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Charters and Inter-Urban Networks: England, 1439-1449*

On the surface, there is very little insight to be gained from royal charters to later medieval English towns.[1] The preambles justifying the town's receipt of extended privileges are highly formulaic, with virtually all charters highlighting the town's poverty, loss of inhabitants, and long-standing service to the king.[2] The newly-granted powers and liberties were often set out in a vague or confusing manner; indeed, it was not uncommon for towns to request further charters from the king to clarify ambiguities in previous grants.[3] Some of the privileges obtained were significant, but, more often than not, royal charters simply validated existing practices and jurisdictions.[4] Moreover, although charters possessed a veneer of permanence, the terms they contained were always subject to royal pleasure.[5] Towns whose citizens angered the Crown or promoted widespread disorder could have their charters temporarily revoked, and their elected civic officers replaced with royal wardens; in addition, the king could cancel rights he granted to a town if they reduced the powers exercised by others, as the town of Beverley found out to its

*I would like to thank John Watts and Ingrid Rembold for their comments on earlier drafts of this article. I also received many helpful questions from the audience at the Institute of Historical Research, London, where this paper was first presented.

[1] Here, a 'charter' is defined broadly, including both royal charters and letters patent. In this, I follow British Borough Charters 1307-1660, ed. M. Weinbaum (Cambridge, 1943), as well as municipal archives, which rarely distinguish between charters and letters patent in their cataloguing schema.

[2] There are too many individual examples to cite, but for the general formula, see A.R. Bridbury, 'English Provincial Towns in the Later Middle Ages', Economic History Review, New Ser., xxxiv (1981), pp. 6-11, 16-17; R. Horrox, 'Urban Patronage and Patrons in the Fifteenth Century', in R.A. Griffiths, ed., Patronage, the Crown and the Provinces in Later Medieval England (Gloucester, 1981), p. 145.

[3] See, e.g., Shrewsbury's charter of 1446 in C[alendar of the] P[atent] R[olls]: Henry VI (6 vols., HMSO, Norwich, 1901-10), 1441-6, p. 411; Colchester's of 1447 in C[alendar of the] Ch[arter] R[olls] (6 vols., HMSO, London, 1903-27), vi. 83-5; and Rochester's of 1461 (ibid., vi. 176-80).

[4] Bridbury, 'English Provincial Towns', p. 11; S. Reynolds, An Introduction to the History of English Medieval Towns (Oxford, 1977), p. 116; ead., 'The History of the Idea of Incorporation or Legal Personality: A Case of Fallacious Teleology', in S. Reynolds, Ideas and Solidarities of the Medieval Laity (Aldershot, 1995), pp. 1-20; S. Rigby and E. Ewan, 'Government, Power and Authority 1300-1540', in D.M. Palliser, ed., The Cambridge Urban History of Britain, I: 600-1540 (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 298-300.

[5] This is stressed in C.M. Barron, London in the Later Middle Ages: Government and People 1200-1500 (Oxford, 2004), pp. 10, 30-34, 37, 41-2.

detriment in 1416 when the archbishop of York forced the king to renege on his charter allowing Beverley's municipal officials to serve as justices of the peace.[6] It is little wonder, then, that modern scholars studying the political history of English towns have turned their attention away from the charters that dominated urban historiography in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries, relying instead on financial accounts, custumals, assembly rolls, minute books, and official correspondence.[7]

The modern indifference to the medieval urban charter, however, stands greatly at odds to the attitude of contemporary townspeople. These documents were highly prized and considered to be worth the considerable investment of money and time required to obtain them. In 1463 it cost Exeter's civic government 116s 11d to cover the expenses of two representatives sent to London to secure a charter confirming previous royal grants to the city.[8] Charters that were not merely confirmatory, but granted significant new privileges, could be considerably more costly. A 1461 charter that turned Canterbury into a freestanding county cost the corporation £35 19s 2d.[9] In 1440, Kingston-upon-Hull received two charters, one incorporating the town as a county in and of itself, and another allowing for a sword to be carried before the mayor. Richard Scoles and Richard Anson spent twenty-eight days in London lobbying for the

[6] Famous instances of royal revocation of urban charters include York in 1405, Bishop's Lynn in 1415, Norwich in 1436 and 1443, and Canterbury and the Cinque Ports in 1471. For Beverley, see CPR 1413-16, p. 287; CPR 1416-22, p. 31; R.E. Horrox, 'Medieval Beverley', in K.J. Allison, ed., Victoria County History: A History of the County of York East Riding (9 vols., Oxford, 1989-), vi. 29-30.

[7] E.g., P. Fleming, 'Making History: Culture, Politics and The Maire of Bristowe is Kalendar', in D.L. Biggs, S.D. Michalove, and A.C. Reeves, eds., Reputation and Representation in Fifteenth-Century Europe (Leiden, 2004), pp. 289-316; H. Carrel, 'Food, Drink and Public Order in the London Liber Albus', Urban History, xxxiii (2006), pp. 176-94; D.J.S. O'Brien, '"The Veray Registre of All Trouthe": The Content, Function, and Character of the Civic Registers of London and York c.1274-c.1482', (Univ. of York D.Phil. thesis, 1999); J.P. Croft, 'The Custumals of the Cinque Ports c.1290-c.1500: Studies in the Cultural Production of the Urban Record', (Univ. of Kent at Canterbury D.Phil. thesis, 1997); and A. Butcher, 'The Functions of Script in the Speech Community of a Late Medieval Town, c.1300-1550', in J. Crick and A. Walsham, eds., The Uses of Script and Print, 1300-1700 (Cambridge, 2004), pp. 157-70. For the earlier study of urban charters, see discussion below.

[8] Exeter, Devon Record Office, Exeter City Archives, Receiver's Account, 2-3 Edward IV.

[9] Canterbury Cathedral Archives, CC-F/A/2, fo. 67v.

new charters, and, when all was said and done, Hull's government tallied an astounding £238 7s 4d in expenses for securing the grants.[10]

Once obtained, urban charters became deeply ingrained in the civic imagination. Urban governments sometimes paid for their new charters to be illustrated with decorative insignia or images of the king, and always preserved them for succeeding generations in a municipal archive.[11] The text of the charters was often copied into books or rolls listing the town's customs; civic governments sometimes took the opportunity to illustrate or rubricate these custumal copies of charters, as well.[12] Nor, once copied and decorated, did charters lose their political significance. In 1469, for example, two citizens of Hull interrupted the annual mayoral election to demand 'that the Charters and the ordinauncez of the Toun myght be sene and Redd' by the commons of the town.[13] To these residents of Hull, the town's charters were not dead documents, but important reminders of their shared history and of the rights belonging to its citizens. Perhaps most tellingly, the annalistic civic chronicles produced in the town of Coventry, with surviving examples dating from the fifteenth to nineteenth centuries, all begin their narratives in the year 1345-6—the date of the town's famous charter of incorporation.[14] Charters were signposts of urban public memory, against which townspeople plotted the history of their urban corporation.

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[10] Charters and Letters Patent Granted to Kingston upon Hull, ed. and trans. J.R. Boyle (Hull, 1905), pp. 47-9; H[ull] H[istory] C[entre], C BRF/2/356, Chamberlains' Accounts, 1439-40.

[11] For the illumination of urban charters, see C.D. Liddy, War, Politics and Finance in Late Medieval English Towns: Bristol, York and the Crown, 1350-1400 (Woodbridge, 2005), pp. 55-7, and E.A. Danbury, 'The Decoration of the Doncaster Borough Charters', in Doncaster: A Borough and its Charters (Doncaster, 1994), pp. 26-46.

[12] See, e.g., HHC, C BRE/1/2.

[13] HHC, C BRB/1, fo. 113v.

[14] These chronicles are described in R.W. Ingram, ed., Records of Early English Drama: Coventry (Toronto, 1981), pp. xxxvii-xli. The earliest surviving example is Coventry History Centre, Aylesford Annal, PA 351, dorse, printed in P. Fleming, Coventry and the Wars of the Roses, Dugdale Society Occasional Papers, l (2011), pp. 24-35.

It is apparent, then, that English civic governments and the people they ruled attached great significance to urban charters. It is less clear why they did so. Historians have posited several explanations for the attachment of later medieval citizens to their town's charters. Most of these, as we will see, depend on viewing each town as a discrete unit, concerned principally with its own relationship to the Crown and with its own internal politics. Here, it will be proposed that charters, instead, signified that a particular town and its residents had joined other towns endowed with similar liberties in a powerful network capable of exercising influence on the national stage. Royal charters, or at least particular types of charters granted in particular circumstances, may have served as reminders to later generations of townspeople of their borough's past political glories, and of its role in a politically important inter-urban network. In the pages that follow, we will explore a network approach to urban charters through a number of different angles: firstly, by discussing the ways in which social network analysis can be used to supplement the existing historiography of urban charters; secondly, by identifying patterns in urban charter acquisition during the fifteenth century; thirdly, by examining one particular period featuring a glut of urban charters—1439-49—and uncovering the political relationships that tied together the towns that received charters in these years; and, fourthly, by determining how the study of inter-urban networks could influence historians' understanding of later medieval English politics more generally and of England's place within wider European narratives.

To the casual observer, it may well seem that urban charters have been discussed and debated ad nauseam, and are not in need of a historiographical renaissance. For historians and antiquaries

working before the second World War, charters were the bedrock of urban history.[15] The work of these early historians is exemplified in the two-volume Town Life in the Fifteenth Century written by Alice Stopford Green in 1894. Green presented the urban history of later medieval England as a progressive, and only occasionally stunted, accumulation of civic autonomy through chartered liberties. Urban charters ensured freedom from the surrounding feudal landscape, and hence represented a great march towards modernity. Therefore, far from being unnecessary status symbols, charters were important historical milestones. They were milestones, however, that removed towns and townspeople from the environment around them; as Green wrote, 'clinging to privileges won by common effort that separated it from the rest of the world—the town remained isolated and self-dependent'.[16]

Subsequent research on urban charters has taken a less Whiggish tone, but still views them as vehicles through which civic governments and townspeople sought to achieve a desirable distance from royal government. Many twentieth-century historians, such as Caroline Barron and A.P.M. Wright, regard urban charters as the product of a largely antagonistic relationship between the Crown and its towns. During periods of royal weakness, towns were able to gain extensions of their privileges of autonomous governance, but these were not available from more competent kings who did not wish to see their power eroded through the creation of independent jurisdictions.[17] Although Wright and Barron's viewpoint still underlies a

[15] E.g., R. Brady, An Historical Treatise of Cities, and Burghs or Boroughs (2nd edn., London, 1704); T. Madox, Firma Burgi, or an Historical Essay Concerning the Cities Towns and Buroughs of England. Taken from Records (London, 1726); H.A. Merewether and A.J. Stephens, A History of the Boroughs and Municipal Corporations of the United Kingdom, from the Earliest to the Present Time (3 vols., London, 1835); J. Tait, The Medieval English Borough: Studies on its Origins and Constitutional History (Manchester, 1936); M. Weinbaum, The Incorporation of Boroughs (Manchester, 1937).

[16] A.S. Green, Town Life in the Fifteenth Century, (2 vols., London, 1894), i. 125; see also i. 246-7.

[17] Barron, London in the Later Middle Ages, pp. 9-42; A.P.M. Wright, 'The Relations between the King's Government and the English Cities and Boroughs in the Fifteenth Century', (Univ. of Oxford D.Phil. thesis, 1965), pp. 132-59, 393-6. Less strident variations can be found in D.M. Palliser, 'Towns and the English State, 1066-

great deal of work on urban history, it was contested in the mid-2000s by the work of Christian Liddy, who argues that charters to towns represented urban independence and royal weakness, but were instead the culmination of a political partnership between the king and his urban subjects.[18] The charters studied by Liddy, those granted to Bristol in 1373 and to York in 1393 and 1396, did not divorce the civic governments concerned from the exercise of royal power, but integrated them more firmly within it, as municipal officers began to operate as royal sheriffs and justices of the peace.[19] This perspective, while dramatically altering the way in which historians view urban charters, has nevertheless kept the study of urban politics firmly focused on the town-Crown relationship.

Another school of historical argument regarding urban charters, visible in the work of Stephen Rigby, implies that charters were sought by civic governments usually for the purpose of bolstering their position vis-à-vis lesser urban citizens, and as such related primarily to the rhythms of internal urban politics.[20] Charters granted new legal and financial powers to civic governments, increasing the control that elite merchants holding civic office could exercise over those they ruled. It was royal letters patent giving JP jurisdiction to the mayor, aldermen, and recorder of London in 1443-4 that prompted a famed rebellion among the artisans of the capital,

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1500', in J.R. Maddicott and D.M. Palliser, eds., The Medieval State: Essays Presented to James Campbell (London, 2000), pp. 127-45, and L. Attreed, *The King's Towns: Identity and Survival in Late Medieval English Boroughs* (New York, 2001), pp. 4-6,13-14, 17-18, 33-44, 49-56, 305, 313-15.

[18] Liddy, War, Politics and Finance, pp. 190-212. For the use of a similar 'partnership' model for the Carolingian and early modern periods, respectively, see B.H. Rosenwein, Negotiating Space: Power, Restraint, and Privileges of Immunity in Early Medieval Europe (Manchester, 1999), pp. 6, 215-16, and R. Tittler, The Reformation and the Towns in England (Oxford, 1998), pp. 101-2, 178-9; although note the tensions observed by P. Withington, The Politics of Commonwealth: Citizens and Freemen in Early Modern England (Cambridge, 2005), pp. 38, 48, 52-3, 64-7.

[19] Liddy, War, Politics and Finance, pp. 210-12.

[20] S. Rigby, 'Urban "Oligarchy" in Late Medieval England', in J.A.F. Thomson, ed., Towns and Townspeople in the Fifteenth Century (Gloucester, 1988), pp. 79-80; Rigby and Ewan, 'Government, Power and Authority', pp. 310-11; Tait, Medieval English Borough, p. 324. See also J. Lee, 'Urban Policy and Urban Political Culture: Henry VII and his Towns', Historical Research, lxxxii (2009), pp. 493-510, and H. Swanson, Medieval British Towns (Basingstoke, 1999), pp. 83, 95-6, 106.

who felt that their opportunity to contest civic government policies had been circumscribed.[21] Civic governments also sought royal charters to change procedures through which municipal officers were elected, redefine eligibility requirements for civic office-holding, and alter the configuration of councils governing the town.[22] In some instances, these charters could broaden the participation of the citizenry in civic political life, as occurred, for example, at York in 1464 and 1473.[23] Most often, however, they limited the number of citizens who were involved in municipal decision-making, as became particularly apparent in charters from the later fifteenth century.[24]

Each of these approaches has contributed much to our understanding of the role played by royal grants in later medieval urban society, but all have emphasised particular aspects of urban political life while ignoring others. Urban charters have been depicted either as indicative of the relationship between individual towns and the Crown, or as pertaining to the town as an isolated unit occupied with its own internal civic politics. But these do not constitute the totality of urban political experiences. In addition to interactions with the king and with the lesser citizens of their own town, urban elites were frequently in contact with wealthy merchants and civic officers from other towns. Such horizontal links between towns were fostered through shared participation in a vibrant national political community, manifested most visibly in parliament.[25] Royal charters to towns were products of this communication between towns, and

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[21] C.M. Barron, 'Ralph Holland and the London Radicals, 1438-1444', in R. Holt and G. Rosser, eds., The English Medieval Town: A Reader in English Urban History, 1200-1540 (London, 1990), pp. 173-82.
[22] S. Reynolds, '1483: Gloucester and Town Government in the Middle Ages', in Reynolds, Ideas and Solidarities, pp. 49-50.
[23] CPR 1461-7, p. 366; CPR 1467-77, p. 416; J.I. Kermode, 'Obvious Observations on the Formation of Oligarchies in Late Medieval English Towns', in Thomson, ed., Towns and Townspeople, p. 89; E. Miller, 'Medieval York: The Later Middle Ages', in P.M. Tillott, ed., Victoria County History of Yorkshire: The City of York (Oxford, 1961), p. 71.
[24] Rigby, 'Urban Oligarchy', pp. 74-81; Lee, 'Urban Policy', pp. 499-504.
[25] E. Hartrich, 'Town, Crown, and Urban System: The Position of Towns in the English Polity, 1413-71', (Univ. of Oxford D.Phil. thesis, 2014).

can be used to trace the influence in national politics of a shifting group of urban actors sharing common experiences of commerce and municipal government—an entity we shall call an inter-urban network.

To view late medieval English towns as part of an inter-urban network is to re-evaluate the motivations behind the political actions taken by townspeople. The historians cited above have taken an individualistic approach to municipal decision-making, in which those acting on behalf of the town rationally calculate the advantages to be accrued to that particular locality (or a group of individuals within it) and act accordingly. A network approach, however, posits that the decisions made by individuals or particular groups are affected significantly by the actions taken by other people and entities with whom they are in contact (either directly or indirectly); as such, social interactions replace rationality as the most important framework guiding the choices made by people or groups.[26] Civic governments forming part of an inter-urban network, therefore, sought charters not (just) because of the material or political benefits that could be gained from the documents themselves, which were often far from commensurate with the effort and money spent to obtain them, but because other civic governments in their network had received similar charters and they wished both to follow a collectively-coordinated policy and to demonstrate their continued membership of the network by gaining a new charter of their own.

More broadly speaking, by viewing fifteenth-century English towns as part of a network and not as individual actors, it becomes possible to gain a greater appreciation of urban influence on English politics. In Friends of Friends, anthropologist Jeremy Boissevain argued that individuals and groups hold power less through their formal positions in political organisations

[26] D. Knoke and J.H. Kuklinski, 'Network Analysis: Basic Concepts', in G. Thompson, J. Frances, R. Levaĉić, and J. Mitchell, eds., Markets, Hierarchies and Networks: The Coordination of Social Life (London, 1991), p. 173.

and more through their ability to maintain a wide-ranging set of friends, allies, and acquaintances; political goals can then be achieved by mobilising this network of contacts into action.[27] Even before Boissevain, however, historians of later medieval England long accepted that the exercise of power was, fundamentally, a matter of assembling political networks. Historians following in the footsteps of K.B. McFarlane have demonstrated that the influence exerted by individual nobles on the national political stage was, in part, the result of carefully-cultivated affinities of well-wishers in the localities.[28] But, equally important as these vertical networks between noble and gentleman were the horizontal networks that the gentry constructed amongst themselves. In marrying one another's kin, acting as each other's witnesses and feoffees at law, and serving together in county administration, gentry from a particular locality built up a sense of solidarity and a strong collective power base, allowing them, on many occasions, to dictate the course of local politics and even to play a considerable role in determining the success or failure of aspirants to the throne during the Wars of the Roses.[29]

Towns and townspeople, though, fit rather awkwardly into these networks of noble and gentry power that were so fundamental to English political life. Although the world of noble patronage was certainly not alien to townspeople, the participation of townspeople in aristocratic networks was discouraged by civic governments.[30] A 1442-3 ordinance in Hull, for example, ordered that no citizen who accepted fees or clothing from gentlemen should hold office in the

[27] J. Boissevain, Friends of Friends: Networks, Manipulators and Coalitions (Oxford, 1974).
[28] K.B. McFarlane, The Nobility of Later Medieval England (Oxford, 1973); id., 'Parliament and "Bastard Feudalism"', in id., England in the Fifteenth Century: Collected Essays (London, 1981), pp. 17-21; id., 'The Wars of the Roses', in ibid., pp. 231-61; C. Carpenter, Locality and Polity: A Study of Warwickshire Landed Society, 1401-1499 (Cambridge, 1992); S. Walker, The Lancastrian Affinity 1361-1399 (Oxford, 1990); S. Payling, Political Society in Lancastrian England: The Greater Gentry of Nottinghamshire (Oxford, 1991). The pervasiveness of McFarlane's influence is discussed in C. Richmond, 'After McFarlane', History, lxviii (1983), pp. 46-7, 58-60.
[29] See, esp., Carpenter, Locality and Polity, pp. 479-83, 516, 637.
[30] For townspeople and aristocratic society, see Horrox, 'Urban Patronage', pp. 145-6, and ead., 'The Urban Gentry in the Fifteenth Century', in Thomson, ed., Towns and Townspeople, pp. 22-44.

town or counsel the mayor, and this sentiment was re-iterated in a letter patent received by the town in the same year.[31] Moreover, while some urban officeholders held significant rural estates, many members of urban elites lacked substantial lands in the countryside, meaning that they were not a particularly strong presence in the world of enfeoffment and land law that helped to knit together the gentry networks that held such sway in local and national politics.[32] In these circumstances, it is no wonder that Lorraine Attreed and others who have attempted to situate townspeople within networks of provincial patronage and noble affinities conclude that civic governments and those they ruled were minor and comparatively powerless actors in an English political society based on landholding.[33]

As only fitful participants in the noble and gentry networks through which historians believe that real power was exercised, civic governments easily become cast as politically isolated entities that pursued the extension of their own liberties but had little means for exercising greater influence on how English government was run. If we see towns, instead, as forming their own network of political actors, the situation alters considerably. When townspeople pooled their resources they made for a formidable political force. Wool merchants and cloth merchants from different towns, organised as the Company of the Staple at Calais and the Merchant Adventurers, respectively, lent substantial sums of money to the Crown and played

[31] HHC, C BRE/1/2, fo. 23v; Charters to Hull, pp. 52-3. See also N. Bacon, The Annalls of Ipswche. The Lawes Customes and Government of the Same. Collected out of ye Records Bookes and Writings of that Towne, ed. W.H. Richardson (Ipswich, 1884), p. 113; Horrox, 'Urban Patronage', p. 157; The Records of the Borough of Northampton, ed. C.A. Markham and J.C. Cox (2 vols., Northampton, 1898), i. 297-8; and Horrox, 'Urban Gentry', p. 24.

[32] For discussion of the position of 'merchant class' vis-à-vis the gentry, see Horrox, 'Urban Gentry', pp. 22-44; J. Kermode, Medieval Merchants: York, Beverley and Hull in the Later Middle Ages (Cambridge, 1998); and S.L. Thrupp, The Merchant Class of Medieval London 1300-1500 (Chicago, IL, 1948). It should be noted that London merchants, at least, became a greater presence in landholding society in the late fifteenth century: M.K. McIntosh, Autonomy and Community: The Royal Manor of Havering, 1200-1500 (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 224-8, 236-7.

[33] Attreed, *King's Towns*; Horrox, 'Urban Patronage', pp. 145-66. For a less negative view of urban participation in patronage networks, see C.F. Patterson, Urban Patronage in Early Modern England: Corporate Boroughs, the Landed Elite, and the Crown, 1580-1640 (Stanford, CA, 1999).

a significant role in the formation of royal foreign policy.[34] G.L. Harriss and J.L. Bolton have shown, moreover, that the Calais Staplers were pivotal in securing the throne for Edward IV, since the liquid cash at their command and their ability to pay (and thus gain the allegiance of) the permanent garrison at Calais made them crucial components to the Yorkist military victory over Henry VI's supporters.[35] As we shall see, the same merchants who were active in powerful commercial lobbies were also mayors, sheriffs, aldermen, and bailiffs for civic governments and represented their towns in parliament, creating an urban network committed to both the extension of municipal government and the advancement of particular trading interests. The individual interests of participants in this sector sometimes clashed, but, nevertheless, the experiences of commerce and civic governance shared by these urban/mercantile elites created a framework within which prominent townspeople participated in English political life. Urban residents formed their own network of political actors capable of exerting collective influence on national politics; this network interacted with the aristocratic political networks discussed earlier, but involved different participants and cemented the ties between its members through different means. For townspeople, parliament and mercantile organisations, rather than the county court, served as the chief venues for interaction, and personal links were made through joint commercial or shipping ventures rather than through receipt of livery.[36]

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[34] A.F. Sutton, The Mercery of London: Trade, Goods and People, 1130-1578 (Aldershot, 2005); E.E. Power, 'The Wool Trade in the Fifteenth Century', in E.E. Power and M.M. Postan, eds., Studies in English Trade in the Fifteenth Century (London, 1933), pp. 72-89; W.I. Haward, 'The Financial Transactions between the Lancastrian Government and the Merchants of the Staple from 1449 to 1461', in ibid., pp. 293-320; G.L. Harriss, Cardinal Beaufort: A Study of Lancastrian Ascendancy and Decline (Oxford, 1988), pp. 44-5, 134-5, 193-4, 197-9, 206-7, 277-8, 296, 304, 326-8; T.H. Lloyd, The English Wool Trade in the Middle Ages (Cambridge, 1977), pp. 257-80.
[35] G.L. Harriss, 'The Struggle for Calais: An Aspect of the Rivalry between Lancaster and York', ante, lxxv (1960), pp. 30-53; J.L. Bolton, 'The City and the Crown, 1456-61', London Journal, xii (1986), pp. 11-24.
[36] For urban/mercantile parliamentary activity in the later middle ages, see Liddy, 'Estate of Merchants', pp. 331-45; id., War, Politics and Finance, pp. 140-89; W.M. Ormrod, 'Parliament, Political Economy and State Formation in Later Medieval England', in P. Hoppenbrouwers, A. Janse, and R. Stein, eds., Power and Persuasion: Essays on the Art of State Building in Honour of W.P. Blockmans (Turnhout, 2010), pp. 132-7; G. Dodd, 'The Calais Staple and

Attempts to trace this English inter-urban political network, however, prove difficult. Towns in continental Europe left behind much richer records of their networked political activities, because these took place within formal associations, such as the Lombard League, the Hanseatic League, and the Four Members of Flanders, that held their own regular assemblies and possessed their own administrative apparatuses.[37] With the exception of the Cinque Ports—which held a Brodhull, or assembly, in which participating towns and their affiliated 'members' created their own ordinances and constructed collective policy—England did not possess formally-constituted urban associative groups; interaction between residents of different towns tended to occur more informally, either through private mercantile ties or through encounters taking place outside parliament, meetings of the royal courts, and other state-sponsored events, and was thus less likely to produce extensive documentation.[38] That English inter-urban networks were less likely to be recorded, and tended to be based on private friendships between individuals rather than on public relationships between institutions, did not necessarily make them less influential or less worthy of analysis; indeed, the power exercised by a political network often stems from the very fact that it is a 'members-only' club whose activities are impenetrable to outsiders.[39] There are tools that historians can use to trace the membership of late medieval England's informal inter-urban networks—correspondence between civic governments, visits by urban representatives to other towns or to nodal points where political

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the Parliament of May 1382', ante, cxvii (2002), pp. 96-102; and P.R. Cavill, The English Parliaments of Henry VII, 1485-1504 (Oxford, 2009), 154-70, 175-8, 182-6.

[37] E.g., G. Raccagni, The Lombard League, 1167-1225 (Oxford, 2010); P. Dollinger, The German Hansa, trans. D.S. Ault and S.H. Steinberg (London, 1970); W.P. Blockmans, 'A Typology of Representative Institutions in Late Medieval Europe', Journal of Medieval History, iv (1978), pp. 196-209; id., 'Voracious States and Obstructing Cities: An Aspect of State Formation in Preindustrial Europe', Theory and Society, xviii (1989), pp. 738, 741-2.

[38] For the Cinque Ports, see K.M.E. Murray, The Constitutional History of the Cinque Ports (Manchester, 1935), and A Calendar of the White and Black Books of the Cinque Ports 1432-1955, ed. F. Hull (Historical Manuscripts Commission, 1966).

[39] G. Thompson, J. Frances, R. Levaĉić, and J. Mitchell, 'Introduction', in iid., eds., Markets, Hierarchies and Networks, pp. 14-15.

contacts were likely to made (such as the royal court or parliament), business partnerships between merchants from different towns, or wills that might demonstrate personal relationships between citizens from different communities.[40] Such sources, however, demonstrate contact and communication between towns, but do not necessarily show that such communication engendered political action.[41] Also, not all towns are blessed with a surviving municipal archive extensive enough to provide these types of evidence for interpersonal links. Historians of late medieval England are handicapped further by the fact that the Company of the Staple at Calais, the most prominent mercantile conglomerate in late medieval England and undoubtedly a significant hub for interactions within the inter-urban network, has left behind virtually no records of its internal organisation.

It is here that the urban charter comes in, not only as a product of inter-urban communication, but as a means of tracing the extent and operation of the inter-urban political network in late medieval England. One of the key means by which social scientists explore the operation of a social system is to follow the diffusion of a selected 'innovation'.[42] Through this process, analysts can not only observe the social interactions through which information travels, but can also gauge the ways in which influence is exerted in a particular social milieu—e.g., who are the actors most likely to convince others to adopt something new, unfamiliar, and potentially strange? Socio-economic historians have used this technique to chart the parameters and

[40] The former two categories are discussed in Hartrich, 'Town, Crown, and Urban System', pp. 16-17, 25-6, 31, 40-43, 52-3, 57-63, 68, 145-6, 255-63; for the use of similar evidence for the later medieval Holy Roman Empire, see P. Monnet, 'Pouvoir Communal et Communication Politique dans les Villes de l'Empire à la Fin du Moyen Âge', Francia, xxxi (2004), pp. 121-39. Business partnerships and wills have been used to trace urban networks in J.I. Kermode, 'The Merchants of York, Beverley, and Hull in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries' (2 vols., Univ. of Sheffield D.Phil. thesis, 1990); ead., Medieval Merchants; and Sutton, Mercery of London, pp. 217-22. See also Thrupp, Merchant Class of Medieval London, pp. 206-14, 226-30, 321-92.

[41] See M. Emirbayer and J. Goodwin, 'Network Analysis, Culture, and the Problem of Agency', American Journal of Sociology, xcix (1994), p. 1418.

[42] See, esp., E.M. Rogers, Diffusion of Innovations (New York, 1962).

dynamics of urban systems at particular points in time; most notably, Bernard Lepetit used the spread of savings banks to determine which towns were integrated into networks of communication and exchange in nineteenth-century France.[43] Here, I will take charters granting new types of privileges, or reviving forgotten ones, as an 'innovation', and by tracing which towns asked for these charters at which times, will re-construct the inter-urban political network in fifteenth-century England and spot fluctuations within it.

In charting the spread of an innovation along an urban network, it also becomes possible to deduce links between different towns that cannot be traced through other forms of written evidence. As Lepetit has pointed out, an urban network analysis based purely on documented links will usually serve to confirm what we already know about transport systems and economic relationships between towns, while in examining the diffusion of an innovation we can identify less tangible means by which information circulated along the network and thus uncover new kinds of relationships among the network's members.[44] Studying the diffusion of an innovation hints at indirect or weak links between participants in the network, which can often prove critically important. The decisions taken by political actors can be affected by the behaviour of outside entities with whom they have no direct connections; if both parties are members of the same network, however, it is probable that they will receive news of one another's actions through a third party and will try to copy the same behaviour. Moreover, as shown in the work of sociologist Mark S. Granovetter, it is often indirect links or very occasional contact between parties (the kind least likely to appear in written sources) that lead to the circulation of new

[43] B. Lepetit, The Pre-Industrial Urban System: France, 1740-1840, trans. G. Rogers (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 375-92. Some historians adopt a similar approach, but trace the diffusion of chosen 'indicators' (which do not need to be new developments) rather than 'innovations': this approach is taken in many of the essays in Le Réseau Urbain en Belgique dans une Perspective Historique (1350-1850) (Brussels, 1992), and in P. Stabel, Dwarfs among Giants: The Flemish Urban Network in the Late Middle Ages (Leuven, 1997), pp. 239-69.
[44] Lepetit, Pre-Industrial Urban System, pp. 375-6.

information within a network and facilitate collective political action—'dense' networks, in which members have frequent (and probably the best documented) contact with one another will not be exposed to new ideas and will not have the ability to reach out to peripheral acquaintances to create a powerful political action group.[45] By looking at the diffusion of 'innovative' charters among towns in fifteenth-century England, we can attempt to identify these indirect or weak linkages between residents of different towns that would allow them to form a powerful and well-informed urban political lobby and affect the content of national policy.

A degree of speculation is, of course, inherent in a 'diffusion of innovations' approach to inter-urban networks. There is a built-in assumption that the spread of the given innovation, in this case the 'innovative' royal charter, indicates a relationship (whether direct or indirect) between the recipients of charters, even if there is minimal evidence to suggest contact between the towns concerned. Without this assumption and the dangers it entails, however, it would not be possible to gain a nuanced and complete view of the operation of the inter-urban political network in late medieval England; we would be able to see isolated clusters of relationships only, and not the full extent of a functioning network capable of influencing politics at the highest levels. Though charters are not evidence for direct links between different towns, the receipt of similar charters by a group of towns suggests that they had some sort of relationship or, at the very least, existed within the same political milieu and had access to the same types of information; in turn, then, patterns in the receipt of charters can alert historians to relationships between towns that might not be obvious through other types of evidence.

[45] M.S. Granovetter, 'The Strength of Weak Ties', American Journal of Sociology, lxxviii (1973), pp. 1360-80.

But, it should be stressed, the charter has not been chosen at random as an indicator to trace; there is every reason to believe that its diffusion does, indeed, coincide with real relationships. As will be shown below, evidence from municipal financial accounts, parliament rolls, and central government administrative documents demonstrates that, in many cases, residents from towns receiving similar types of chartered liberties also traded with one another, acted together politically, and knew the same people. Moreover, a consideration of the mechanics through which civic governments obtained charters fortifies the impression that they were documents produced through horizontal communication and social interactions between townspeople, and thus an appropriate vehicle for analysing a social system. The terms of charters were not the product of royal policy, but of petitions submitted by civic governments.[46] Urban elites, therefore, wrote the content of their own charters—typically, the king merely ratified or refused them. To craft a petition most likely to receive royal approbation, representatives of civic governments not only needed to know when the king would be in a mood to grant further liberties to towns, but also which liberties other towns had successfully requested. A civic government's intimate knowledge both of recent charters obtained by other towns, and of the goings-on at London, Westminster, and the royal court was fostered by the involvement of its members in a politically influential inter-urban network, through which information about both urban and national politics was communicated. Also, to get a petition for liberties ratified, civic governments sent men to lobby parliament, nobles, royal ministers, and important lawyers. The effectiveness of this lobbying often depended upon relationships that leading citizens of the town concerned had already formed with men in power; while some of these links were tied to patterns of lordship in the localities, many other important relationships

[46] This is stressed in Reynolds, '1483', pp. 48, 50.

with political powerplayers evolved from citizens' involvement in large-scale mercantile and naval initiatives characterised by inter-urban co-operation. Thus, the very process of obtaining a charter was rooted in the participation of townspeople in an inter-connected urban political network. Civic governments themselves also regarded charters as documents that tied them to other towns. In their charters, a town was often granted explicitly the liberties of another town in full—London, Oxford, Winchester, and Lincoln were frequent exemplars. This created a lasting bond between the town concerned and its 'mother-city'. Lynn and Norwich's civic governments consulted their respective 'mother-cities' of Oxford and London during disputes over mayoral elections in the fifteenth century, and London's internal ordinances were copied into the custumals of other towns, such as Bristol, York, and Northampton.[47] Charters, then, both reflected urban networks and helped to fortify them.

By tracing which towns gained charters at which times and how widespread particular types of new privileges were among urban communities, we can begin to identify when changes occurred both in the composition of inter-urban networks and in the role these networks played in national politics. When a larger number of towns received the same types of liberties at the same time, we can assume a high degree of communication between urban elites across the country and the existence of an inter-urban network in which leading members of civic governments followed each other's behavioural cues. Also, when there was an increase both in

[47] K. Parker, 'Lordship, Liberty and the Pursuit of Politics in Lynn, 1370-1420' (Univ. of East Anglia Ph.D. thesis, 2004), pp. 102-3, 134; Norwich, Norfolk Record Office, Norwich City Records case 18a/1, Chamberlains' Accounts 1384-1448, fo. 191v; case 16d/1, Assembly Proceedings 1434-91, fos. 7v, 10; The Records of the City of Norwich, ed. W. Hudson and J.C. Tingey (2 vols., Norwich, 1906-10), i. 283; P. Tucker, 'London and "The Making of the Common Law"', in M. Davies and A. Prescott, eds., London and the Kingdom: Essays in Honour of Caroline M. Barron (Donington, 2008), pp. 307-8; R. Ricart, The Maire of Bristowe is Kalendar, ed. L. Toulmin Smith, Camden Society, new ser., v (1872), pp. 5-6, 92-113; Fleming, 'Making History', pp. 304, 308-9; *York City Chamberlains'* Account Rolls 1396-1500, ed. R.B. Dobson, Surtees Society, cxcii (1980), p. 96; Records of the Borough of Northampton, i. 199-430.

the number of towns receiving particular types of charters and in the status of the individual towns receiving them, it is plausible to conclude that the inter-urban network was, in that period, one capable of pooling a vast range of resources and exercising particularly strong influence on national politics.

In the pages that follow, I shall demonstrate the relationship between charters and urban political networks by comparing the period 1439-49—when the Crown granted a wealth of new privileges to towns, principal among them the appointment of civic officers as justices of the peace or escheators, incorporation, and exemption from Admiralty jurisdiction—to periods featuring fewer new urban charters. This study includes both formal charters and letters patent granting urban privileges, but for convenience's sake lumps both under the category of 'charters'; it excludes confirmations of existing charters, which tended to occur at fixed periods, such as the accession of a new monarch. Over the course of 1439-49, the Crown issued forty-two charters and letters patent to towns beyond those of a purely confirmatory nature—this compares to six in the years 1428-38 and sixteen in 1450-60. Furthermore, across the years 1395 to 1504, the only decades to reach anywhere near the figures for 1439-49 were 1395-1405 and 1461-71, during each of which kings issued twenty-six non-confirmatory charters to towns.[48]

When we view towns as individual political agents in a one-to-one relationship with the Crown, these patterns are difficult to explain. The concentration of royal grants to towns during the 1440s belies the idea, advocated by Wright and others, that the English Crown granted away privileges to towns during periods of its own weakness.[49] In the 1450s, the loss of England's

[48] These calculations have been made with reference to British Borough Charters 1307-1660.
[49] Wright, 'Government and Cities', pp. 159, 393-6.

possessions in France (apart from Calais), the Jack Cade rebellion, economic recession, and the duke of York's claims to exert power in the name of the 'commonweal' left the authority of Henry VI's government in tatters—and yet this was a period in which very few royal grants of liberties were made. In fact, the Crown was in a far stronger position in the 1440s—when many charters were issued to towns—since the duke of Suffolk had managed to craft a household-based royal regime that commanded support from the vast majority of the political community.[50] The patterns observed in urban charters indicate, instead, that towns were hesitant to seek grants from royal governments they believed to be incapable of upholding them. In this context, it makes perfect sense that no towns should receive new royal grants in 1450 (a year featuring the fall of the duke of Suffolk, the loss of Lancastrian Normandy, and the Cade rebellion), 1454 (the year in which the duke of York assumed control of royal government during Henry VI's bout of madness), or 1456 (the year in which Margaret of Anjou set up a clearly partisan government at Coventry)—these were not years in which civic governments could trust that the Crown could guarantee the security of any new privileges obtained.[51] By the same token, civic governments would have been eager to petition for new grants in the years after 1439, by which time Henry VI, who had begun his reign as an infant in 1422, was approaching adulthood. It was natural that more of his subjects, who may have believed that grants made by a minority council might not be confirmed once the king reached his majority, should seek charters now that the king could make grants of his own grace.[52] It is not sufficient, however, to simply reverse conventional wisdom,

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[50] For Suffolk's regime, see J. Watts, Henry VI and the Politics of Kingship (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 207-33, and C. Carpenter, The Wars of the Roses: Politics and the Constitution in England, c.1437-1509 (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 93-115.

[51] For the crises of authority in the 1450s, see Watts, Henry VI, pp. 260-362. For the move of government to Coventry in 1456, see R.A. Griffiths, The Reign of King Henry VI (3rd edn., Stroud, 2004), pp. 772-90, and J.L. Laynesmith, 'Constructing Queenship at Coventry: Pageantry and Politics at Margaret of Anjou's "Secret Harbour"', in L. Clark, ed., The Fifteenth Century III: Authority and Subversion (Woodbridge, 2003), pp. 137-47.

[52] Determining when Henry VI's minority ended is notoriously difficult, but it appears that a temporary assertion of Henry VI's 'personal' authority was made around 1439: J.L. Watts, 'When Did Henry VI's Minority End?', in D.J.

and to state that urban charters were most prevalent during periods of strong royal rule; by such logic, the reign of Henry V (1413-22) and the second half of Edward IV's reign (1471-83)—often touted as periods of powerful kingly leadership and domestic peace—should have featured far more requests for urban charters than the 1440s, when royal government, though still just about functioning, was not headed by a decisive or active king.[53] Another factor must be in play.

One explanation offered by historians for the profusion of urban charters in the mid-fifteenth century is the onset of urban decline. As urban populations dwindled after the Black Death and the business activities of provincial towns were usurped by London, it is argued, civic governments could no longer rely on traditional taxation or tolls to fund their activities. By obtaining new privileges, urban governments gained the right to acquire lands in perpetuity, and thus extract rents from them, as well as to collect the fines associated with new jurisdictional offices.[54] Richard Britnell and others have also contended that the attachment of new dignities to civic office by charter, such as the wearing of special liveries, the carrying of swords before officeholders, and the vesting of more power in the hands of aldermen, was intended to make urban officeholding more attractive to a town's wealthier residents, who in difficult economic

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Clayton, R.G. Davies, and P. McNiven, eds., Trade, Devotion and Governance: Papers in Later Medieval English History (Stroud, 1994), pp. 124-30, and id., Henry VI, pp. 140-45.

[53] For flattering depictions of the reign of Henry V, see G.L. Harriss, ed., Henry V: The Practice of Kingship (Oxford, 1985); E. Powell, Kingship, Law and Society: Criminal Justice in the Reign of Henry V (Oxford, 1989); and C. Allmand, Henry V (2nd edn., New Haven, CT, 1997). For a similar portrayal of Edward IV, see Carpenter, Wars of the Roses, pp. 182-205.

[54] C. Platt, The English Medieval Town (New York, 1976), pp. 144-7; Rigby, 'Urban Oligarchy', p. 79. See also L.C. Attreed, 'The King's Interest: York's Fee Farm and the Central Government, 1482-92', Northern History, xvii (1981), pp. 24-43, and Horrox, 'Urban Patronage', pp. 145-6. For the concentration of trade in London, see J.I. Kermode, 'Medieval Indebtedness: The Regions versus London', in N. Rogers, ed., England in the Fifteenth Century: Proceedings of the 1992 Harlaxton Symposium (Stamford, 1994), pp. 72-88; P. Nightingale, 'The Growth of London in the Medieval English Economy', in R. Britnell and J. Hatcher, eds., Progress and Problems in Medieval England: Essays in Honour of Edward Miller (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 89-106; and ead.,'The Rise and Decline of Medieval York: A Reassessment', Past & Present, ccvi (2010), pp. 40-41.

times may have sought to avoid the personal costs associated with service to the town.[55] These arguments are fortified by the preambles of urban charters, which frequently cited poverty and the desertion of inhabitants as the reasons why new privileges were necessary.[56]

For 1439-49, however, these explanations for the growth in urban chartered liberties fall flat. Firstly, many town governments that did obtain new privileges in this period were perfectly capable of meeting their costs through existing resources. Indeed, the great budgetary deficits of the Hull and York civic governments, frequently cited by historians of urban decline, did not occur until the 1450s or 1460s—a period in which grants of chartered liberties were less numerous—and thus cannot explain why the towns were so eager to expand their privileges one or two decades previously.[57] One of the towns receiving extensive chartered liberties in this period, Colchester, was in fact experiencing a commercial renaissance as a result of peace between England and the Hanseatic League, whose cloth merchants were active in Suffolk and Essex.[58] Thus while some towns, such as Rye, were experiencing long-term economic malaise which they hoped royal grace might alleviate, many of the larger towns were not—or at least not yet.[59]

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[55] R.H. Britnell, Growth and Decline in Colchester, 1300-1525 (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 227-30; R.B. Dobson, 'Urban Decline in Late Medieval England', Transactions of the Royal Historical Society, 5th ser., xxvii (1977), pp. 13-14; Rigby and Ewan, 'Government, Power and Authority', p. 312. See also J.I. Kermode, 'Urban Decline? The Flight from Office in Late Medieval York', Economic History Review, new ser., xxxv (1982), pp. 179-98.

[56] E.g., Charters to Hull, p. 51, and The Charters of the Borough of Southampton, ed. H.W. Gidden, 2 vols., Southampton Record Society, vii, ix (1909-10), i. 54-5.

[57] For the acceleration of urban decline from the 1460s, see D.M. Palliser, 'Urban Decay Revisited', in Thomson, ed., Towns and Townspeople, p. 16; id., 'A Crisis in English Towns? The Case of York, 1460-1640', Northern History, xiv (1978), p. 113; Dobson, 'Urban Decline', pp. 7-9; Attreed, *King's Towns,* pp. 142-4; W.R. Childs, The Trade and Shipping of Hull 1300-1500, East Yorkshire Local History Society (1990), pp. 40-41; and J.I. Kermode, 'Merchants, Overseas Trade, and Urban Decline: York, Beverley, and Hull c.1380-1500', Northern History, xxiii (1987), pp. 51-73. Nightingale, 'Rise and Decline of Medieval York', p. 35, believes York's economy to be in a tailspin throughout the 1440s, with Hull experiencing crisis only at the end of the decade.

[58] Britnell, Growth and Decline in Colchester, pp. 169-74, 179-82, 188-9; id., 'The Woollen Textile Industry of Suffolk in the Later Middle Ages', Ricardian, xiii (2003), p. 89.

[59] G. Draper, Rye: A History of a Sussex Cinque Port to 1660 (Chichester, 2009), pp. 89, 101-3, 174-5.

Furthermore, even if royal weakness and economic necessity provided adequate explanations for why towns sought new liberties during some time periods rather than others, they cannot explain why a large number of different towns requested exactly the same types of new privileges. The urban charters of 1439-49 were remarkable not just for their number, but also for their standardised character. Towns did not pursue particular liberties according to their own independent schedules, but at the same time that the other larger towns were seeking the same liberties. This suggests that the political 'needs' of a town were formulated as much through interaction with fellow members of an elite inter-urban political network as they were in response to local conditions. That towns pursued charters in some sort of a co-ordinated fashion can be seen from the fact that the liberties granted in 1439-49 fall into four major categories: commissions of the peace, escheatorship, incorporation, and exemption from Admiralty jurisdiction. These four types of liberties were either entirely new or re-introduced in 1439-49, meaning that, in order to ask for these liberties, a particular town needed to be aware that other towns had successfully petitioned for similar privileges. Charters conveying commissions of the peace, escheatorship, incorporation, and exemption from Admiralty jurisdiction to municipalities can thus be interpreted as 'innovations', whose diffusion we can study in order to gain a better idea of the ways in which inter-urban political networks operated in the mid-fifteenth century.

In the first of these privileges, royal charters granted allowed members of civic governments to serve ex officio as justices of the peace for the town over which they ruled, giving them broad summary powers to seize, imprison, and punish non-felonious offenders.[60] This privilege was granted to towns for the first time in the late fourteenth century, and eleven

[60] J.R. Lander, English Justices of the Peace 1461-1509 (Gloucester, 1989), pp. 8-12; E.G. Kimball, 'Commissions of the Peace for Urban Jurisdictions in England, 1327-1485', Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society, cxxi (1977), pp. 448-74.

towns received it over the period 1373-1414.[61] There was then a twenty-five year hiatus in such grants, with no towns seeking or obtaining this privilege between 1414 and 1439. Over the single decade of 1439-49, however, another twelve towns gained the right to have their elected officers serve as JPs—Windsor, Plymouth, Hull, Winchester, London, Shrewsbury, Derby, Bridgnorth, Ipswich, Colchester, Bath, and Canterbury.[62] A similar pattern emerges in grants allowing mayors to serve as royal escheators, the officers responsible for investigating and reporting which lands under their jurisdiction should be heritable by the Crown. This privilege had been granted to Bristol in 1373, York in 1396, Norwich in 1404, and Lincoln in 1409, but to no town in the succeeding thirty years.[63] In 1439-49, six towns (Hull, Southampton, Northampton, Shrewsbury, Ipswich, Bridgnorth, and Nottingham) were granted the right for their mayors to act as royal escheator, bypassing the machinery of county administration.[64]

While charters granting civic officers JP and escheator duties underwent a revival in 1439-49, incorporation charters and exemptions from Admiralty jurisdiction were either redefined or invented over the same years, strengthening the argument that towns receiving these types of privileges must have been in communication with one another (or at the very least with

[61] These were Bristol (1373), Southampton (1383), York (1393), Gloucester (1398), Coventry (1399), Hereford (1399), Nottingham (1399), Newcastle (1400), Norwich (1404), Lincoln (1409), and Scarborough (1414): CChR, v. 336, 372, 380, 383, 398, 422-3, 473; British Borough Charters 1307-1660, pp. 38-9, 42, 48, 52, 72, 84, 89, 91, 116, 131, 132; Bristol Charters 1155-1373, ed. N. D. Harding, Bristol Record Society, i (1930), pp. 130-31; Royal Charters Granted to the Burgesses of Nottingham A.D. 1155-1712 (London, 1890), pp. 44-5; The Royal Charters of the City of Lincoln: Henry II to William III, ed. and trans. W. de Gray Birch (Cambridge, 1911), pp. 80-81; Kimball, 'Commissions of the Peace', pp. 465-6; Liddy, War, Politics and Finance, pp. 194-203, 211-12; J.W.F. Hill, Medieval Lincoln (Cambridge, 1948), pp. 270-71.

[62] CChR, vi. 6, 10-11, 41-3, 45, 54-5, 65, 71, 77, 84, 98; CPR 1441-6, p. 84; CPR 1446-52, pp. 181-3; British Borough Charters 1307-1660, pp. 6, 21, 25-6, 35, 50, 56-7, 77-8, 96, 99, 101, 109-10, 128; Charters to Hull, pp. 42-3.

[63] CChR, v. 358, 421; Bristol Charters 1155-1373, pp. 120-21; Royal Charters of Lincoln, p. 79; British Borough Charters 1307-1660, pp. 72, 84, 132. See also Wright, 'Government and Cities', pp. 239-40.

[64] CChR, vi. 10, 44, 45, 55, 66, 71; CPR 1446-52, pp. 265-6; British Borough Charters 1307-1660, pp. 48-9, 87, 91, 96, 99, 109-10, 128; Charters to Hull, pp. 36-7; Royal Charters to Nottingham, pp. 54-7; Charters of Southampton, i. 58-9; Records of the Borough of Northampton, i. 77-80. See also Wright, 'Government and Cities', p. 135.

important officers in central government) in order to be aware of these newly-moulded liberties and to petition for them. 'Incorporation'—the creation of a group of men as an entity capable of legal action—was a quality exercised by many civic governments in practice throughout the middle ages, as Susan Reynolds has shown, and was granted by royal charter to Bury St Edmunds, Coventry, and Hedon (Yorks.) during the early fourteenth century in a primitive form, and, in varying degrees of formality, to Bristol, York, Basingstoke, Norwich, and Lincoln between 1373 and 1409.[65] After another thirty-year interval in the granting of incorporation, eight towns (Plymouth, Hull, Southampton, Canterbury, Rochester, Tenterden, Nottingham, and Ipswich) received the privilege.[66] In earlier years the features of incorporation had remained imprecisely defined, while in the 1440s charters the classic 'five points' of incorporation identified by Blackstone begin to emerge: perpetual succession for the governments and burgesses of the town, the ability to sue or be sued as a collective entity, entitlement to hold lands in mortmain, permission to adopt a common seal, and the authority to issue their own by-laws.[67] The standardisation of the incorporation principle during 1439-49 in urban charters suggests that towns were particularly conscious in these years of the liberties being granted to other towns, and anxious to remodel their own constitutions accordingly. Indeed, the spate of standardised incorporation charters probably led towns to fear that the liberties they already

[65] Reynolds, 'History of the Idea of Incorporation', pp. 1-20; Weinbaum, Incorporation of Boroughs, pp. 42-58; Tait, Medieval English Borough, pp. 234-40.
[66] CChR, vi. 8-9, 55, 62; CPR 1446-52, pp. 181, 266, 276; British Borough Charters 1307-1660, pp. 25, 48-9, 56-7, 64, 65, 91, 109-10, 128; [The] Parliament] R[olls] [of]M[edieval] E[ngland, 1275-1504], XI: Henry VI 1432-1445, ed. C. Given-Wilson (Woodbridge, 2005), pp. 278-86; Charters to Hull, p. 35; Royal Charters to Nottingham, pp. 50-53; Charters of Southampton, i. 54-7. See Weinbaum, Incorporation of Boroughs, pp. 64-6, 71, 73-4, 76, 78-80.
[67] W. Blackstone, Commentaries on the Laws of England in Four Books (2 vols., London, 1753), i. 475-6; Weinbaum, Incorporation of Boroughs, pp. 18, 62-7; Platt, English Medieval Town, p. 144.

exercised by custom might be rescinded 'for lack of any express statement of them', and thus spurred them to request new charters.[68]

The last of the four types of privileges we are discussing, exemption from Admiralty jurisdiction, was an entirely new type of urban liberty introduced in the 1440s. The Lord High Admiral had the authority to exercise summary justice and administrative oversight for anything occurring on the sea, Channel, rivers, creeks, and inland ports. This included summoning juries to judge legal cases concerning piracy, foreign contracts, distribution of captured goods, naval discipline, and mariners' wages.[69] Henry VI's government exempted York, Newcastle, Southampton, Bristol, Ipswich, Rochester, and Hull from the Admiral's jurisdiction in charters issued in 1442-7, and in several of these cases vested the Admiral's authority over local waterways in the hands of members of the civic government.[70] To know that exemption from Admiralty jurisdiction was a privilege at the Crown's disposal, civic governments needed to possess keen awareness of the activities of their fellow towns.

An unusual profusion of urban charters is most likely, therefore, to be a product of heightened inter-urban communication. Another curious feature of the grants of 1439-49 is that they tended to be awarded to larger towns that had parliamentary representation and could be relied upon to choose local men as their MPs. It was from these cities and towns—Bath, Bedford, Bridgnorth, Bristol, Canterbury, Colchester, Coventry, Derby, Dover, Faversham, Gloucester, Hull, Ipswich, Kingston-upon-Thames, Lincoln, London, Newcastle-upon-Tyne,

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[68] A fear expressed by Woodstock: CChR, vi. 125.
[69] For a summary of the legal framework for Admiralty jurisdiction, see Hale and Fleetwood on Admiralty Jurisdiction, ed. M.J. Prichard and D.E.C. Yale, Selden Society, cviii (1993).
[70] CChR, vi. 31, 39, 55, 62; CPR 1441-6, p. 439; British Borough Charters 1307-1660, pp. 40, 48-9, 64, 89, 109-10, 132; Charters to Hull, pp. 57-8; Bristol Charters 1378-1499, pp. 122-7; Charters of Southampton, i. 60-61; Wright, 'Government and Cities', p. 139. For the operation of the court of Admiralty in Hull, see HHC, C BRE/1/2, fos. 25-8.

Northampton, Nottingham, Plymouth, Retford East, Rochester, Shrewsbury, Southampton, Sudbury, Tenterden (incorporated as part of Rye), Thetford, Winchester, Windsor, and York—that came people who could be counted as political powerplayers, and would have sufficient political knowledge to seek charters at the most propitious times.[71] Some of these towns, undoubtedly, were minor centres at best, such as Retford East, but most were at the heart of political affairs, either due to their position as centres of trade and industry (London, York, Coventry, Bristol, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Colchester, Ipswich, Southampton), or as county towns (Derby, Gloucester, Lincoln, Northampton, Nottingham, Shrewsbury), or as members of the historically influential Cinque Ports (Dover, Faversham, Tenterden/Rye), or as locations for the royal court, government, and administration (London, Windsor, Canterbury). In contrast, the towns receiving grants in 1428-38 and 1450-60 tended to be rather smaller fish—such as the fast-declining Melcombe Regis in Dorset, Woodstock in Oxfordshire, Chipping Sodbury in Gloucestershire, and Wainfleet in Lincolnshire.[72] The civic governments that obtained charters in the 1450s did so less through their own influence and more that of powerful political patrons—for example, it was Bishop William Waynflete of Winchester, born in Wainfleet, who secured an incorporation charter for that town while he was serving as Lord Chancellor.[73] It is also worth noting that Woodstock used its incorporation charter of 1453 to remove itself from further engagement in national politics by securing a provision that the town should be exempt from sending representatives to parliament.[74] This contrasts starkly with the civic governments

[71] These charters are calendared in British Borough Charters 1307-1660, which also contains references to printed versions of the documents.
[72] CChR, vi. 125-7, 128-9; CPR 1436-41, p. 74; CPR 1446-52, pp. 565-6; British Borough Charters 1307-1660, pp. 31, 41, 74, 95. Although Weinbaum categorises Chipping Sodbury's 1452 letter patent as an urban incorporation, it is unclear whether the letter patent incorporates the civic officers and burgesses of the town, or a guild of its leading inhabitants.
[73] For Waynflete, see V. Davis, 'Waynflete , William (c.1400–1486)', Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (online edn., 2008), at http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/28907.
[74] CChR, vi. 127.

that received charters in the 1440s, which were highly active in parliament and other venues for public political discussion, as we shall see.

It may well be that larger towns were politically savvy enough to know that a charter issued by what was still, in effect, a minority council in the 1430s or by the highly questionable authority of those acting in the name of Henry VI during the 1450s could be more easily disputed, particularly considering parliamentary pressure for the resumption of royal grants during the latter decade.[75] The civic government of Ipswich, for example, made some initial steps to obtain a new charter in 1451-3, but then decided that it would be more prudent to wait until 1463, by which time Edward IV was on the throne and central government was operating more effectively.[76] They were also more likely to possess the wider range of connections that would enable them to keep abreast of new developments in urban liberties occurring across the realm, and thus to petition for new charters according to the same schedule as a greater number of other towns. Therefore, in examining identifying and analysing particular gluts of urban charters, we can also delineate more clearly the distinction between towns that were members of an inter-urban political network, and with the up-to-date knowledge of national politics that came with it, and those that were not. Moreover, spikes in the granting of urban charters can be taken to indicate the existence of an unusually powerful and co-ordinated inter-urban network, with greater means at its disposal of achieving the aims both of the group as a whole and of its individual members.

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[75] For the constitutional problems inherent in Henry VI's minority council, see J.L. Watts, 'The Counsels of King Henry VI, c.1435-1445', ante, cvi (1991), pp. 285-93; id., 'When Did Henry VI's Minority End?', pp. 116-39; and id., Henry VI, pp. 113-49. For the parliamentary acts of resumption in the 1450s, see B.P. Wolffe, The Royal Demesne in English History (London, 1971), pp. 117-42.

[76] Bacon, Annalls of Ipswche, pp. 108-11, 122-3; G. Martin, 'The Governance of Ipswich I: From its Origins to c.1550', in Ipswich Borough Archives 1255-1835: A Catalogue, ed. D. Allen, Suffolk Record Society, xliii (2000), p. xxvii.

What remains is to investigate the glut of urban charters in 1439-49 more closely to establish how townspeople gained knowledge of other activities within the inter-urban network, and what particular circumstances encouraged the formation of channels through which information about chartered liberties could be disseminated. As we shall see, there were a number of different 'clusters'—or sub-networks featuring unusually dense linkages between members—within the inter-urban network of the mid-fifteenth century, generated through geographic proximity or through the activities of individual brokers, for instance.[77] What gave great political muscle to the inter-urban network of 1439-49, however, was the emergence of one particular 'cluster': a mercantile/naval lobby, including many men active in civic governments, which had been essential in supplying ships and money to the Crown for the defence of Calais from the Burgundians in 1435-6, and who had secured the passage of extensive commercial legislation in parliament, especially statutes designed to benefit the wealthier merchants of the Calais Staple.[78] Through their activities as members of this lobby, mayors and aldermen formed links with their counterparts in other towns, through which they could communicate about what types of liberties should be sought from the king, and were able to pool their resources to achieve particular policy initiatives.

An examination of the activities of Hamo Sutton, mayor of the Calais Staple, hints at some of the ways in which this mercantile lobby may have helped to generate inter-urban

[77] For 'clusters' within networks, see Boissevain, Friends of Friends, pp. 43-4.
[78] C.F. Richmond, 'Royal Administration and the Keeping of the Seas, 1422-1485' (Univ. of Oxford D.Phil. thesis, 1963), pp. 173-86, 207, 213-22; id., 'The Keeping of the Seas during the Hundred Years War: 1422-1440', History, xlix (1964), pp. 283-96; D. Grummitt, The Calais Garrison: War and Military Service in England, 1436-1558 (Woodbridge, 2008), pp. 26, 145-7, 158; Sutton, Mercery of London, pp. 186, 238, 245-50; and P. Nightingale, A *Medieval Mercantile Community: The Grocers' Company & the Politics & Trade of London, 1000*-1485 (New Haven, CT, 1995), pp. 446-8; Griffiths, Reign of King Henry VI, pp. 200-85, 390-92, 423, 555-7; G.L. Harriss, Cardinal Beaufort: A Study of Lancastrian Ascendancy and Decline (Oxford, 1988), pp. 256, 266, 277-8.

communication and a culture of urban charter-seeking. Sutton had been one of the leading lenders to the Crown throughout the 1430s, and had undoubtedly been instrumental in securing a number of exemptions from parliamentary subsidies for his hometown of Lincoln.[79] He represented Lincolnshire at the parliament of 1439-40, where he was part of a mercantile lobby responsible for ensuring the passage of several statutes favourable to their interests, including the Alien Hosting Ordinances, the relaxation of anti-piracy laws, and the stricter enforcement of the Calais wool monopoly.[80] The same parliament also saw the beginning of the run on urban charters, with Plymouth gaining formal recognition of its independence from local ecclesiastical houses through parliamentary petition and with the MPs of Hull using the parliament's sessions to lobby for an important new charter of their own.[81] Both towns gained incorporation through the charters negotiated at the 1439-40 parliament, as well as the right to appoint their own civic officers as JPs, and Hull to have its mayor serve as royal escheator. It may be no coincidence that the last town to receive an incorporation charter before Plymouth in 1439 was Sutton's home borough of Lincoln in 1409—also the most recent charter to appoint a mayor as escheator and one of the most recent to allow a town to choose its own JPs from among its elected officials.[82] Although Sutton was exempted from holding civic office in Lincoln from 1429, he had been

[79] For more on Sutton, see C. Rawcliffe, 'Sutton, Hamon (c.1392-1461/2), of Lincoln', in The History of Parliament: The House of Commons 1386-1421, ed. J.S. Roskell, L. Clark, and C. Rawcliffe (4 vols., Stroud, 1992), iv. 535-7. Lincoln was exempted from parliamentary taxation at the 1433, 1435, 1437, and 1439-40 parliaments: PROME, XI: Henry VI 1432-1445, pp. 89, 177, 217, 251; CPR 1441-6, p. 148; Hill, Medieval Lincoln, pp. 272-3. For Sutton's loans to the Crown, see PROME, XI: Henry VI 1432-1445, pp. 156, 171-2; Rotuli Parliamentorum 1278-1503 (6 vols., London, 1832), iv. 474-5; CPR 1429-36, p. 498.

[80] PROME, XI: Henry VI 1432-1445, pp. 253-4, 291-3, 296-7, 303, 306-8. While Sutton's importance in the Staple is undisputed, historians remain at odds over his position regarding protectionist and bullionist policies pursued by some Staplers in 1429-49: see Power, 'Wool Trade', pp. 86-9; J.H. Munro, Wool, Cloth, and Gold: The Struggle for Bullion in Anglo-Burgundian Trade, 1340-1478 (Toronto, 1972), pp. 121-2, 127-8; Lloyd, English Wool Trade, pp. 270-71; Harriss, Cardinal Beaufort, pp. 266-7, 271; and Sutton, Mercery of London, pp. 247-8, 250.

[81] PROME, XI: Henry VI 1432-1445, pp. 278-86; Charters to Hull, pp. 34-45, 47-8; HHC, C BRE/1/2, fos. 12-v; C BRF/2/356, Chamberlains' Accounts, 1439-40.

[82] Royal Charters of Lincoln, pp. 74-87.

involved in the town's civic government in the early 1420s, before his commercial activities and his appointments to royal office in the county intervened.[83] When we take into account Sutton's influence at the parliament of 1439-40 and his political experiences in Lincoln, it becomes worthwhile to consider that Sutton, while lobbying for mercantile legislation in parliament, also counselled borough MPs to seek these perhaps-forgotten privileges for their own towns.

This possibility is strengthened by the fact that Sutton had strong connections with Hull. Hull was just across the Humber from Lincolnshire, and Sutton not only exported wool from the port but had served as deputy for Ralph Botiller, the king's butler in the town, from 1435.[84] Later, in 1451, he would be given a commission to arrest ships in the town for royal use.[85] Moreover, a sizeable proportion of the members of Hull's civic government, including prominent citizens Hugh Cliderhowe, Edmund Coppendale, and Richard Auncell, were members of the Calais Staple, of which Sutton was head.[86] It seems feasible that through interaction with Sutton either in parliament or in Calais, members of the Hull civic elite became aware of the terms of Lincoln's 1409 charter, and sought them for his own town.

Unlike Hull, Plymouth had no recorded links to Sutton. Nevertheless, Plymouth's prominence in the naval activities of Henry VI's reign made it part of the same powerful mercantile lobby to which Sutton and Hull were connected. Plymouth, like Hull, was small in population, with only around 1,500 taxpayers in 1377, but had a disproportionate importance when it came to the keeping of the seas and the provision of ships for royal armies.[87] Ships from

[83] CPR 1429-36, p. 26; C. Rawcliffe, 'Lincoln', in House of Commons 1386-1421, i. 490; ead., 'Sutton, Hamon', in ibid., iv. 534.
[84] Lloyd, English Wool Trade, p. 271; CPR 1429-36, p. 490; CPR 1446-52, p. 53.
[85] CPR 1446-52, p. 446.
[86] CPR 1446-52, pp. 314-16, 323-4; CPR 1452-61, pp. 209-10.
[87] A. Dyer, 'Appendix: Ranking Lists of English Medieval Towns', in Palliser, ed., Cambridge Urban History of Britain, I, p. 758.

Plymouth were to join those of London, Bristol, Hull, Newcastle, Weymouth, Winchelsea, Falmouth, Fowey, Dover, Sandwich, and Hastings in the fleet set up by parliament in 1442 for the keeping of the seas, designed to protect English interests in the Channel and defend Calais from further attacks.[88] These naval activities surely brought Plymouth into contact with merchants and townspeople organising the defence of Calais and royal naval preparations. The connection between Plymouth's 1439 charter and the town's naval contributions was made explicit in the preamble, which argued that the 'mooring of fleets, ships and vessels' there and the destruction wrought by the king's enemies made it necessary for the town to seek incorporation so that the civic government might attend to the construction of new walls and other defensive fortifications.[89] Through these connections, Plymouth, too, was drawn into a political network of powerful towns.

As the 1440s progressed, there continued to be a correlation between the towns obtaining new chartered liberties and membership of an active mercantile lobby at parliament, even if (as we shall see) at times the interests of particular groups within this lobby splintered. One of the other towns to gain incorporation in this period was Nottingham, which received its new charter in June 1449. By this same charter, Nottingham's mayor was made royal escheator and the mayor and aldermen were allowed to wear liveries similar to those worn by the mayor and aldermen of London (a privilege that had already been won for Hull by its second of two charters in 1440).[90] Nottingham's charter was probably negotiated during the first parliament of 1449, which held sessions in February-April, May, and June-July. This parliament featured a long petition from the merchants of the Calais Staple, requesting the confirmation of the Staple's

[88] PROME, XI: Henry VI 1432-1445, pp. 373-4.
[89] Ibid., XI: Henry VI 1432-1445, p. 278: 'applicatio classium, navium et vasorum'.
[90] Royal Charters to Nottingham, pp. 48-71.

liberties, the invalidation of any licences issued by the king allowing men to avoid the Staple, and the deposit of broad summary powers of enforcement in the hands of the mayor and merchants of the Staple.[91] Both Nottingham's MPs at this parliament, Thomas Thurland and Thomas Alestre, were active members of the Calais Staple (with Thurland holding office in its administration), and would almost certainly have been involved in the formulation and passage of this petition.[92] Other Staplers, such as Sutton and some of his fellow Lincoln merchants, as well as Hugh Cliderhowe, a prominent Calais Stapler and alderman for Hull, probably joined them in this endeavour.[93] Nottingham's charter could well have been the product of communication stemming from the co-operative efforts of a Stapler lobby in parliament, but the impetus for Nottingham's 1449 incorporation charter may have also lain in mercantile rivalries within the Calais Staple. In 1435, Sutton and several of his trading associates, in return for a loan to the Crown, received a licence allowing them to sell wool without reference to the ordinances of the Staple.[94] Thurland was Mayor of the Staple at the time, and vehemently opposed the licence, even imprisoning the servant of one of Sutton's trade partners when he attempted to sell a sarpler of wool to an alien merchant without observing Staple protocol.[95] In achieving for his own home town of Nottingham very similar chartered liberties to those possessed by Sutton's Lincoln, Thurland may have hoped to cement his position within the Calais Staple, demonstrating to fellow wool merchants that he, too, had enough power at court to secure important grants from the Crown. Thus, Susan Reynolds is probably right in stressing

[91] PROME, XII: Henry VI 1447-1460, pp. 57-60.
[92] CPR 1446-52, pp. 315, 323. History of Parliament Trust, London, unpublished article on Nottingham for 1422-61 section by S.J. Payling. I am grateful to the History of Parliament Trust for allowing me to see this article in draft.
[93] Cliderhowe, along with Thurland, is listed as a merchant of the Calais Staple in a 1450 letter patent: CPR 1446-52, p. 323.
[94] Sutton, Mercery of London, p. 247.
[95] Power, 'Wool Trade', pp. 86-7; A.E. Bland, P.A. Brown, and R.H. Tawney, eds., English Economic History: Select Documents, (London, 1914), pp. 185-6.

that keeping up with the 'municipal Joneses' was one of the crucial motives for towns to seek a new charter.[96]

Nottingham's (and Thurland's) connections with other Hull and Lincoln manifested themselves outside the Calais Staple, as well. Hull was the port through which many Nottingham Staplers chose to export their wool.[97] Thurland actually owned property in Hull, in conjunction with the Bedford family, whose members served in civic office there. Thurland would later release his property to the civic government of Hull in order to endow a chaplain to pray for John Bedford's soul.[98] Considering Thurland's connections with Hull, it is not unreasonable to see Hull's charters of 1440 as the direct antecedents of Nottingham's 1449 charter. Thurland may also have been well acquainted with Lincoln's 1409 charter through his friendship with Ralph, Lord Cromwell, Lord Treasurer of England. In 1447 he and Thurland jointly refounded the Holy Trinity guild at St Mary's church in Nottingham—tellingly, they secured an incorporation charter for the guild at this time, too.[99] Cromwell, a prominent landowner in both Lincolnshire and Nottinghamshire, was also informal patron to the city of Lincoln.[100] Cromwell had endorsed a 1426 licence allowing Lincoln to acquire lands in mortmain, and may well have been influential in helping the city to secure its parliamentary tax exemptions in the 1430s—the city's first was granted in 1433, the year Cromwell became

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[96] Reynolds, '1483', p. 49. See also Rigby, 'Urban Oligarchy', pp. 80-81.
[97] CPR 1446-52, pp. 315, 323.
[98] R. Horrox, The Changing Plan of Hull, 1290-1650: A Guide to Documentary Sources for the Early Topography of Hull (Hull, 1978), pp. 36, 132; Calendar of the Ancient Deeds, Letters, Miscellaneous Old Documents, &c., in the Archives of the Corporation, ed. L.M. Stanewell (Hull, 1951), p. 61.
[99] CPR 1446-52, p. 82; English Economic History, pp. 148-50.
[100] For Cromwell's landholdings in the East Midlands and his role in local politics there, see Payling, Political Society in Lancastrian England, pp. 6, 8, 10, 92, 96-7, 102-4, 140-47, 166, 196-8, 208-11; R.L. Friedrichs, 'Ralph Lord Cromwell and the Politics of Fifteenth-Century England', Nottingham Medieval Studies, xxxii (1988), pp. 217-19; ead., 'The Last Two Wills of Ralph, Lord Cromwell', Nottingham Medieval Studies, xxxiv (1990), pp. 95-7, 107-8; and R.L. Storey, 'Lincolnshire and the Wars of the Roses', Nottingham Medieval Studies, xiv (1970), pp. 69-70, 77-8.

Treasurer.[101] Cromwell was, moreover, an associate of Sutton, acting as surety for a loan he made to the Crown in 1435 and serving with him on a number of Lincolnshire commissions in the 1430s and 1440s.[102] He also was one of the royal councillors to whom the Libelle of Englyshe Polycye, the poem of the 1430s that argued vociferously for the defence of the English Channel and the protection of English mercantile interests in Calais, was addressed.[103] Sutton, Thurland, Cromwell, Hull, Nottingham, and Lincoln were thus connected through a web of contacts, both mercantile, political, and personal, through which ideas about incorporation and other urban chartered liberties could easily have been disseminated.

Local politics, of course, played a great role in the relationship proposed above between Hull, Nottingham, and Lincoln, creating an East Midlands cluster within the wider inter-urban network. Lincoln is only about fifty miles from both Hull and Nottingham, and the leading merchants of these towns were historically involved in the wool trade. Cromwell held extensive lands in this region, and was thus an excellent candidate to foster inter-personal links between the elites of these towns. But the 1440s also featured contact between townspeople from different geographic regions, providing new conduits along which trends in chartered liberties could travel, rather than simply intensifying existing associations. We know that during the 1442 parliament Hull MPs Richard Anson and Nicholas Elys paid £3 to Thomas Yong, recorder and MP for Bristol, to assist them in attempting to discourage the assembly from making another grant of poundage to the Crown. Although Yong was a lawyer by trade, and thus often consulted by private individuals as well as urban corporations, in this case he was clearly being sought out in his urban capacity—the payment is made to 'Thomas Yonge de Bristollia'.[104] Bristol and

[101] Horrox, 'Urban Patronage', p. 153; Hill, Medieval Lincoln, p. 280; and The National Archives, SC8/121/6024.
[102] CPR 1429-36, pp. 50, 202, 620; CPR 1436-41, pp. 147, 314-15, 586; CPR 1441-6, pp. 61, 474.
[103] The Libelle of Englyshe Polycye, ed. G. Warner (Oxford, 1926), p. 58 (ll. 1157-64).
[104] HHC, C BRF/2/358, Chamberlains' Accounts, 1441-2. The italics are my own.

Hull were also linked in this period through commitments to naval defence; during the 1442 parliament, as well, a sea-keeping force—the same one to which Plymouth had contributed—was instituted to patrol the English Channel, for which Bristol and Hull were each to provide two ships.[105] When Hull obtained exemption from Admiralty jurisdiction in 1447, it may have been inspired by the similar grant made to Bristol in the previous year. After all, one of the two men who lobbied on Hull's behalf for the new privilege was Richard Anson, who had been among those to meet with Yong during the 1442 parliament.[106]

Indeed, it is possible that Yong served as a broker within the inter-urban network, enabling a wide variety of towns to keep informed of the activities pursued by other members of the network. A broker, according to Boissevain, is a person with an extensive set of social contacts who links otherwise unconnected entities in exchange for some sort of a profit.[107] In Yong's case, many civic governments were willing to pay him a fee for the expertise and knowledge he had gained through advising other municipalities on acquiring new charters. In 1449 the Cinque Port of Rye paid 'Younge of Bristowe' to assist it in its efforts to receive an incorporation charter for the small town of Tenterden, so that it could be more easily declared a 'member' town attached to Rye.[108] Rye itself, although certainly on a lesser level, contributed ships to naval expeditions of the mid-1430s in which Bristol and Hull had been involved, and the town's vulnerability to French attack made it particularly concerned with the naval and defensive policies in which merchants from larger towns played a significant part.[109] Therefore, the men of

[105] PROME, XI: Henry VI 1432-1445, p. 373; CPR 1429-36, pp. 510, 515; Richmond, 'Royal Administration and the Keeping of the Seas', pp. 213-28. Bristol, Hull, and Plymouth, among other towns, also provided ships for Lord Talbot's journey to Normandy in March 1442: CPR 1441-6, p. 79.
[106] HHC, C BRB/1, fo. 35v; C BRF/2/362a, Chamberlains' Accounts, 1445-6.
[107] Boissevain, Friends of Friends, pp. 147-58.
[108] Fifth Report of the Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts (HMSO, London, 1876), p. 491.
[109] Maidstone, Kent History and Library Centre, White Book of the Cinque Ports 1432-1571, CP/B1, fo. 9; Calendar of the White and Black Books, pp. 7-8; HMC 5th Report, p. 490; Draper, Rye, pp. 174-5.

Rye may have had some contact with urban shipping interests in parliament, but were very much on the periphery of the inter-urban network in which men like Sutton and Thurland were the central players. In obtaining an incorporation charter, however, which had never before been used by any of the constitutionally irregular Cinque Ports, Rye demonstrated that it had access to up-to-date information on municipal liberties passing through this inter-urban political network.[110] Yong was very probably the bridge connecting Rye to the network formed by other, more important, English towns, and Rye may have chosen Yong as its legal adviser for the information he could provide about other towns within the network. Yong not only had established connections to Hull, which was incorporated in 1440, but also had links to one of the key political allies of the mercantile lobby, Ralph, Lord Cromwell—Cromwell had chosen Yong as one of his feoffees for his manors of Ampthill in 1444 and Tattershall in 1454.[111] In soliciting Yong's advice, Rye was seeking to solidify its links to a wider inter-urban network, and the town's resulting decision to obtain incorporation for Tenterden signaled that Rye belonged to an elite group of connected towns, forged through joint contributions to royal commercial and defensive policy, that formatted their constitutions in the same way and employed a defined set of signifiers—even if Rye had few other claims to membership of such a group.

Urban charters proclaimed the membership of a town's residents in a powerful inter-urban political network at a particular point in time; they proved that the town concerned was well-connected with other important mercantile centres and that its inhabitants were capable of exercising influence in national politics. After all, information about which towns were gaining

[110] For the anomalous position of the federated Cinque Ports, see Murray, Constitutional History of the Cinque Ports.
[111] Friedrichs, 'Last Two Wills of Ralph, Lord Cromwell', pp. 106-7; CPR 1452-61, p. 200. Cromwell and Yong had been associated with one another as early as 1437: Calendar of the Close Rolls: Henry VI (6 vols., HMSO, London, 1933-9), 1436-41, p. 115.

which chartered liberties at which times—information that was necessary for crafting a successful petition—was gained through venues for inter-urban contact to which not all towns had access, such as parliament and the Calais Staple. When we view charters not just as mechanisms for augmenting the powers of civic governments but also as membership cards for an inter-urban political network, we can begin to understand why citizens were willing to spend a great deal of effort and money to secure royal charters that often simply formalised practices they had been exercising unhindered for centuries, and why, once obtained, they held such a revered place in civic history.

So far, this article followed a rather narrow remit, focusing on charters and inter-urban networks in England over a confined period of time. Here, I shall take the opportunity to suggest some ways in which the approach outlined above could affect wider narratives of English and European political history in the later middle ages. Firstly, changes in the nature and extent of the English inter-urban network—changes visible to historians, in part, through the examination of charter evidence—had the potential to alter the course of national politics. In examining two periods of particularly frequent grants of charters to English towns, 1399-1413 and 1439-49, we can observe that increases in the privileges of urban corporations corresponded to the high profile of inter-urban mercantile organisations on the national political scene. Neither was a period of particularly intense military activity, but each featured a Crown that was struggling to fund the royal household and, especially, its permanent garrison in Calais.[112] Such peacetime

[112] D. Grummitt, 'The Financial Administration of Calais during the Reign of Henry IV, 1399-1413', ante, cxiii (1998), pp. 277-99; id., Calais Garrison, pp. 141-7; G.L. Harriss, 'Marmaduke Lumley and the Exchequer Crisis of 1446-9', in J.G. Rowe, ed., Aspects of Late Medieval Government and Society: Essays Presented to J.R. Lander (Toronto, 1986), pp. 143-78; C. Given-Wilson, *The Royal Household and the King's Affinity: Service, Politics and* Finance in England 1360-1413 (New Haven, CT, 1986), pp. 79-80, 83, 86-7, 90-91, 94, 107-10, 129-31, 140-41.

costs were less likely than full-scale military campaigns, such as the Agincourt campaign of 1415, to be bankrolled through tenths and fifteenths granted by parliament. A lull in parliamentary taxation also made it difficult for the king to seek loans from monasteries, civic governments, and other public institutions, which often required assurance that they would be repaid through the proceeds of taxation. Alleviating the Crown's financial troubles in both periods were loans made by individual merchants and mercantile organisations, who were more adept at securing repayment through the grant of wool subsidies, assignments on customs, and a variety of commercial exemptions and privileges, and therefore were willing to advance money to the king even without the guarantee of repayment from direct taxation.[113] Taking advantage of their financial leverage with the Crown, mercantile interest groups were very successful in both 1399-1413 and 1439-49 in shepherding legislation through parliament that benefited the Calais Staple, mariners, and other townspeople.[114] Both of these activities—supplying the Crown with cash and parliamentary lobbying—involved frequent communication between residents of different towns who participated in large-scale mercantile organisations such as the Calais Staple or Merchant Adventurers. These men were also often officials in civic government, and contact with other urban officers created an atmosphere in which talk of new varieties of urban liberties would spread like wildfire, and in which towns would be eager to secure privileges demonstrating that they were, indeed, fully-fledged members of this elite inter-urban network. The resulting urban charters, therefore, imply that urban power was most

[113] G.L. Harriss, 'Preference at the Medieval Exchequer', Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research, xxx (1957), pp. 17-40; D. Grummitt, 'Public Service, Private Interest and Patronage in the Fifteenth-Century Exchequer', in Clark, ed., Fifteenth Century III, pp. 156-7, 162.

[114] For 1439-49, see, e.g., above, nn. 80, 91. For 1399-1413, see, e.g., PROME, VIII: Henry IV 1399-1413, pp. 39-40, 58-60, 63, 70-74, 78-9, 119-20, 126-7, 130-31, 135, 147-8, 153, 182-5, 187-8, 191-3, 195-201, 206, 213-15, 218-19, 263-6, 274-5, 279-80, 306, 309, 317, 331-4, 392, 399-400, 404-6, 414, 423-4, 429-30, 433, 437-8, 440-46, 448, 460, 463-4, 488, 491-9, 502-3, 506-7, 510, 544-7, 549, 552-6.

forcefully expressed on the national political stage during periods of peacetime financial crisis for the Crown, when it was channeled through a mercantile 'cluster' within a strengthened inter-urban political network.

The years between 1450 and 1460, on the other hand, featured a very different pattern in charter acquisition: a reduction in the frequency with which such documents were issued to the more prominent towns of the kingdom, and an increase in privileges granted to smaller, less politically-active towns. These changes in the patterns of charter acquisition reflect a collapse of the influential inter-urban political network of the 1440s. Crucially, parliament—one of the primary venues through which urban representatives exchanged information and pursued collective political goals—became dominated by concerns with Henry VI's misgovernment, and later by the public posturing of the duke of York and his opponents. This made parliament less a place where townspeople could meet with one another to advance a shared mercantile agenda or discuss urban governance, and more a political battleground for Lancaster and York. As Simon Payling has shown, some towns were anxious to avoid these politically volatile assemblies, and allowed members of aristocratic affinities to be elected to seats usually reserved for officers of the civic government.[115] The decline in the number of charters issued to towns in the 1450s was both symptomatic of and contributory towards this temporary decrease in the urban presence in parliament. Parliament had previously provided an occasion for civic representatives to discover new trends in urban chartered liberties which they could then pursue themselves, and, once they had decided to obtain a charter, to lobby figures in central government for its issue.[116] It is

[115] S. Payling, 'Identifiable Motives for Election to Parliament in the Reign of Henry VI: The Operation of Public and Private Factors', in L. Clark, ed., The Fifteenth Century VI: Identity and Insurgency in the Late Middle Ages (Woodbridge, 2006), pp. 100-105.
[116] The nature of parliamentary lobbying undertaken by urban groups is discussed in Barron, 'London and Parliament', pp. 353-4, 356-61; M. Davies, 'Lobbying Parliament: the London Companies in the Fifteenth Century',

interesting in this regard to note that several of the towns that received charters in the 1450s were ones that did not send MPs to parliament, and would have been unaffected by these developments—in contrast to the 1440s, when a greater proportion of towns receiving charters were represented in parliament.[117] A decrease in the number of charters granted to important towns, therefore, may indicate urban disengagement from the conduct of national politics, as well as the severing of inter-urban links. The lack of an inter-urban political network in the 1450s, demonstrated in part by the paucity of charters granted to important towns, may, in fact, explain why towns, whose residents had played such an important role in the national political conflicts of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, were less involved in the rebellions and dynastic wars of the early stages of the Wars of the Roses.[118]

The fluctuating strength of inter-urban networks, then, could influence the course of national politics as profoundly as shifting alliances of aristocrats and gentry. Therefore, in tracing the activities of these changing inter-urban political networks—networks which occasionally involved aristocrats and gentry but also had interests and dynamics of their own—we can begin to question the historiographical assumption that politics in late medieval England was the preserve of landholders. To obtain a voice in fifteenth-century English politics, one did

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Parliamentary History, xxiii (2004), pp. 138-47; and M. McKisack, The Parliamentary Representation of the English Boroughs during the Middle Ages (Oxford, 1932), pp. 119-45.

[117] In 1439-49, twelve out of forty-two non-confirmatory urban charters were given to towns without parliamentary representation (28.57 per cent); three of these were granted to Coventry and Plymouth, which would begin returning MPs shortly after. In 1450-60, seven out of sixteen non-confirmatory urban charters were granted to towns without parliamentary representation (43.75 per cent); this included one to Coventry. For borough representation in this period, see House of Commons 1386-1421, and McKisack, Parliamentary Representation.

[118] For urban disengagement from national political disputes in the early 1450s, see Hartrich, 'Town, Crown, and Urban System', pp. 176-216; Barron, 'London and the Crown', pp. 92-7; and ead., London in the Later Middle Ages, pp. 9, 26-9. For the role of towns in earlier national political conflicts, see S.K. Cohn, Jr., Popular Protest in Late Medieval English Towns (Cambridge, 2013); C.I. Hammer, 'Complaints of the Lesser Commune: Oligarchic Rule and Baronial Reform in Thirteenth-Century Oxford', Historical Research, lxxxv (2012), pp. 353-71; I. Stone, 'The Rebel Barons of 1264 and the Commune of London: An Oath of Mutual Aid', ante, cxxix (2014), pp. 1-18; and E. Hartrich, 'Urban Identity and Political Rebellion: London and Henry of Lancaster's Revolt, 1328-29', in W.M. Ormrod, ed., Fourteenth Century England VII (Woodbridge, 2012), pp. 89-105.

not need to belong to a magnate's affinity. Those whose livelihood came from commerce rather than agriculture and who resided in towns rather than on country estates could make use of the collective political might of towns—whether mobilised through royal institutions such as parliament, independent mercantile organisations such as the Calais Staple, or through informal meetings stemming from the sense of 'brotherhood' existing among civic governments—to gain leverage on the national political stage.

Moreover, by adopting a network approach, it becomes possible to see greater similarities between late medieval English towns and those on the continent. While English towns, unlike those in Italy, the Low Countries, or Germany, rarely formed institutionalised urban associations, they were not defined purely by their relationship with the monarchy, either; the political activities of townspeople in England, as elsewhere, often manifested through inter-urban networks, and the actions taken by any individual civic government or towndweller were influenced by those adopted by others within the network. In this regard, England fits into a wider European narrative of associative politics, beginning with the communal movement of the eleventh century, that existed alongside and participated in monarchical power structures.[119] England may not have had its direct equivalent of the Lombard League, but networked urban political activity was, nevertheless, crucial to the operation of the polity. Medieval English towns did not exist in isolation, solely concerned with increasing their own self-government at the Crown's expense; nor did their political strength derive primarily from partnerships, however reciprocal and respectful, between the Crown and individual towns. Towns and townspeople in fifteenth-century England used their interactions with one another to gather information and resources that would make them a collective entity capable of influencing political affairs at the

[119] See above, n. 37, and J. Watts, The Making of Polities: Europe, 1300-1500 (Cambridge, 2009), pp. 98-116.

highest level. Urban charters were the products of these English inter-urban political networks, and were crucial status symbols within them; as such, they comprise the best means at our disposal for tracing the elusive, informal, and often unrecorded relationships on which these networks were built. As such, charters can be used to reconstruct the changing dynamics of an inter-urban network in fifteenth-century political society—to determine its membership, assess the intensity of relations between its members, gauge its integration within a wider world of national politics, and illustrate how its cohesion and importance altered over time.

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