

Reputation and economic performance in English medieval towns, 1250-1550

[Dr Catherine Casson \(/staff/profiles/business/catherine-casson.aspx\)](/staff/profiles/business/catherine-casson.aspx)

Today, when English towns and cities face a decline in their established economy or competition from other locations, urban planners and developers often look towards retail and cultural developments as the solution for improving economic performance. Cities that played an important role in the Industrial Revolution, such as Leeds, Nottingham and Birmingham, have recently redefined themselves as retail and leisure destinations by investing in new museums, art galleries and shopping malls.

Redevelopment requires a re-evaluation of a city's attributes. Modern York, for example, is known for its narrow medieval streets and small boutique shops, but these characteristics are now believed to deter the establishment of many large chain stores and cause shoppers to abandon York in favour of Leeds.

This project suggests that reputation could play a part in economic performance, and that policy-makers may have a role in supporting those types of institution that encourage it. The project uses a modern economic and social definition of reputation. An individual or institution possesses reputation when they can confidently be expected by others to behave honestly. Good reputation builds trust and encourages people to participate in, or trade with, the reputable individual or institution. This concept of reputation has been used by economic historians to analyse the evolution of modern commerce.

This project will be the first to apply this modern concept systematically to the medieval period, presenting a comparative study of how the civic authorities of seven towns, London, Norwich, Colchester, Nottingham, Leicester, Bristol and York, used reputation as an economic and political asset during the period 1250-1550. Administrative, literary and archaeological sources reveal that civic authorities sought to engender trust and confidence in the economy, governance and society of their town amongst a range of people. In doing so they hoped to develop a good reputation for their town that could help it overcome the economic upheavals and political turmoil of the medieval period.

Uniquely this project examines how these reputation-building strategies caused towns to prevent, halt or reverse economic decline. The project examines whether changes in the fortunes of towns were linked to differences in reputation and reputation-building strategies. The economic performance of each town is measured by the values of its recorded wealth in taxation returns, the level of business shown in customs accounts of overseas trade, the value of rents, the number of new buildings being constructed and the number and range of new professions emerging. Comparisons are made across towns and over time.

While today's urban planners and developers focus mainly on retail and cultural developments as the solution to restore civic fortunes, this project argues that the civic authorities of medieval English towns adopted six strategies: regulating trade; competitive pricing; following royal requirements; maintaining the right to self-govern; infrastructure and esteem.

Research into this topic has already been undertaken using sources from London, Norwich and Leicester for the period 1400-1500, the findings from which have been presented at conferences including the Economic History Society Conference 2012 and the University of Oxford Medieval Economic and Social History Seminar. Results so far indicate that there were some variations between towns in the reputation-building strategies used, for example London and Norwich were more concerned about maintaining good relations with the crown than Leicester. Variation also occurred over time, especially in the extent to which civic authorities sought to maintain their right to self-government.

Through its examination of a wide range of reputation-building strategies this project unites issues that are often distributed across different bodies of literature, for example political history, economic history and social history. Its analysis is informed by a range of evidence, covering different types of sources, a number of locations and a broad period. Much debate is present today regarding how to improve urban economic performance, yet the most innovative methods may have come from the reputation-building strategies of medieval towns.