

***NORWICH ON THE CUSP -
FROM SECOND CITY TO REGIONAL CAPITAL***
BY: PENELOPE J. CORFIELD

**Essay published in *Norwich since 1550*,
ed. Carole Rawcliffe and Richard Wilson
(Hambledon, London, 2004), pp. 139-166**

to be read in conjunction with other essays in this volume
and in the companion volume by the same editorial team,
Medieval Norwich (2004).

**There is a fine old city before us, ... A fine old city, truly, is that,
view it from whatever side you will; ... perhaps the most curious
specimen at present extant of the genuine old English town.
*George Borrow (1851, writing of the 1810s).*¹**

**Of all the cities I have seen
(And few their numbers have not been)
This *Norwich* is the oddest; whether
View'd in its parts, or altogether.
- *anonymous poet (1792).*²**

I: 'Placing' Norwich

Norwich in all its glory was an impressive sight to see, as the two opening quotations indicate. Visitors admired its relative size, its urban density, its attractive site, its busy industry, its famously lively population, and its long history - which was visible in the city's glittering black flint-stone walls, its ancient castle, and in its many town churches of medieval origin. But how exactly did they 'place' Norwich? Their verdicts differed. George Borrow, who came to live in the city as a young man in the 1810s, described it both as 'fine' (an understated East Anglian compliment) and 'old', with a genuine urban antiquity. By contrast, the anonymous poet, who visited in 1792 but did not stay long, thought it 'odd' and unlike other places, although his doggerel verse did not specify the precise nature of its oddity.

For the historian, these comments suggest two rival ways of looking at urban history. One technique is to consider typicality. How does a town fit into the urban pattern of its day? with what other centres can it be compared? what was normal and unsurprising about its role, whether locally, regionally, nationally or even internationally? The second technique highlights the opposite. What was unique and special about each place? and how did it differ from other towns? After all, however widespread or otherwise the extent of urban development, each urban centre occupied its own distinctive place in the world that belonged to it and to none other.

These two contrasting approaches serve to highlight the simultaneous ‘normality’ of Norwich and its ‘oddity’. And, as will become apparent, both these features of its history were crucial for its long eighteenth-century transition from England’s second city into a well-established regional capital.

A traveller in western Europe in 1700 would have had little difficulty in finding urban centres that were on a par with Norwich in terms of population size. It was not one of the giant metropolitan cities, like London or Paris, whose growth had been so rapid in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Instead, Norwich and its approximately 30,000 inhabitants matched other places like Amiens and Rennes in France, or Utrecht in the Dutch Republic, or Padua in northern Italy. All these were medium-sized regional centres, sited inland and powerful within their own hinterlands, where they were easily distinguished from the smaller market towns that were scattered around them. One visitor in 1698 thought that Norwich, verdant with its many trees, resembled a Dutch city. Another seventeenth-century writer compared the East Anglian capital to Constantinople. That was based on the happy assertion that both places abounded with orchards and gardens, making each ‘*a City in a Wood, or a Wood in a City*’.³ The comparison was doubtless not the first that sprang to mind on the banks of the Bosphorus; but, for home consumption, it placed sylvan Norwich in an international league. Local authors obviously enjoyed the phrase, because it was applied with many variants, for example as ‘a city in a grove’, ‘a city in a garden’, or ‘a city in an orchard’.

Added to that, Norwich by 1700 was clearly well rooted, with its own history and traditions. It was no sudden newcomer in the English urban hierarchy. Its medieval town walls, which, unlike those of many places, had survived intact after the seventeenth-century civil wars, proclaimed its independent jurisdiction as a city and county in its own right. Norwich in the early eighteenth century visibly guarded its

own, as did other fortified places like Chester, Chichester, and York in England, and great number of cities across Europe. Its fortifications were by no means as massive and militarised as those of places like Carcassonne in France or Avila in Spain. But the Norwich walls, adorned by 40 towers, were sturdy and spacious, enclosing a central area larger than that of any other town in England, including the City of London. For many years, the 12 main gates were closed at night and on Sundays, leaving determined travellers to use the postern gates instead. Norwich therefore looked like what it was: proudly and self-containedly urban. In September 1662, a youthful citizen, returning from travels with his brother, was impressed to see his birthplace again:⁴

That famous city of Norwich presents itself to our view; Christ Church high spire [the Cathedral], the old famous castle, eight and thirty goodly churches, the pleasant fields about it and the stately gardens in it, did so lessen our opinion of any [other city] we had seen, that it seemed to us to deride our rambling folly and forced new admiration from us ...

Popular traditions also contributed a mythic dimension to genuine antiquity. Norwich was not a city that dated back to pre-Roman or even to Roman times. In urban longevity, it could not compare with, say, York or Winchester. Undaunted, however, local legends gave Norwich Castle a historic ancestry. It was said to have a pre-Roman foundation and a founding monarch, to boot. He was the ancient British King Gurguntus. The Castle mound (actually built by the Normans in the later eleventh century) was rumoured to be ‘the grave heap of an old heathen king, who sits deep within it, with his sword in his hand, and his gold and silver treasures about him’. So reported George Borrow, recounting the story with relish but adding with a shade of scepticism ‘if tradition speaks true’.⁵ When Queen Elizabeth I visited the city in 1578, she was greeted not only by the Mayor and Corporation but also by a player dressed as King Gurguntus, who was ready to give a versified loyal address but, alas, ‘by reason of a shower of rain, her Majesty hasted away, the speech not uttered’.⁶ A century later, however, enthusiasm for this story was already dimming. King Charles II, who visited in 1671, was not introduced to a proxy Gurguntus; and the tale dwindled from quasi-history into total legend.

Mythically, Norwich joined a number of old-established cities with claims to a pre-Roman monarchical foundation. Bath, for example, was allegedly created by King Bladud; Colchester by Old King Cole (the ‘jolly old soul’ of popular song);

Canterbury by King Rudhudibrass; Leicester by King Lear; and Northampton by King Belinus. It seemed manifest to the local enthusiasts who first circulated these myths that the early monarchs must have been enlightened town planners, who would have known just where England's regional capitals properly ought to be.

Elevated fiction and real history thus located Norwich firmly within the established urban scene. What then rendered it 'odd'? Here a word of definition is required. 'Oddity' in this context really refers to 'distinctiveness'. It does not mean that Norwich was strange or incomprehensible. Not all visitors liked the place, although many, perhaps most, did so. None, however, found it beyond their powers of description. It was recognisably both urban and civic.

Nonetheless, among any given category, it is always possible to be distinctive for one reason or another. Within the genus of the 'old English town', Norwich was unusual in being relatively populous over a long stretch of time - so much so that, for many years until well into the eighteenth century, it held pride of place as England's largest provincial town. How had that happened?

II: Norwich as Second City

Evidence of the relative size of Norwich came from a local population enumeration in 1693, recording 28,881 residents then living in the city.⁷ No census is perfect, of course; and the origins of this one are unclear. Very probably, it was prompted by municipal concerns over the rising cost of poor relief, resulting from population pressures; and, in the eighteenth century, this enumeration was cited as a civic listing. It appears to have been made carefully, on a parish by parish basis; and it can therefore be taken to provide a reasonably reliable bench-mark. A population of approximately this magnitude was additionally confirmed by independent estimates by the pioneering social statistician Gregory King. He calculated the Norwich inhabitants at 29,332 and 28,546 in 1695 and 1696 respectively, multiplying the number of households by an average figure of 4.2 inhabitants to provide a grand total. As the city saw a surge of growth in the later seventeenth century, it is entirely probable that its population had reached 30,000 by 1700. That made Norwich easily England's largest inland town and, after London, its second city.

At this point, it is useful to recollect that the meaning of urban population size depends on context. Norwich was not particularly large in absolute terms. Moreover, like all provincial towns, it was insignificant besides England's own great metropolis.

Nor was Norwich very massive, when compared with the contemporary range of leading towns across Western and Central Europe. In 1700 there were thirty large urban centres with resident populations of 50,000+. Of those, only two were located within the British Isles, and they were the capital cities of Dublin (60,000) and mighty London (c.575,000) - already one of the largest cities in the entire world. Norwich was therefore relatively modest in population terms. It just scraped into the next category of Europe's thirty medium-sized urban centres, with populations of between 30-49,000, as shown in Table 1 [below, p. 25].

On the other hand, it is also apparent that the urban hierarchy was steeply graded. At the top, there were only 11 really large cities (six of them sea-ports) with more than 100,000 inhabitants apiece and another 19 (nine of them sea-ports) with more than 50,000. The European countryside was not at all densely urbanised at this date. Tiny hamlets and scattered villages dotted the landscape, interspersed by thousands of very small towns, some hardly larger than villages themselves.⁸ The entire population of the total of 201 cities with populations of 10,000+ (still a low threshold in absolute terms) was no more than 8.7% of Europe's population in aggregate. In this context, Norwich in 1700 appeared much more impressive. It ranked with thirty medium-sized towns with populations of 30,000-49,000, that had themselves emerged from the larger ruck of another 141 small-medium towns (mostly situated inland) with populations of 10,000-29,000. In other words, it stood poised between the significantly large towns on the one hand and the long tail of smaller places on the other. It was an urban intermediary, a linkage point between the centre and peripheries, and between 'rural networks and urban hierarchies', as aptly noted of the urban role in a twentieth-century African case study.⁹

It may be observed, too, that most of the medium-sized and small-medium towns at this period were located inland. While Europe's urban leaders consisted of great sea-ports as well as magnificent capital cities (and some, like London, Lisbon, and Copenhagen, were both at once), a sizeable majority of the middling cities were situated away from the coast, commanding the countryside via their local networks. Norwich fits that pattern well. It was, in fact, a small river port, as were a number of inland towns. But it was sited at the heart of an encircling hinterland within east Norfolk, in a classic 'central-place' location. One pre-condition for Norwich's urban success was thus its prime location within a fertile agricultural terrain.

Within this immediate region, its nearest urban rival, in terms of population size, was the port of Great Yarmouth, located 30km away, at the mouth of the Yare/Wensum river complex. There was always a certain competitiveness between the two places. The region was, however, amply able to sustain both. Indeed, if Norwich and Yarmouth are considered together as a 'split town' or an 'urban consortium', then the urban development of east Norfolk in 1700 was even more notable. At that date, Yarmouth housed another 10-11,000 inhabitants and was itself the seventh city of England in population terms. It was a busy entrepôt, sending bulky raw materials and coals up-river to Norwich; and it was also the home-port of the North Sea herring fleets. These provided a regular source of cheap and nutritious food. Lightly smoked red herrings - the celebrated Yarmouth bloaters - thus became standard fare for the poor in Norwich, filling 'many a hungry bellie'.

Fortified by these agricultural and maritime contacts, the city was readily able to recruit population especially when its economy was booming. Throughout the eighteenth century, many migrants into Norwich came from within East Anglia, and especially from Norfolk and east Suffolk. At the same time, a subsidiary stream of newcomers travelled from further afield, attracted by the city's size and reputation. In addition, Norwich had long-standing overseas contacts. Many citizens were descendants of the massive influx of sixteenth-century Walloon settlers, and of the smaller number of French Huguenots who came in the early 1680s. In addition, numerous Norwich merchants had trading links with their counter-parts in Holland and Germany. Indeed, in 1700 the city in 1700 was part of a distinctive North Sea urban 'cluster'.

So sustained, Norwich continued to grow until the mid-1780s. It is true that its mortality rates remained high for most of this period.¹⁰ As the city expanded, so did the silent toll of deaths within its walls. There were, however, no overt plagues and their attendant panics. As in all cities at this time, mortality levels were especially high among the very young; and in one local epidemic (probably smallpox) in 1747, almost 70% of all fatalities in Norwich involved children under the age of 10 - most being babies in the first year of life. These grim urban penalties, however, did not halt the city's expansion, as long as buoyant hopes of work continued to attract new recruits.

The special factor that accounted for the emergence of inland Norwich into the front ranks of England's provincial towns was ultimately not demographic but economic. It sprang from the city's capacity to combine its long-standing trading role

as a centre of distribution and consumption, with a specialist industrial role as a centre of textile production. This strategic multiplication was clearly distinctive.

Important as was its manufacturing sector, the Norwich economy was by no means so specialised that it had shed its traditional functions as a regional, county and ecclesiastical centre. On the contrary, all these different strands worked together. Norwich's famous markets continued to flourish and were frequented by wholesalers and retailers alike. It was a major regional centre for shopping, with both luxury goods and staple wares available in abundance.¹¹ Professional and financial services were also located in Norwich, as a nodal point where client and providers could meet readily. Much business came to the city through its role as county capital, as headquarters of the Anglican diocese, as centre of religious Dissent, and as a 'leisure town' where people came for recreation and consumption. The town walk in Chapel Fields, smartly laid out with trees and gravel paths, was deemed likely to become the veritable '*Mall* of Norwich',¹² in flattering allusion to metropolitan amenities. And ancient Cockey Lane ('cockey' = watercourse or drain) was renamed as London Lane, later London Street, upgrading its nomenclature as it turned into a fashionable shopping parade.

Such commercial and leisure activities undoubtedly created work and wealth in the city. They did not in themselves, however, account for the relatively large size of Norwich by 1700. The example of the city of York provides an instructive contrast. Its long-term role as a regional centre of commerce and of conspicuous consumption very much paralleled that of Norwich. Yet York, 'the ancient and venerable capital of the North', had ceased by the mid-seventeenth century to grow with any rapidity. Housing c.11,000 inhabitants in 1700, it was only a little over one third the size of Norwich. And for many years in the eighteenth century York - majestic and well frequented as it was - did not make any net population gains.

Some other factor was impelling the growth of Norwich. That was its continuing success as a textile town. As one local historian reported proudly:

By their Industry and ready Invention, the [Norwich] Manufacturers have acquired prodigious Wealth in the Art of Weaving, by making such variety of Worsted Stuffs, in which they have excelled all other Parts of the Kingdom; which Trade is now [1728] in a flourishing Condition.¹³

Even in the era of pre-mechanised industrial production, manufacturing could be very labour intensive. That was particularly notable in the case of textiles. It took

much application to transform the shaggy hanks of untreated wool into massive bales of finished fabrics, ready for market. An official computation in 1719 estimated that labour accounted for 'more than' five-sixths (83%) of the total production costs in the Norwich industry, and in 1785 a very similar figure was reported to the younger Pitt, in response to a government enquiry.¹⁴ The location of the workforce was thus poised between centrifugal forces, seeking cheaper costs in the countryside, and centripetal forces, seeking specialist urban production skills. The Norwich industry exemplified this tension. There was a rural sector to the industry, clustered in villages within an approximate 30km radius of the city, where simpler and plainer stuffs were woven. And pre-mechanised spinning always remained a low-pay, low-skill preparatory process that was widely diffused across the countryside, generally carried out by nimble-fingered women and children as a by-employment. However, the need to dye the yarn, once spun, so that the Norwich weavers could create their beautiful designs in the weave, and then to finish the woven textiles by hotpressing, to give them a characteristic glazed and shiny surface, all encouraged an urban location. That permitted the workforce to respond quickly to news of changing fashions; and also helped the merchant manufacturers, who organised the distribution networks, to get the stuffs speedily from the loom into the markets.

One name for the stage of cottage industry for mass markets at a distance from the point of production is 'proto-industrialisation'. The concept, advocated especially by Franklin Mendels, has been much criticised; and rightly so.¹⁵ His stress upon rural or 'peasant' industries, migrating into the countryside to evade restrictive town guilds and there becoming precursors of industrialisation, over-simplifies the paths of economic development. Some pre-mechanised production was indeed based in the countryside; but far from all. The case of Norwich indicates that 'cottage' manufacturing could still be very urban in its location; and that medieval guild controls had generally lapsed. Historians who follow Mendels too closely, in assuming that pre-industrial towns were centres of commerce and distribution but not of production, miss a vital element of town life. An instructive analogue to Norwich was Leiden, its Dutch counterpart, which made similar textiles with similar success in the later seventeenth century.

Locations for pre-mechanised industrial production in fact depended very much upon the nature of the product and of its market. Among hand-loom textiles, for example, the simple, low-cost linens were characteristically made by a dispersed rural

and small town workforce. By contrast, luxurious silk manufacturing was concentrated in London's Spitalfields, close to fashionable consumers, while its lighter, cheaper half-worsted, combining worsted yarn with silk, were gradually dropped from production by the mid-eighteenth century. These metropolitan producers catered for the really volatile upper end of the market. The worsted stuffs made in Norwich, however, were not ultra-stylish products. Instead, they were smart items for middling purchasers, whose pockets were not endlessly deep.¹⁶ That made the Norwich industry also highly cost- and fashion-sensitive. A location in a reasonably accessible provincial centre with low production costs accordingly made good sense: it avoided the great expense of London but, at the same time, it retained an urban workforce that was sufficiently skilled to produce quality goods and sufficiently nucleated in location to get speedy news of changing market conditions.

During the long century from c.1680 to 1780, therefore, the East Anglian capital grew large and rich on the strength of its famous textiles. It already had a long weaving tradition, that went back to medieval times.¹⁷ And this staple industry had shown itself to be very adaptable, shifting to the lighter, brighter 'New Draperies' in the later sixteenth century, under the stimulus of Walloon knowhow, and refining its fabrics in the later seventeenth century, with some contribution from Huguenot expertise. The urban economy thus specialised in production for distant markets. And, by way of proof, the hand-loom worsteds that were produced in both the city and its rural hinterland became known generically as 'Norwich stuffs'.

III: Norwich's Urban Ambience

Combining many roles created in Norwich a spirited urban ambience. Its way of life yoked the busy intentness of trade and manufactures with the polish and public jollity of a social and leisure capital. Writing in 1802, John Thelwall the radical orator, who had lectured in the city in 1796, lamented his self-imposed exile in south Wales, which kept him mired in rural ignorance, far from the urban stimulus of places such as 'the friendly, the enlightened, the animated circles of Norwich, ...'.¹⁸ Something of what he was missing was indicated by another visitor in 1805. The artist John Opie confided that his late summer stay with his wife's family in Norwich had prepared him for the rigours of winter, 'through the medium of beef, dumplings, wine, riding, swimming, walking and laughing'.¹⁹

Local authors regularly chorused their praises. To a clerical poet in 1774, Norwich was the 'faire nurse of industry and wealth'.²⁰ In 1783, the city's first *Directory* agreed that the place was 'abounding in opulence and fashion'.²¹ There was an element of the formulaic, of course, in such commendations. But it is always interesting to see what was said or left unsaid. Another local poet in 1730 celebrated the social excitements of the 'Norwich Assembly', that attracted county society each summer to visit 'happy Norwich'.²² And a Norfolk-born visitor in 1800 expressed satisfaction with the total effect. 'Norwich, the industrious, commercial, and prosperous Norwich, is certainly a very lovely spot', adding that nothing could equal the view of this 'happy seat of affluence and industry' from its Castle Hill.²³

Characteristic sounds then recorded the city's busy diversity. In the weaving parishes, the pervasive background noise was a rhythmic 'click-clack' which signalled that the wooden hand-loom were being set vigorously to work. Aloft could be heard bird-song from the caged canaries, kept in many a weaver's garret.²⁴ This vied with the ringing of church bells from the city's thirty medieval churches (Norwich had its own Society of Ringers); and with the street cries of the itinerant vendors, offering goods and services for sale.²⁵ Horses and carriages clattered on old cobbles and new paving stones alike, although the traffic clogged when carts laden with hay got stuck in the narrow medieval gates. Everywhere, snatches of laughter, song and talk were audible from the urban inns and ale-houses. These were the venues for the many clubs and societies that formed the bed-rock of this intensely clubbable city's social life.²⁶ And attentive listeners could distinguish among the cacophony of voices the 'broad Norfolk' of the countryside and the sharper vowels of 'Narrich's' own citizens.

Animated conversation was an urban staple. As the city's livelihood depended upon the ready circulation of news and views, it was no surprise to find that Norwich was the first provincial centre to gain its own weekly newspaper, launched in 1701. Indeed, for most of the eighteenth century, the city sustained two rival journals - one Whig and one Tory - in circulation. Venues for discussions were plentiful, from boozy inns and taverns, to more sedate club rooms, lecture halls, informal salons, and the new coffee-houses, clustered around the market-place. It was in one such establishment in 1697 that a young Norwich-born cleric, Samuel Clarke, debated the new Newtonian physics with William Whiston, then chaplain to the Bishop of Norwich.²⁷ This chance encounter in a coffee-house was a classic example of the urban circulation of ideas. The meeting began a long friendship between these two

unorthodox thinkers, whilst leading to clerical preferment for Clarke, who was introduced by Whiston to the Bishop. It also indicated that some Norwicheers were *au fait* with the latest scientific ideas. Indeed, it transpired that Clarke and his father, one of the city Aldermen, had been studying Saturn's rings through a seventeen-foot telescope. The episode serves as a reminder, therefore, that Norwich was sizeable enough to sustain its own 'intelligentsia', renewed in each generation.²⁸ This informal network, of men and some women, furnished a vivid sequence of local historians, topographers, antiquarians, essayists, poets, scientists, medical men, lawyers, theologians, hymnodists, and clerical polemicists.

What else would strike a visitor to Norwich? In terms of immediate olfactory impact, the city was not exceptionally notorious. Some low-lying parts of town, abutting the sluggish River Wensum, were indeed disagreeable: the Duke of Norfolk's former palace was reported as 'built in a low stinking place', which helps to explain why the ducal family finally abandoned its delapidated Norwich residence after a quarrel with the Corporation in 1708. The river was also clogged by discharges from numerous private 'bog-houses'.²⁹ Furthermore, the best behaviour among polite society was not enforced in the male territory of the city's ale-houses and taverns. Each room had its own pewter chamber pot, ready for use: 'there it stands stinking till it is full, and often till it run about the Room in a very Nasty manner',³⁰ noted William Arderon, a Yorkshireman who had moved to Norwich in the 1740s. However, these things were widely tolerated. Above all, the urban production of hand-loom textiles did not have a seriously blighting effect, unlike the smoke-stack industries that choked some other places. Thus, on its ridged site in East Anglia's breezy lowlands, the city was considered to be generally salubrious. On hearing in 1757 of the death of John Clarke (Samuel Clarke's younger brother and Dean of 'vile, damp' Salisbury), a friend claimed that had Clarke 'wintered at Norwich, as he used to do, he might have been alive & bonny many a day longer'.³¹

This aura of healthiness, which was quietly belied by high urban mortality rates for most of the eighteenth century, was fostered not only by the city's many trees and gardens, but also by the abundance and quality of foodstuffs in its markets. Taste-buds in Norwich, of the well-to-do at least, were well treated. There were plentiful North Sea fish on sale; as well as good agricultural produce from the city's fertile and 'improving' hinterland; there were the plump ducks, geese and turkeys for which the region was famous; and sturdy cattle, brought from afar to fatten on the marshlands in

the Wensum valley. All that, washed down with the hearty local drink, the ‘humming brown beer’ known as ‘Norwich Nog’. Other cities enjoyed their own favoured beverages too: a ballad saluting the virtues of Nottingham ale promised that it would cure all ills and drive women wild with lust.³² Drinking songs in Norwich did not claim quite so much. But they enthused over their brew and its brewers, who provided some of the city’s great urban dynasties: ‘May Weston’s name shine, in Numbers divine/ And his malt and hops never cog;/ May Tompson have store, with Morse and some more,/ And live long to brew Norwich Nog’.³³

Bright lights too signalled a busy as well as a sociable urban world. Viewed after dark, when the weavers were working late in their garrets by candle-light, Norwich was a glimmering beacon of activity: ‘every winter’s evening exhibited, to the traveller entering its walls, the appearance of a general illumination’.³⁴ And, from 1701 onwards, oil-lamps were ablaze in the city streets until 11.00pm at night. Norwich did not have a separate ‘red light’ district (here unlike most port cities) but there were many venues for night life including the sale of commercial sex. While the city had a public reputation for Puritanism, in practice the city tolerated a range of behaviours. A scandalous divorce case in 1707/8 revealed that a group of Norwich ‘middling sort’ spent their evenings in drinking, card-playing, and sexual games, that included group sex, bi-sexual flagellation, and voyeurism.³⁵

Meanwhile, by day there were many respectable sights to be seen, registering both the antiquity and the modernity of the city. ‘Old’ Norwich was visible in the medieval walls, the town gates, the Norman Castle on its bulky mound, the Cathedral with its elegant spire, its 33 medieval parish churches, the flint-stone Guildhall in the central market-place, the venerable half-timbered town housing, and the great public inns. The ‘modern’ city was interspersed within the older framework, with new buildings, rebuildings, and fresh frontages. Indicators of change included not only the smart brick and stucco housing, coffee-houses, shops, pleasure gardens, and, after 1756, dignified local banks; but also dedicated buildings such as the substantial New Theatre (1758; enlarged 1800), the grand Assembly Rooms (1754) providing a venue for balls, concerts, and dinners, the Unitarians’ striking Octagon Chapel (1754-6) ‘one of the most spacious, noble, and elegant buildings of this kind in the kingdom’, various discreet Nonconformist meeting houses, a new Concert Room (1816), and, just outside the walls at St. Stephen’s Gate, the new Norfolk and Norwich Hospital (1771).

Significant urban atmospherics responded also to the dynamics of people as well as the statics of the built environment. The streets of Norwich were good indicators of the state of urban economic and social life. When trade was busy, the weavers - with the characteristic pale faces of indoor workers - toiled inside at their looms, leaving the weaving parishes in West Wymer and the Northern Ward apparently deserted. But in the evenings and at times of holiday, people quickly reappeared. Saturday nights were the busiest time of the week, and Sundays the quietest days, in due deference to Protestant tradition.

Crowds, however, were never far away. On special occasions, the townees were always augmented by visitors from further afield. Observing the public celebrations in October 1746 to laud the defeat of the Jacobite rebellion, William Arderon noted that: 'We had the greatest part of the nobility and gentry of ye country [Norfolk] here, as well as multitudes of people of lower life'.³⁶ There were also annual festivities that regularly brought people into Norwich. The Tombland Fair, held on Maundy Thursday, just before Easter, had shifted its role from commercial event to a popular festival, with vendors selling toys and gingerbread. It also coincided with the annual Horse Fair, held in the Castle Ditches. And the late summer Assize week, when the judges arrived on circuit and festivities were organised, attracted huge crowds, making this 'the gayest period known to the inhabitants of Norwich'.³⁷ On such an occasion in August 1783, the new Bishop preached before a 'brilliant & crowded audience'; and, at an Assembly in the evening, 'the wives of some of the richest people in the county shone with diamonds at least.'³⁸

But people did not come to town solely for special events. Touring the sights of Norwich on a late Sunday afternoon, an aristocratic visitor in mid-September 1732 commented: 'I think I never was in so mobbish a place, we could scarce walk the streets for the numbers of people that flocked about us'.³⁹ Market days, especially on Fridays and Saturdays, were always thronged. Country farmers and their wives came to sell; and country as well as town residents to buy. The ensuing bustle was highly characteristic. One traveller rhapsodised specifically about Norwich's great central market as a forum for the easy mingling of rural and urban society. It is notable, however, that this 1800 account, written in war-time, did not list the city's weavers, whose industry was then in crisis, among the promenaders:⁴⁰

At the bottom [of the central market] is another space of parade-like appearance, emphatically called the Gentleman's Walk. This walk, on the market day, is thronged with a collection of very interesting characters; the merchant, the manufacturer, the magistrate, the provincial yeoman, the militia-officer, the affluent landlord, the thrifty and thriving tenant, the independent farmer, the recruiting-officer, the clergy, faculty, barristers, and all the various characters of polished and professional society. In short, ... [a] proud scene of bustle and business, health and wealth, prosperity and pleasure - proud let me call it, as it is the true criterion of provincial and national glory,



John Sell Cotman's evocative painting of
Norwich Market-place (c.1809)
© Tate Gallery no 5636.

References to the social confidence of the leading Norwich citizens were commonplace. Politically, the place had long maintained its independence. Although it was frequented by Norfolk bigwigs at times of festivities, Norwich was no 'pocket borough' under the sway of aristocratic patrons. Instead, the city's two MPs were chosen by a large electorate of urban freemen, including many craftsmen and weavers, as well as merchants and professional men. The urban grandees in Norwich accordingly walked tall in their own bailiwick; and they were readily saluted as urban 'gentlemen', as shown by the 1783 *Norwich Directory*, which was significantly subtitled *The Gentleman and Trademan's Assistant*.⁴¹

Civic dignity was confirmed annually, with a pageant to celebrate the Mayoral election. This was the 'Guild-Day', held in June on the Tuesday before midsummer:

with a procession in full regalia, civic music, a service in the Cathedral, a public oration, an official swearing-in, a gunfire salute, a Corporation dinner, and the parading of the Norwich 'Snap-Dragon' (a brightly painted beast, of wicker and canvas) with an attendant Fool to add to the fun and Whifflers (sword-bearers) to clear a path through the crowds.

Events like this provided an outward signal of urban solidarity and community. Of course, in practice there were often divisions among the Norwich population. Religion and politics were sources of argument, sometimes ritualised, sometimes heated.⁴² The diversity of the city's economy, however, meant that Norwich society did not appear riven between a few great masters on the one hand, and a large number of journeymen on the other. A variegated middle band of citizens interposed between the very rich and the very poor. And because the staple industry known to require a certain skill and application, the workforce was mentioned in respectful terms (except when it was rioting). In 1763, for example, the Mayoral Court referred routinely to the city poor as the 'industrious' class.⁴³ Among their number were a number of self-taught men, such as Daniel Wright and an amateur mathematician John Barnard. The eccentric scholar and tutor, John Fransham (1730-1810), also sustained himself for a time by weaving in a garret.

Collectively, the Norwichers had a reputation for being assertive and disputatious. They were 'the most wrangling, mischievous, envious, malicious people that ever I came amongst', a Quaker complained in 1655.⁴⁴ They were 'a little self-conceited, and prone to Discords', ran another verdict in 1718, although adding rather more kindly that people were also quick-witted and friendly.⁴⁵ Opinions were commonly expressed with force and sometimes via direct action. In 1751-2 the plebeian adherents of the controversial Methodist preacher, James Wheatley, were repeatedly attacked by hostile crowds, who also mockingly shouted 'Baa' Baa' at his 'dear lambs of God'.⁴⁶ Arriving in Norwich to minister to his own followers in August 1759, John Wesley faced 'a large, rude, noisy congregation'.⁴⁷ He fretted that, after the sermon, people gathered in knots to talk, turning the 'place of worship into a coffee-house'. In 1764, Wesley was still upset by the fickleness of his flock: 'I have seen no people in all England or Ireland so changeable as this.'⁴⁸

Deference was certainly not the habitual style in Norwich. It may have been that urban directness as well as the severity of his tutor that caused the Norfolk-born

William Godwin - then a precocious eleven-year-old sent in 1767 for his schooling in the great county capital - to bemoan the 'odiousness of the Norwichers'.⁴⁹

Weavers were known as particularly forceful lobbyists. As evidence of that, in May 1765 Horace Walpole in London was on the verge of panic when he heard that a disaffected contingent from Norwich was marching upon the capital city. This was to support the Spitalfields campaign for legislation to protect the silk industry. 'A large body of weavers are on the road from Norwich, and it is said have been joined by numbers in Essex', he wrote; 'guards are posted to prevent, if possible, their approaching the city. Another troop of manufacturers are coming from Manchester ...'.⁵⁰ In the event, the reports were quickly contradicted. The mass march of weavers never occurred. But the episode was instructive. Legislation duly followed to exclude foreign-made silks, just as earlier in 1722 combined protests from Norwich and the Spitalfields had gained protectionist laws against the wearing of printed calicoes. The city's assertiveness in its own cause was allied also with its reputation for radicalism. Again, that can be exaggerated, as political views were never unanimous in Norwich. Nonetheless, common repute did not worry about such qualifications. A loyalist satire in 1795 thus envisaged the Norwich population as chorusing proudly:⁵¹

Since the days of old Kett, the republican Tanner,
Faction has always seen us lost under her Banner;
From our country's best Interests we've ever dissented,
In War we're disloyal; in Peace discontented. ...

IV: Norwich on the Cusp of Change

With its size, success, and reputation to safeguard it, Norwich appeared outwardly unassailable. In particular, the years of the mid-eighteenth century, from the 1730s to the 1770s, seemed in retrospect a gilded era, when trade was buoyant, food was relatively cheap, dire poverty was held at bay, visitors were appreciative, and the city embellished with new amenities. Norwich's industrial specialism had not ousted its other functions. In 1780, for example, it was the sixth most substantial 'residential leisure town' in England (after London, Bath, Bristol, York, and Newcastle upon Tyne), as measured by the presence of 30 or more elite families employing menservants.⁵² Such a role as a resort for the conspicuously rich was clearly not just a matter of urban size. The huge metropolitan region of London, to be sure, easily took first place, followed by Bath. Yet the much smaller city of York, the traditional capital of the north, was also a significant home for menservants and their employers. Norwich's role therefore reflected its historic regional placement rather than merely its size. However, not all wealthy people employed

menservants (upon whom tax was due), so this data provides only partial evidence about the very rich. In practice, social leadership in Norwich came from its affluent working elite: such as the Pattlesons (brewers), the intermarried Ives and Harvey families (worsted merchant-manufacturers), the Kerrisons (bankers), and the Quaker Gurneys (who had moved from textiles into banking).

Details of these urban bigwigs were publicly listed in the 1783 *Directory*. This was a pioneering volume, confident in the city's fame but also ready with suggestions for environmental improvements. Its business information demonstrated once again the importance of textiles to the urban economy, while confirming that commerce and specialist services provided long-term ballast. Table 2 shows that 546 of the 1,323 people with stated occupations (41.3% of all occupations) were in manufacturing, compared with 370 (28%) in 'dealing' and 192 (14.5%) in the professional sector. At this date, most businesses were headed by one person, but there were 118 firms, including a number of family concerns. Another 268 people featured in the *Directory* by name only, without apparent occupation (16.8% of all entries). These individuals may have been rentiers, living off private income; but some did have thriving businesses, such as John Morse, the brewer (twice Mayor of Norwich in 1781 and again in 1803) and the banker Bartlett Gurney. These men were sufficiently well known to be recorded without further description, so that the *Directory* listing must be taken as indicative rather than absolutely comprehensive. [See Table 2, below p. 26]

Women, who formed a majority of the urban population (as in all large towns at this date) also had a public presence among the urban elite in 1783. At least 208 were listed in the *Norwich Directory* (13% of all names). A majority of them had been married ('Mrs' = 143; 'Widow' = 19) but 19 were unmarried and another 27 gave name only. Most did not have any stated occupation and probably lived on private incomes, as seems likely in the case of the twelve ladies living in the Cathedral Close. But at least 90 women owned their own businesses, including not only 38 commercial dealers, 25 specialist makers/dealers in clothing, seven proprietors of 'boarding schools for young ladies', and seven miscellaneous, but also 13 working in the staple manufacturing sector. One was Susanna Hardingham, who lived in unfashionable Cowgate Street, in the weaving ward of Fyebridge, north of the river. With her son, she ran a business as a scarlet dyer. Two more, Mary Powell and Mrs Towler, were skilled hotpressers. The presence of all these women, without fanfare, indicated that economic imperatives were quietly eroding the old cultural and legal barriers to women's business careers.

Throughout all this, Norwich's population continued to grow for most of the eighteenth century: not rapidly but steadily, reaching a total of some 41,000 by the third of its three local enumerations in 1786. No fears were expressed in the city that its urban predominance was under threat. A local history in 1728 had already noted - correctly - that Norwich had been overtaken by Bristol and was thus by that date the third, rather than second, city in England and Wales. But without regular censuses before 1801, all population figures were hazy. In 1795, another local commentator had reviewed the demographic history of eighteenth-century Norwich and concluded cheerily that, in population terms, the city 'has something to boast of, and nothing to fear'.⁵³

Indeed, old reputations died hard. In 1792, a national guide to parliamentary boroughs still named Norwich as, 'in point of opulence, commerce, manufactures, and number of inhabitants', unequivocally 'the second [city] in the kingdom'.⁵⁴

Imperceptibly, however, things were changing. It was not that Norwich was not growing, at least before the 1790s, but that other places were expanding more rapidly. The 1801 census provided a snapshot of the process. Norwich was still one of the urban leaders, the tenth largest urban place anywhere in England and Wales (see Table 3, below p. 27). It was more populous than the fashionable resort city of Bath, which was the classic eighteenth-century urban success story. That indicated the scale of Norwich's historic lead. But a new urban-industrial world was clearly emerging. The new provincial power-houses were Manchester/Salford, Liverpool, and Birmingham. Even Bristol, which had surpassed Norwich to become the second city by 1750, was becoming overtaken in turn by 1801. In addition, the number of places with populations of 10,000 and over was fast multiplying - from only seven in 1700 to 49 in 1801 - as the general urban infrastructure gained depth. As a result, Norwich was no longer head and shoulders ahead of all rivals. Instead it was very noticeably experiencing a relative eclipse, as was, to a lesser extent, its East Anglian partner, the port of Great Yarmouth.

Specialisation was and is no guarantor of automatic urban growth over the very long term. Everything hinges upon the fortunes of the special economic function. Many towns have faced serious problems when a key trade or industry gets into difficulties. In periods of crisis, individuals may leave to search for work elsewhere. Yet towns by definition must stay put. They gain continuity and identity from a settled location but, by the same token, they have to cope with problems on the spot.

Manufacturing towns, especially single-industry towns, are vulnerable to downturn if the markets for their staple products collapse, or if their wares are undercut by cheaper

competitors elsewhere. Leiden, just across the North Sea, already offered a warning. Norwich's Dutch counterpart saw an outright population decline of remarkable proportions, from perhaps 55,000 in 1700 to 31,000 in 1801. Its famous University could not attract sufficient labour-intensive business to counterbalance the collapse of its stuffs manufactures. An English visitor in 1769 accordingly noted: 'As Leyden consists chiefly of people in trade, which is at present, greatly on the decline, you may suppose the town to be, what in fact it was, extremely dull'.⁵⁵ Its population loss was much the steepest to be found anywhere in eighteenth-century Europe, at a time when most towns were growing. Leiden's problems, as a particularly painful part of the readjustment of the Dutch economy, put those of Norwich into perspective; but that was little consolation in Norwich when the crisis came.

Disaster struck as a result of the long wars between Britain and France from 1793 to 1815. In the early eighteenth century, the city's textiles had been sold chiefly in domestic markets. Over time, however, Norwich merchants had turned their attention overseas, in response to competition at home from new fabrics such as Manchester cottons. Some exports did go to North America, especially before the American war of independence. From the mid-century, however, the big surge had been in sales of Norwich stuffs to mainland Europe, moving into markets vacated by the declining Leiden industry. But this business was severely curtailed by the French wars and consequent trade embargoes. In 1798, the city's staple industry was said, with exaggeration but genuine anguish, to be 'effectively ruined'.⁵⁶ Many weavers simply left the city and the total population declined.⁵⁷ Those who remained lounged in the streets, pale-faced and despairing. In May 1799 a commentator urged onlookers 'rather to commiserate than reproach these emaciated and inactive wanderers' amidst their 'empty looms, uninhabited houses, and unwanted work-rooms'.⁵⁸

In fact, Norwich's famous textile industry was not dead. It hung on and eventually enjoyed a revival, following the peace of 1815. Many in the city fervently expected the 'immediate return of our manufacturing grandeur', as a commentator noted,⁵⁹ although old hands advised against excess euphoria. And the eventual decline of the handloom industry, which followed from the later 1820s, was very protracted.

Starkly revealed, however, was the vulnerability of the urban economy and the extent to which its staple livelihood was dependent upon factors far beyond the city's direct control. This was a deeply worrying portent. Norwich was gradually losing its earlier locational advantage. It drew its raw materials from afar, and its finished goods

were sent to distant markets. Moreover, river transportation was slow to its regional port at Yarmouth, which had a difficult harbour and was in turn losing its own competitive position. Why should worsted weaving continued to be located in Norwich at all? The industry relied upon the accumulated knowhow of its skilled workforce. But Norwich weavers had little scope for cost-cutting, in the event of competition from cheaper rivals. Moreover, a new domestic challenger was emerging in the form of Bradford, located on the West Yorkshire coalfield, where from the late 1790s machine-spun yarn was beginning to be supplied cheaply and close at hand. In fact, the emergent ‘worstedopolis’ of the north, with a population of some 13,000 in its four townships, was still in 1801 much smaller than Norwich. For all that, the signs of change were apparent; and some worsted weavers left East Anglia for Yorkshire.

Citizens in Norwich, meanwhile, had not been silent in their anger and consternation. Already in January 1795 the City Corporation, despite its general support for the Pitt government, had petitioned urgently for an end to the war, ‘which has nearly annihilated the manufactories and trade of this once flourishing city.’⁶⁰ The poverty of the weaving workforce dampened purchasing power throughout the urban economy, which was plunged into depression. One obscure artisan, a member of tiny sect of Muggletonians surviving quietly within the shelter of Norwich’s eclectic Nonconformist tradition, wrote to his co-religionists in London in May 1794, hoping that they could find him work. He explained in simple English: ‘I am sorrow that I have Not rote to you all before this time, the reason wich is I havae bin Disstred in my Buisness. ... the treade is so bad that in Norwich my Friends can Not meet so often as we would.’⁶¹

Radicals meanwhile called for political overhaul at home. Norwich brimmed with urgent debate. A young trainee lawyer, Thomas Amyot, confessed in May 1794 that ‘I am so pestered with Aristocrat & Democrat, Royalist & Jacobin, Pitt & Robespierre, Prussian Hussars & French Sans Culottes that I almost sicken at the sight of a newspaper.’⁶² Numerous radical artisan clubs in Norwich pressed for peace and constitutional reform. They were in contact with similar societies in London and Sheffield. Some ‘Sons of Liberty’ were bitter. In November 1793 inflammatory handbills were circulated. ‘Ninety Thousand Guineas is taken out of our Pockets every week for the expenses of this Cruel, unjust and destructive War! Oh, ye sons of Liberty, why will you suffer it? Haste and revenge your Wrongs. Let us all join and Rebel’, urged one. Another was even more specific: ‘He who wishes well to the cause of Liberty, let him repair to Chapel Field at Five O’clock this afternoon. There he will meet with

Hundreds to begin a Glorious Revolution.’⁶³ There was in fact no uprising. Nonetheless, the sheer extent of discontent, however diverse in its political aims, was sufficient for Norwich to be known as ‘that city of sedition’.

Famously in 1796, moreover, the urban electorate gave the government an anxious moment. Bartlett Gurney, a respectable Quaker banker from a leading Norwich family, boldly stood against William Windham, the sitting Whig MP for the city, who was Secretary of State at War in Pitt’s wartime cabinet, no less. The result was highly dramatic. Windham kept his seat, but only just. He had a majority of 83 votes, surviving only through support from 321 ‘out-voters’ - freemen who had left the city but returned to support the sitting candidate. Within Norwich itself, Gurney actually won the suffrage. He obtained 122 more votes from the city freemen than did Windham. Nonetheless, the Secretary of State had survived.

Further excitements followed six years later, when the electoral battle resumed. During the 1802 campaign, Windham still expected to win. ‘All that system and organisation and malice and activity and Jacobinism and puritanism can do against us here is doing, but I think upon the whole that we shall prevail against it’, he wrote, showing a vivid sense of the multiple forces ranged against him.⁶⁴ Yet this time, it was he who lost. His opponent, the Dissenter William Smith (son of a London merchant) gained - with fine appropriateness - precisely 83 more votes than did Windham. It was a political sensation, which was described, exaggeratedly, as a veritable ‘Jacobin triumph’.⁶⁵ In fact, however, the Norwich electorate had embraced moderate reform; and Smith retained his seat, with one short break only, until 1830.

But his signal success did not stop the war, which resumed after a brief truce in 1802. One radical pamphleteer, naming himself as ‘(in the modern acceptance of the word) a Leveller, Jacobin and Revolutioner’ had hoped that the city’s vote would be decisive. ‘A *disaffected* place so formidable as Norwich, rejecting a War-Minister in disdain, would in all probability have put an end to the war’.⁶⁶ Such calculations were, however, wide of the mark. The hard truth was that Norwich, with or without the hapless William Windham as its MP, was not so important to those outside the city as it was to those who lived and worked there.

V: Norwich as a Regional Capital

By the end of the eighteenth century, there were already clear signs of change in Britain’s urban configuration. Norwich was no longer the provincial leader. Instead, it

was more than ever described as ‘old’, ‘ancient’, ‘venerable’, ‘odd’ rather than thrusting, ‘modern’, and go-ahead. The Corporation itself made an ill-considered decision to permit the destruction of the city’s medieval gates, chiefly in 1792/4, and then to allow the old city walls to decay, on the grounds that the cost of their upkeep was too great in hard times. This ‘improvement’, first suggested in 1786 by the *Norwich Directory*, was made a time when only few people were interested in ‘Gothic’ remnants, especially in the form of secular buildings. The demolition therefore seems to have been largely unmourned. It had the paradoxical effect, however, of leaving Norwich with a reputation for antiquity - but thereafter depriving the city’s tourist industry of one of its most spectacular historical assets.

Survivability was, however, still the great theme in the city’s history. Norwich was sustained by its long-term role as the regional capital of East Anglia. It had no new competitor nearby to provide a new challenge. Unlike Coventry (say), Norwich did not have to face a Birmingham in East Anglia. However, the city’s hinterland was itself changing. East Anglia had been a mixed agricultural and industrial region; but increasingly it was coming to specialise in the former role. Norwich played a part in that, as the commercial, administrative, social and financial capital of a rich and highly developed farming terrain.⁶⁷ Insurance and banking featured among the city’s new growth sectors in the early nineteenth century. In particular, the Norwich finance houses were one of the key mechanisms whereby capital from East Anglia was invested into the fast-growing industrial north and Midlands. This was a new regional specialism in a new regional dispensation. Henceforth Norwich was, as it were, ‘locked’ into agrarian East Anglia, in a way that it had not been before. But, if it isolated the city in one way, its regional role also sustained it. Only in the later twentieth-century growth of Ipswich has a substantial rival emerged within Norwich’s own heartlands of East Anglia - a new challenge for the future.

Returning therefore to the question of urban typicality or otherwise, onlookers in 1800 would not face any difficulty in ‘placing’ Norwich. The city’s long-term decline was, after all, a very long-term and relative one. Moreover, urbanisation has historically been fuelled by a range of urban specialisms, and not by the fate of manufacturing alone. At the end of the eighteenth century, Norwich still ranked among the leading urban centres not only of Britain but also of Europe as a whole, where it was the sixty-eighth largest (jointly with Magdeburg in Germany). A comparison of Tables 1 and 4 (below, pp. 25, 28) shows that between 1700 and 1800 demographic

growth had greatly multiplied the number of towns with populations of 10,000+; but that still only relatively few had surpassed 30,000 by the later eighteenth century.

If Norwich in 1801 no longer stood out from its British peers in population terms, it kept its status among Europe's medium-sized inland towns - with counterparts in places like Amiens, Nîmes, Frankfurt-am-Main, Magdeburg (on the Elbe) and Parma. Interestingly, even an urban rising star like Munich, capital of the emergent Bavaria, was still at this date smaller than the East Anglian metropolis.

Moreover, Norwich had not by any means shed its distinctive qualities. It stood out among Europe's medium-sized commercial centres, for the exceptional vitality and 'outreach' of its urban culture, as seen especially in its literary and artistic flowering. Comparisons with classical Athens in its glory were made not only in the case of late eighteenth-century Edinburgh, at the heart of the Scottish Enlightenment, but also with reference to Norwich. It is true that there was an element of local flattery in this latter attribution.⁶⁸ Yet it paid tribute to the city as a cultural capital in its own right, and as a cultural intermediary with northern Europe. Thus in the 1790s the essayist William Taylor, the leisured son of a Norwich textile manufacturer, was a key translator of German literature into English; as was Anne Plumptre, daughter of the Prebendary of Norwich. With her markedly pro-French views, she was a particularly controversial member of the city's literary and political circles. 'Oh for the good old times! when females were satisfied with feminine employments ...', groaned one traditionalist cleric, shocked to find such a 'totally Frenchified' person emerging from the Anglican calm of the Cathedral Close.⁶⁹

Both Anne Plumptre and William Taylor were members of Norwich's radical intelligentsia who contributed in 1794/5 to their own literary and political magazine. Named *The Cabinet, by a Society of Gentlemen*, this innovative venture attempted to sustain a reform culture. It published not only political articles, discussing constitutional change (one author advocated votes for women) but also poems and general essays.⁷⁰ Appearing fortnightly, it was an ambitious project to launch in a troubled city of 37,000 inhabitants - the successful Whig journal, the *Edinburgh Review*, which followed in 1802, was published quarterly within the much larger Scottish capital with some 82,000 inhabitants. In the event, *The Cabinet* was voluntarily ended in 1795, at a time of political clamp-down. A weekly newspaper supporting reform, named *The Iris* and edited by William Taylor, followed in 1802 but, again, did not last long. The circumstances were not propitious. Yet a snooty

visitor in 1812 still noted the ‘astonishing’ enthusiasm for literature in the city, despite the fact that it had no University and was ‘merely a manufacturing town’.⁷¹

Equally ambitious but less political and more successful was Norwich’s celebrated Society of Artists, founded in 1803. Their skills were fostered by urban traditions of artistry, nurtured by the city’s rich textile heritage of expertise in colour and design. In addition, the artists were sustained by an affluent urban clientele, which was willing to support local art. Here there were noted similarities with the commercial context of seventeenth-century Dutch art, which was well known to East Anglian collectors. However, it took the mutual organisation of the city’s artists into their own Society to consolidate their *de facto* identification as a ‘school’. Nothing as formalised was to be found anywhere else, outside London; and nowhere else in Britain was the urban connection so cultivated directly by the artists themselves.

Admittedly, none of the painters made great fortunes. Nonetheless, from 1805 onwards, the Society’s annual exhibitions, held in the busy Assize week, kept their work in the public eye. Thus were bolstered the careers of modestly-born artists like John Crome, son of a Norwich journeyman weaver and publican, and John Sell Cotman, son of a Norwich hair-dresser who later kept a small draper’s shop, as well as those of lesser luminaries like James Stark (1794-1859), the son of a Scottish dyer who had come to work in Norwich, and George Vincent (b.1796), another son of a Norwich weaver.

Between them,⁷² they painted the serene enduringness of the Norfolk countryside, that framed the long-term survival of the city. They also depicted the busy life of the winding river, gracefully linking Norwich to Yarmouth and the wider world. And they painted the city too: in evocative panoramas and detailed vignettes, featuring street scenes, old housing (but no weavers at their looms), the Cathedral, the water mills, the river banks, and the central market, beautifully shown in its combined hubbub and harmony by Cotman in 1806. So there survives a visual record of distinctive urbanity by those who witnessed it, capturing the ‘fine old city’ of Norwich amidst its historic transition - from second city to regional capital.

TABLE 1

**West and Central European Towns and Cities (10,000+) in 1700,
Grouped by Population Size¹**

<i>Population Size</i>	<i>No. of Cities</i>	<i>Aggregate Pop.</i>	<i>Towns 10,000+ as % of All Pop.</i>
500,000+	2	1,085,000²	1.33%
100,000+	9	1,305,000³	1.60%
50,000+	19	1,263,000⁴	1.55%
30,000+	30	1,094,000⁵	1.34%
10,000+	141	2,313,000	2.84%
<hr/>			
ALL TOWNS 10,000+	201	7,060,000	8.66%
<hr/>			
TOTAL POPULATION		81,400,000⁶	
<hr/>			

Source: Calculated from data in J. de Vries, *European Urbanisation, 1500-1800* (London, 1984), pp. 269-78. Figures are best estimates, based upon local enumerations where available.

¹ Comprising all countries in West and Central Europe from the Atlantic across to and including Austria-Bohemia and Poland; but excluding Slovakia, Hungary and the Balkans.

² In size order (1) London; (2) Paris.

³ In size order: (3) Naples; (4) Amsterdam; (5) Lisbon; (6 jointly) Rome, Venice; (8) Milan; (9) Vienna; (10) Madrid; (11) Palermo.

⁴ In size order: (12) Lyon; (13) Seville; (14 jointly) Brussels, Genoa; (16) Marseilles; (17) Florence; (18 jointly) Antwerp, Copenhagen, Hamburg; (21) Rouen; (22) Bologna; (23) Dublin; (24 severally) Berlin, Leiden, Lille; (27) Ghent; (28 jointly) Bordeaux, Danzig, Valencia.

⁵ In size order: (31) Rotterdam; (32 jointly) Liège, Stockholm; (34) Barcelona; (35 severally) Cologne, Nantes, Turin; (38) Verona; (39 severally) Dresden, Edinburgh, Messina, Nuremberg; (43) Prague; (44 jointly) Bruges, Toulouse; (46 severally) Brescia, Königsberg, Parma; (49 jointly) Haarlem, The Hague; (51 severally) Amiens, Malaga, Norwich, Orléans, Padua, Rennes, Strasbourg, Tours, Utrecht, Zaragossa. [Note: Jan de Vries lists Norwich's population as 29,000, whereas here it is taken to be 30,000. The difference in terms of calculating Europe's aggregate urban population is minimal.]

⁶ As estimated by De Vries, *European Urbanisation*, p. 36.

TABLE 2

Occupations of the Social & Business Elite in Norwich in 1783

Occupations by Economic Sector⁷	Number	% of All With Occupations	% of All Listed
Agriculture	31	2.3%	1.9%
Mining/quarrying	5	0.4%	0.3%
Building	102	7.7%	6.4%
Manufacturing	546	41.3%	34.3%
Dealing ⁸	370	28.0%	23.2%
Public Service/Professional	192	14.5%	12.0%
Transport	10	0.8%	0.6%
Industrial Service ⁹	5	0.4%	0.3%
Domestic Service ¹⁰	62	4.7%	3.9%
All Occupations	1,323	100.1%	82.9%
None Given	268		16.8%
Not Classified	3		0.2%
TOTAL LISTED	1,594		99.9%

Source: Figures calculated from entries in Anon., *The Norwich Directory: Or, Gentlemen and Tradesmen's Assistant* (Norwich, 1783), pp. 5-46. The assistance of Serena Kelly in compiling this data is gratefully acknowledged.

Extra Note: Further analysis of Norwich among other provincial centres with early Directories has since been published by PJC as 'Business Leaders and Town Gentry in Early Industrial Britain: Specialist Occupations and Shared Urbanism', *Urban History*, 39 (2012), pp. 20-49; and on PJC personal website as Corfield Pdf/25.

⁷ This economic classification sub-divides occupations into separate groups by type of product or service. The schema (known as Booth/Armstrong) was derived from the nineteenth-century occupational censuses, following the Registrar General's own categories, by Charles Booth in 1886; and has since been adapted by historians from W.A. Armstrong onwards: see C. Harvey, E. Green and P.J. Corfield, *The Westminster Historical Database* (Bristol, 1998), pp. 87-112.

⁸ 'Dealing' includes all occupations involved in the sale and distribution of goods, whether wholesale or retail. There is an unavoidable overlap with 'manufacturing' where the same individuals both made and sold goods (a problem highlighted long ago by Booth). In the Booth/Armstrong classification, the schema follows the main meaning of the occupational title, so that those listed as '-makers' are classified as manufacturers: *ibid.*, pp. 89-91.

⁹ This category relates to occupations that serviced industry, broadly defined. It is a hybrid and not very satisfactory grouping, which ranges from bankers and brokers to labourers and porters.

¹⁰ This category relates to occupations that serviced the household. It includes not only domestic servants (not usually listed in Directories) but also occupations providing services for the individual or for the home, such as hair-dressers, cleaners, chimney sweeps and rubbish collectors.

TABLE 3

**Leading Towns and Conurbations¹¹ in England and Wales,
in 1700, 1750 and 1801**

<i>1700</i>	<i>Pop. in '000</i>	<i>1750</i>	<i>Pop. in '000</i>	<i>1801</i>	<i>Pop. in '000</i>
Metropolitan London	575	Metropolitan London	675	Metropolitan London	948
Norwich	30	Bristol	50	Manchester/Salford	88
Bristol	22	Norwich	36	Liverpool	83
Newcastle/Gateshead	18	Newcastle/Gateshead	29	Birmingham	74
Exeter	14	Birmingham	24	Bristol	64
York	11	Liverpool	22	Leeds	53
Great Yarmouth	10	Manchester/Salford	18	Sheffield	46
		Exeter	16	Plymouth/Dock	43
7 towns over 10,000¹²	680	Leeds	16	Newcastle/Gateshead	42
		Plymouth/Dock	14	Norwich	37
		Chester	13	Bath	35
		Coventry	13	Portsmouth	33
		Nottingham	12	Hull	30
		Sheffield	12	Nottingham	29
		Worcester	11	Sunderland	25
		York	11	Oldham	22
		Great Yarmouth	10	Bolton	18
		Portsmouth	10	Exeter	17
		Rochester/Chatham	10	Great Yarmouth	17
		Sunderland	10	Leicester	17
				Rochester/Chatham	17
		20 towns over 10,000¹³	1,012	York	16
				Plus another 27 towns	
				49 towns over 10,000¹⁴	2,079

Source: Best estimates for 1700 and 1750, derived from local enumerations where available, plus 1801 census returns.

Note: Because figures in Table 3 refer to entire conurbations (such as Manchester/Salford), the size order of English towns differs slightly from that shown in footnotes to Table 4, which show rankings of single municipalities.

¹¹ Conurbations of contiguous urban development are here counted as one unit, even if they contain more than one municipal authority: these include Manchester/Salford; Newcastle/Gateshead; Plymouth/Dock; Rochester/Chatham; and metropolitan London (including the Cities of London and Westminster, plus the Borough of Southwark, and all contiguous urbanised parishes).

¹² Containing 13.1% of total population in England and Wales estimated at 5.2 million.

¹³ Containing 16.6% of total population in England and Wales estimated at 6.1 million.

¹⁴ Containing 23.4% of total population in England and Wales of 8.9 million at 1801 census.

TABLE 4

**West and Central European¹⁵ Towns and Cities (10,000+)¹⁶ in 1800,
Grouped by Population Size**

<i>Population Size 10,000+</i>	<i>Number of Cities</i>	<i>Aggregate Population</i>	<i>Towns as % of All Population</i>
500,000+	2	1,446,000¹⁷	1.18%
100,000+	15	2,531,000¹⁸	2.06%
50,000+	33	2,307,000¹⁹	1.88%
30,000+	42	1,538,000²⁰	1.25%
10,000+	268	4,345,000	3.54%
ALL TOWNS 10,000+	360	12,167,000	9.91%
TOTAL POPULATION		122,700,000²¹	

Source: Calculated from data in J. de Vries, *European Urbanisation, 1500-1800* (London, 1984), pp. 269-78. Figures from census evidence, where available; or, otherwise, best estimates.

¹⁵ Comprising all countries in West and Central Europe from the Atlantic across to and including Austria-Bohemia and Poland; but excluding Slovakia, Hungary and the Balkans.

¹⁶ Following the source, the figures here relate to individual municipalities and not to conurbations, with the except of London and Paris. That affects the rankings of some cities (Manchester with Salford would rank above rather than below Liverpool) but does not seriously affect the overall urban profile.

¹⁷ In size order (1) London; (2) Paris.

¹⁸ In size order [newcomers in this group in bold type]: (3) Naples; (4) Vienna; (5) Amsterdam; (6) Lisbon; (7) **Dublin**; (8) Madrid; (9) Rome; (10) **Berlin**; (11) Palermo; (12) Venice; (13) Milan; (14) **Barcelona**; (15) **Copenhagen**; (16 jointly) **Hamburg**; **Lyon**.

¹⁹ In size order [newcomers to this group in bold type]: (18) Seville; (19) Genoa; (20) Bordeaux; (21 jointly) **Edinburgh**; **Turin**; (23 jointly) Florence; Rouen; (25) Valencia; (26 jointly) **Liverpool**; Marseilles; (28 jointly) **Glasgow**; **Prague**; (30 jointly) **Cork**; **Stockholm**; (32 jointly) Brussels; **Nantes**; (34) Bologna; (35 jointly) **Cadiz**; **Manchester**; (37 jointly) **Birmingham**; **Bristol**; (39) **Warsaw**; (40) Antwerp; (41 jointly) **Konigsberg**; Lille; (43) **Rotterdam**; (44 severally) **Dresden**; **Grenada**; **Liège**; (47) **Wroclaw** (Breslau); (48 jointly) **Leeds**; **Livorno**; (50) Ghent.

²⁰ In size order [newcomers in this group in bold type; declining towns returning to this group in *italics*]: (51) Strasbourg; (52) **Sheffield**; (53 jointly) **Catania**; Toulouse (55) Messina; (56) Orléans; (57) **Plymouth**; (58) Cologne; (59) Verona; (60 severally) **Cordoba**; *Danzig*; **Murcia**; **Nîmes**; Zaragoza; (65 jointly) **Limerick**; **Metz**; (67) The Hague; (68 jointly) **Magdeburg**; *Norwich*; (70 severally) Amiens; **Bremen**; Malaga; (73 jointly) **Frankfurt-am-Main**; **Jerez**; (75 severally) **Caen**; **Munich**; Parma; (78) **Cartagena**; (79 severally) **Bath**; Bruges; **Leipzig**; Padua; **Portsmouth**; **Toulon**; Utrecht; (86 severally) **Graz**, *Leiden*; **Montpellier**; (87) **Reims**; (90 severally) **Clermont Ferrand**; **Ferrara**; **Porto**.

²¹ As estimated by De Vries, *European Urbanisation*, p. 36.

ENDNOTES:

- ¹ G. Borrow, *Lavengro: The Scholar, the Gypsy, the Priest* (London, 1851), i, pp. 177-8.
- ² Anon., *A Norfolk Tale ...* (London, 1792), p. 32.
- ³ A. Neville, *A Description of the Famous Citie of Norwich* (London, 1623), [p. 1].
- ⁴ BL, Ms. Sloane 1900, E. Browne, 'Journal of a Tour' (Sept. 1662), f. 36v [punctuation added].
- ⁵ Borrow, *Lavengro*, i, p. 178.
- ⁶ F. Blomefield, *An Essay towards a Topographical History of the County of Norfolk* (London, 1805-10), iii, p. 322.
- ⁷ P.J. Corfield, 'A Provincial Capital in the Later Seventeenth Century: The Case of Norwich', in P. Clark and P. Slack (eds), *Crisis and Order in English Towns, 1500-1700: Essays in Urban History* (London, 1972), p. 267.
- ⁸ P. Clark, 'Introduction', in idem (ed.), *European Small Towns* (Cambridge, 1995), esp. pp. 1-9.
- ⁹ P.O. Pedersen, *Small African Towns: Between Rural Networks and Urban Hierarchies* (Avebury, 1997), esp. pp. 3-6.
- ¹⁰ See A. Armstrong, 'Population, 1700-1850', in C. Rawcliffe and R. Wilson (eds), *Norwich since 1550* (London, 2004), pp. 243-70.
- ¹¹ An advertisement in 1722 even offered 'second-hand coffins' for sale: *Norwich Gazette*, 22 November 1722.
- ¹² W. Honeycomb [pseud.], *The History of Pudica, ...* (London, 1754), pp. 21-2.
- ¹³ Anon., *A Compleat History of the Famous City of Norwich ...* (Norwich, 1728), p. 2; and see R. Wilson, 'The Textile Industry', in Rawcliffe and Wilson (eds), *Norwich since 1550*, pp. 219-42.
- ¹⁴ Compare evidence in P.R.O. CO/388/21, part ii, f. 286: 'Computations Made by some Persons Concerned in the Weaving Trade at Norwich' (1719); with BL, Add. Mss. 37,873, Windham Pprs XXXII, Robert Partridge (Norwich manufacturer) to William Pitt, 16 Jan. 1785.
- ¹⁵ For the debates, see L.A. Clarkson, *Proto-Industrialisation: The First Phase of Industrialisation?* (Basingstoke, 1985); and D.C. Coleman, 'Proto-Industrialisation: A Concept Too Many', *EconHR*, second series, xxxvi (1983), pp. 435-48.
- ¹⁶ Corfield, 'Provincial Capital', pp. 280-2.
- ¹⁷ See P. Dunn, 'Trade', in C. Rawcliffe and R. Wilson (eds), *Medieval Norwich* (London, 2004), pp. 213-34.
- ¹⁸ J. Thelwall, 'Prefatory Memoir; in idem, *Poems, Chiefly Written in Retirement* (Hereford, 1802), p. xxxviii.
- ¹⁹ Cited in A. Earland, *John Opie and his Circle* (London, 1911), p. 214.

-
- ²⁰ R. Potter, 'A Farewell Hymn to the Country ...', in *ibid.*, *Poems* (London, 1774), p. 67.
- ²¹ Anon., *The Norwich Directory: Or, Gentlemen and Tradesmen's Assistant ...* (Norwich, 1783), p. iii.
- ²² Bodleian Library, Rawlinson Mss. Poetry 222, Anon., 'The Norwich Assembly: Or, the Descent of Venus' (n.d., 1730?).
- ²³ 'Erraticus' [J. Larwood], *Erratics: By a Sailor, Containing Rambles in Norfolk ...* (London, 1800), i, pp. 98-9.
- ²⁴ The 'Norwich Plainhead' is a recognised variety: see C.A. House, *Norwich Canaries* (London, 1954), pp. 7-15.
- ²⁵ BL, Add. Mss. 27,966, W. Arderon, Letter and Tracts, 1745-60, fos. 228-9: listing 56 street cries heard in Norwich in the 1750s.
- ²⁶ See P. Clark, *British Clubs and Societies: The Origins of an Associational World* (Oxford, 2000), *passim*; and Norwich references, esp. pp. 89, 133, 456.
- ²⁷ J.P. Ferguson, *An Eighteenth-Century Heretic: Dr. Samuel Clarke* (Kington, 1976), pp. 7-8. See also W. Whiston, *Historical Memoirs of the Life ... of Dr Samuel Clarke* (London, 1748), p. 9, for the Clarkes' astronomical studies.
- ²⁸ See C. Wilkins-Jones, 'Norwich City Library and its Intellectual Milieu, 1608-1825' (UEA, PhD thesis, 2001), 2 vols.
- ²⁹ S. Renton, 'The Moral Economy of the English Middling Sort ...: The Case of Norwich in 1766 and 1767', in A. Randall and A. Charlesworth (eds), *Markets, Market Culture and Popular Protest in Eighteenth-Century Britain and Ireland* (Liverpool, 1996), pp. 130-2.
- ³⁰ BL, Add. Mss. 27,966, W. Arderon, Letter and Tracts, 1745-60, fos. 228-9.
- ³¹ A. Hartshorne (ed.), *Memoirs of a Royal Chaplain, 1729-63: The Correspondence of Edmund Pyle, D.D. ...* (London, 1905), p. 285.
- ³² Anon., *The Gentleman's Bottle Companion: Containing a Collection of ... Songs ...* (London, 1768; repr. Edinburgh, 1979), pp. 23-4.
- ³³ Norwich Colman Library, Bound vol., 'Historical Accounts of Norfolk and Norwich.'
- ³⁴ T., 'History of Norwich Manufactures', *Monthly Magazine*, vi (1798), p. 415.
- ³⁵ L. Stone, 'Libertine Sexuality in Post-Restoration England: Group Sex and Flagellation among the Middling Sort in Norwich in 1706/7', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, ii (1992), pp. 511-26.
- ³⁶ BL, Add. Mss. 27,966, W. Arderon, Letter and Tracts, 1745-60, f. 68.
- ³⁷ [J. Stacy], *A Topographical and Historical Account of the City and County of Norwich ...* (Norwich, 1819), p. 40.
- ³⁸ B. Cozens-Hardy (ed.), *The Diary of Syllas Neville, 1767-88* (Oxford, 1950), p. 312.
- ³⁹ HMC, *Report on the Mss of ... the Duke of Portland II* (London, 1901), p. 156.
- ⁴⁰ 'Erraticus', *Erratics*, i, pp. 112-13.

-
- ⁴¹ Anon., *Norwich Directory*, titlepage. For definitions of ‘gentility’, see P.J. Corfield, ‘The Rivals: Landed and Other Gentlemen’, in N.B. Harte and R. Quinault (eds), *Land and Society in Britain* (Manchester, 1996), pp. 1-33.
- ⁴² See M. Knights, ‘Politics, 1660-1835’, in Rawcliffe and Wilson (eds), *Norwich since 1550*, pp. 167-92.
- ⁴³ NRO, NCR, 16C (no.47), Mayor’s Court Papers: Resolution for Well Ordering and Regulating the City, January 1763.
- ⁴⁴ A.J. Eddington, *The First Fifty Years of Quakerism in Norwich* (London, 1932), p. 14.
- ⁴⁵ Anon., *The History of the City of Norwich* (Norwich, 1718), p. 4.
- ⁴⁶ E.J. Bellamy, *James Wheatley and Norwich Methodism in the 1750s* (Peterborough, 1994), pp. 36-49, 192.
- ⁴⁷ R. Ward and R.P. Heitzenrater (eds), *The Works of John Wesley, XXI: Journals and Diaries IV, 1755-65* (Nashville, Tenn., 1992), p. 226.
- ⁴⁸ Bellamy, *James Wheatley*, p. 189.
- ⁴⁹ P.H. Marshall, *William Godwin* (New Haven, 1984), p. 18.
- ⁵⁰ W.S. Lewis and others (eds), *Horace Walpole’s Walpole’s Correspondence, XXXVIII: With H.S. Conway and Others II* (London, 1974), p. 560.
- ⁵¹ [J. Sayers], ‘An Address from the Citizens of N-----h to the National Convention [in France]’, (1795), in M.D. George (ed.), *Catalogue of Prints and Drawings in the British Museum* (London, 1942), vii, p. 155: no. 8617.
- ⁵² L. Schwarz, ‘Residential Leisure Towns in England towards the End of the Eighteenth Century’, *Urban History*, xxvii (2000), pp. 51-61, esp. p. 56.
- ⁵³ [R. Beatniffe] (ed.), *The Norfolk Tour: Or, Traveller’s Pocket Companion ...* (Norwich, 5th edn., 1795), p. 71.
- ⁵⁴ [T.H.B. Oldfield], *An Entire and Complete History, ... of the Boroughs of Great Britain ...* (London, 1792), ii, p. 288.
- ⁵⁵ [H. Peckham], *The Tour of Holland, Dutch Brabant, the Austrian Netherlands and Part of France ...* (London, 1772), p. 52.
- ⁵⁶ T., ‘History of Norwich Manufactures’, p. 415.
- ⁵⁷ P.J. Corfield, ‘The Social and Economic History of Norwich, 1650-1850: A Study in Urban Growth’ (University of London, PhD thesis, 1976), pp. 18-23, 327-8.
- ⁵⁸ T.S.N. [Thomas Starling Norgate], ‘Sketch of the State of Society at Norwich’, *Monthly Magazine*, vii (May, 1799), p. 282.
- ⁵⁹ [Stacy], *Topographical ... Account*, p. 122.
- ⁶⁰ NRO, NCR, 16C, Norwich Assembly Book, no. 11, 27 January 1795.
- ⁶¹ BL, Add. Mss. 60,168 (Muggletonian Archive), f. 234v.

-
- ⁶² P.J. Corfield and C. Evans (eds), *Youth and Revolution in the 1790s: Letters of Thomas Amyot, Henry Crabb Robinson and William Patisson* (Stroud, 1996), p. 56.
- ⁶³ PRO, HO/42/27, fos. 182, 190.
- ⁶⁴ L.S. Benjamin (ed.), *The Windham Papers: The Life and Correspondence of ... William Windham, 1750-1810 ...* (London, 1913), ii, p. 194.
- ⁶⁵ HMC, *Report on the Mss of J.B. Fortescue, Esq. VII* (London, 1912), p. 99.
- ⁶⁶ ‘A Leveller, Jacobin, and Revolutioner’, *To the Poor of Norwich* (Norwich, 1795), s.s.fol.
- ⁶⁷ P.J. Corfield, ‘The Identity of a Regional Capital: Norwich since the Eighteenth Century’, in P. Kooij and P. Pellenbarg (eds), *Regional Capitals: Past, Present, Prospects* (Assen, The Netherlands, 1994), pp. 129-47; and idem, ‘East Anglian Towns, 1540-1840’, in P. Clark (ed.), *Urban History of Britain II: 1540-1840* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 31-48.
- ⁶⁸ T.S.N., ‘Sketch of the State of Society’, p. 279.
- ⁶⁹ [W. Beloe], *The Sexagenarian: ... Recollections of a Literary Life* (London, 1817), ii, pp. 364-5.
- ⁷⁰ For the contributors to *The Cabinet*, see Corfield and Evans (eds), *Youth and Revolution*, esp. pp. 187-95.
- ⁷¹ E. Robertson (ed.), *Letters and Papers of Andrew Robertson, A.M., Miniature Painter ...* (London, 1897), p. 172.
- ⁷² For details, see A. Hemingway, *The Norwich School of Painters, 1803-33* (Oxford, 1979); Andrew Moore, *The Norwich School of Artists* (London, 1985; 1995); and J. Walpole, *Art and Artists of the Norwich School* (Woodbridge, 1997).