57 'servants' among 239 seafarers in 1565, and at Rye 450 out of 785 (this is probably a scribal error: other estimates of the seafaring population in the Elizabethan period are around 300). For Hythe itself there is no list which divides seamen into categories, but 12 out of the 75 mariners and fishermen who left wills gave fishing gear to servants or, in two cases, to an apprentice, a significantly higher proportion than obtained among the rest of the population.

But even among the townsfolk at large, servants and wage-earners formed a large group. Very few made a will, and though some received legacies (usually among the gentry or where the testator was childless), they are too few to draw conclusions. Many in this category were no doubt domestics, some apprentices, journeymen or farm labourers. In general, as returns to the 1524 Lay Subsidy show, they made up a large section of the town population: at Chichester 42 per cent. of the men were assessed on wages, usually £2 per annum or less, and this seems to have been a fairly constant proportion over the years, for in 1380 30 per cent. of the men assessed to the poll tax had been servants.²⁶

Beneath them still, at the base of the social pyramid, were the casual workers and paupers, too impoverished to attract the tax collector or to aspire to make a will. In the wills of their richer neighbours there are hints that they were not few. The making of a will served as an opportunity to make up for deeds of piety left undone in the testator's lifetime, and while these usually take the form of payments for masses for the deceased's soul or contributions to the upkeep of the church, the poor are not forgotten, and it seems a general assumption that the executors can always find six stalwart paupers to bear the coffin for a penny or forty deserving recipients for a dole of bread and ale.

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²⁶ Julian Cornwall, *op. cit.* The poll tax assessment is printed in *Sussex Arch. Coll.*, xxiv (1872), 67-60.