A SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY MARKET TOWN: TONBRIDGE

By C. W. Chalklin, M.A., B.Litt.

The Kentish towns of the seventeenth century could be described in more than one sense as country towns. By modern standards their size was minute. The largest, Canterbury, had about 6,000 people, and Rochester, Maidstone, and Dover about 3,000 inhabitants. There were about a dozen more, such as Dartford, Ashford, and Sandwich, with a population of between 1,000 and 2,500 people, and finally a group of about six very small towns with between 500 and 800 people, including Tonbridge and West Malling. With usually no more than one or two main streets the fields lay almost at the back door of most of the houses. Not far from the centre there were detached houses with large gardens, barns, stables and orchards. The streets were often tree lined, and only partly paved. All this suggests that the atmosphere of the towns can hardly have differed from that of the surrounding countryside. They were largely non-industrial, and apart from the innkeepers who served the road traffic, most people gained a livelihood from serving the needs of the neighbouring farmers. Nearly all held a weekly market. Some of the more substantial tradesmen on the outskirts were also farmers, keeping some cattle or cultivating a few acres. Most townspeople were connected by blood with the local yeomen and husbandmen. In the case of the unincorporated towns yet another link with the neighbouring rural district was provided by the fact that the parish was the unit of administration, and usually included a large rural area as well as the town.

Of the smaller towns, Tonbridge, with some 600 to 800 inhabitants, may be taken as an example. It was unincorporated, and lay in the largest parish in Kent. Almost from the Norman Conquest there had been a town on the site. It lay on a main road from London to Hastings, Rye and Winchelsea, on the only important river crossing, that of the Medway. During the reign of William I this road had become a principal route to Normandy. To protect it a castle had been built at Tonbridge, and the town arose near its walls. Its strategic position made it a natural centre for the neighbouring villages, and by the beginning of the fourteenth century it was serving the surrounding area with a market.

From the bank of the Medway the land rises gently northwards, forming a well-drained site for the town. The ground determined that it should lie along a single highway, and not at the junction of several

roads. The main road from Rye joined another highway from Sussex just to the south of the Medway, so as to use a single river crossing. Further, the clay, sand and gravel on which the town lies are bounded on the west side for nearly half a mile north of the River by low lying alluvial ground. Thus the London road from the west stayed on higher ground, and joined the Wrotham road (from due north) about half a mile north of the old market place, the centre of the town. Between this junction and the River only one lateral road, from Maidstone, of secondary importance, enters the High Street. It was natural that the tradespeople should build their houses and shops beside this one main road.

In the seventeenth century, from the Great Bridge over the northernmost arm of the Medway houses were contiguous on both sides of the road for about 100 yards, up to the market cross. There the street widened, to accommodate the market place, the cross being merely a roof supported on posts, open at all sides. The houses probably remained contiguous up the High Street for another 100 yards, as far as the junction with Church Lane ; above this point, on the east side, there were perhaps half a dozen more houses ; then, after a gap filled by the Bull Inn, with its barns and stables, garden and orchard surrounding it, came a toll house and bar and causeway across the town ditch ; beyond on both sides of the road lay a few more houses, generally well spaced ; those on the west side included the School, a long, stone, two storey building with a frontage of 160 feet. There were a few contiguous buildings on Dry Hill near the junction with the London road ; none lay beyond it.

A few other buildings lay in the two streets leading off the market place, and in Church Lane. To the south of the Great Bridge the low lying land between the five arms of the River was frequently flooded, preventing any large scale extension of the town. Besides the Great Bridge of three arches, three bridges each of one arch spanned minor streams within a space of 50 yards ; a short distance to the south lay the fifth bridge of two arches, crossing the other main arm of the Medway. There were only a few houses strung along both sides of the road as far south as the junction of the Rye and Frant roads. This was nearly three quarters of a mile from the top of the town.[1]

The two largest buildings in the town were the Church and the Castle. The Church was large, with two aisles, including a twelfth-century chancel, and thirteenth-century nave and tower. The graveyard lay on the north, and the vicarage and its land on the south. The castle stood on a spur overlooking the River, on the west of the High Street ; it comprised a motte, with a small shell keep on top, a bailey

[1] This description of the town is based on the evidence of contemporary deeds, wills and lawsuits, on old prints, and surviving buildings.

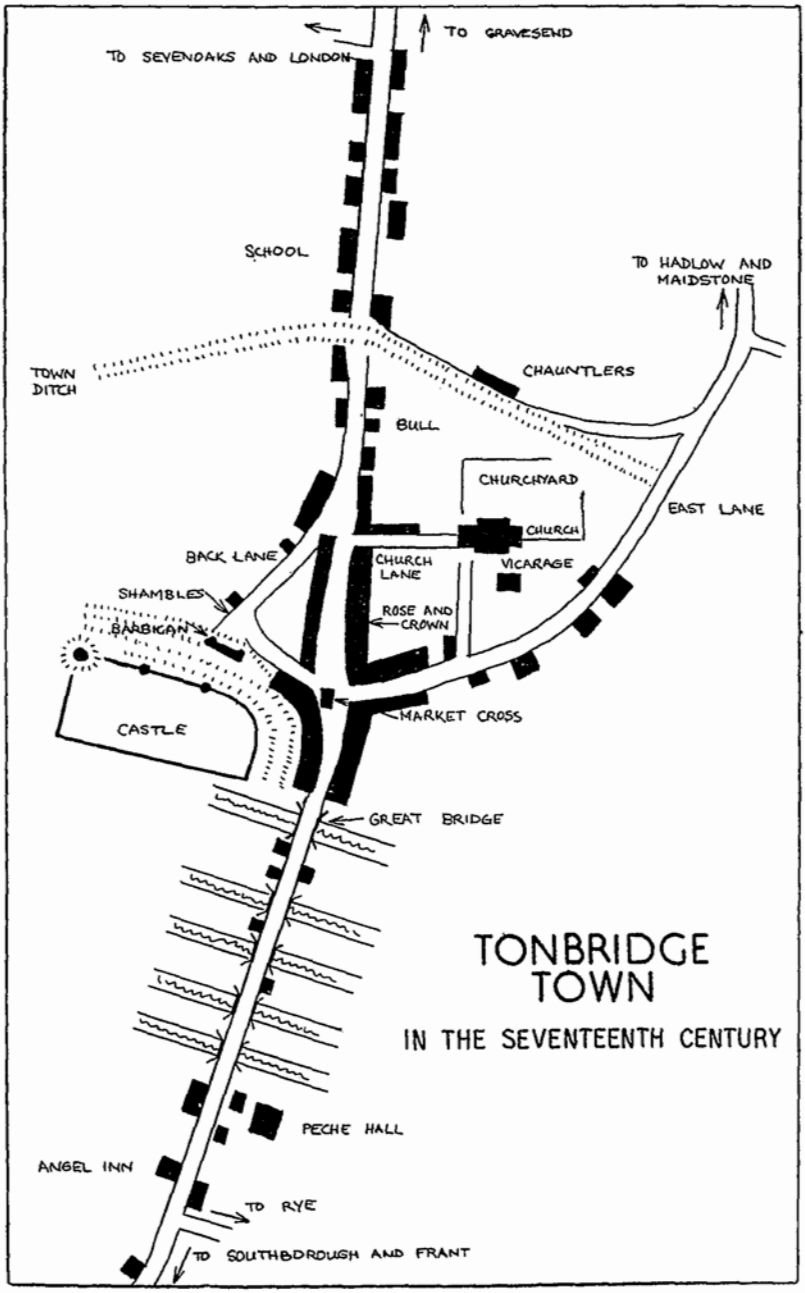
with a fine thirteenth-century gatehouse, and walls interspersed with towers. A moat separated it from the barbican on the north, and another moat lay beyond the barbican. The fact that various parts of the grounds were let by the owner suggests that it was not garrisoned. It was taken over by Parliamentary forces in 1643, and finally dismantled in 1646.

The Castle, Church, and School were the only stone buildings, timber frame construction being normal. All the surviving houses of the period have more than one floor, two storeys and a garret in the gables appearing to be the usual type, such as the Chequers premises in the market place, or the Port Reeves House in East Lane. Shops would seem to have been usually in or near the market place : some, at least, had pent-houses with an open frontage for the display of goods. The shops probably filled the narrow frontage of the houses that were contiguous, the hall and kitchen lying behind, and the chambers and storerooms above.

Between 1600 and 1700 the population of the town probably increased by at least 20 to 30 per cent. To house the additional people there may have been some building on the verge of the town, possibly below the Great Bridge, or on Dry Hill at the north end of the town, or down the side lanes. A deed of 1625 mentioned cottages built on the waste lands of the manor of Tonbridge, probably on the western side of the High Street opposite the Church. One instance, however, is known of the erection of a house in a back garden : in the will of Thomas Johnson, mercer, 1634, he left his son Thomas the messuage in which he had lived, and his other son Abraham the house he had set up in his backyard.[1] Sometimes messuages were rebuilt and divided : thus about 1610–20 Henry Allen, land surveyor, bought from his father-in-law, John Walter, cutler, part of his messuage on the west side of the market place, rebuilt it, divided it, and lived in half himself.[2] But probably most often a new household was provided for by the splitting-up of an existing building. A deed of 1645 refers to " the messuage now divided into divers, several dwellings called the sign of the George ", at the north corner of Church Lane and the High Street.[3]

Nearly all the houses had a close or yard behind them. Some of the tightly packed houses in the market place, like the four tenements owned by John Brightling, blacksmith, in 1648, between the market place and the Castle moat, may have had to share a close. Other houses had stables and gardens of a quarter or half an acre. Thus in 1590 Thomas Harris, butcher, whose house fronted on the High Street and backed

[1] Kent Archives Office : Rochester Consistory will registers : DRb/Pwr 22 f. 84.
[2] Tonbridge Urban District Council Archives : deed of 1640.
[3] *K.A.O.*, Weller Poley MSS. U38 T7.


TO GRAVESEND
TO SEVENOAKS AND LONDON
SCHOOL
TO HADLOW AND MAIDSTONE
TOWN DITCH
CHAUNTLERS
BULL
CHURCHYARD
CHURCH
EAST LANE
BACK LANE
CHURCH LANE
VICARAGE
SHAMBLES
ROSE AND CROWN
BARBICAN
CASTLE
MARKET CROSS
GREAT BRIDGE
TONBRIDGE TOWN
IN THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY
PECHE HALL
ANGEL INN
TO RYE
TO SOUTHBOROUGH AND FRANT

on the shambles, had little plots of ground on the north and south of his house, a close and a little garden adjoining, and a stable. The detached houses on the outskirts naturally had more land attached to them. Thus the messuage on the south-east corner of the Great Bridge had barns, stables, closes of two acres, gardens, and an orchard.

Many houses had their own wells, such as the house of John Hooper, parish clerk, *d.* 1641, on the verge of the town. Others, as in the centre near the market place, shared a well between two or more tenements. There was at least one common well for the use of the poor. Thus in 1558 Clement Haytt, saddler, left 40/– " to the repairing of the well at the north end of the town for the easement of the poor there dwelling that be not able to pay for the repairing thereof ".[1] The cleanliness of the well was of course all-important, and when Thomas How leased a messuage at the north end of the town in 1655, one of the conditions was that he cleanse and scour it, and " amend the staving thereof " once a year.[2] Judging from the evidence of the well of a timber-framed house pulled down in the 1930's, the water came from pure and plentiful springs, and the overflow ran by underground channels to the River 200 yards to the south.

For washing animals and carts and watering horses there was a horsewash at the Great Bridge, a bay of the Medway between the castle wall and the north end of the bridge. Another was made by the fifth bridge, protected from the main flow of the river by a stone wall.

A watercourse, presumably open, ran down the High Street from the toll bar to the Great Bridge. Probably much unhealthy garbage travelled along it. Other not uncommon nuisances in the High Street were straying pigs and the overflow of sewage from individual houses. But most offensive of all were the carcases and other butchers' refuse thrown out from the slaughterhouse in the shambles. All these nuisances were, however, common at this period, and on the whole the town was perhaps kept cleaner than most by the fact that the sloping site did allow an opportunity for the refuse to be washed away.

Part of the High Street, between Church Lane and the market cross, was paved at least from about 1580. In 1633 Thomas Roades of Maidstone deposed that part of the town had been paved 50 years or more, and that formerly it had been done with small stone, but lately with larger. The pavement, only six yards wide, ran down the centre of the street, and there were " divers ancient pavements " before the doors of several inhabitants, leading to the main pavement. Largely because of the heavy carriages of iron travelling from the Wealden iron works to Chatham and London, the five bridges were often in an almost ruinous condition. There was marshy ground between the fourth

[1] *K.A.O.*, DRb/Pwr 12 f. 345.
[2] *K.A.O.*, Knocker Collection, U55 T438.

and fifth bridges. Wooden clappers, 100 feet long and three feet wide, were regularly maintained at this spot. Owing to the treacherous nature of the ground, and the frequent flooding, passage through the town on horse or even foot might have been impossible in winter without them.[1]

The livelihood of the town was only to a small extent dependent on industry. By the early seventeenth century the cloth and iron industries of the Weald of Kent had passed the peak of their prosperity, but were still important features of the economy of the area. Since ironworks required not a strategic position such as was offered by the town, but the presence of streams convenient for damming, and a ready supply of ore and timber for charcoal, they did not lie in the towns. The nearest of the two furnaces and two forges in Tonbridge parish was a mile from the market place. The cloth industry, however, was closely linked with the town. For most of the century there were two or three clothiers living on the outskirts. A messuage on the south side of the Great Bridge seems to have remained a clothier's house through several changes of ownership : *in 1612 Edward Oxley, clothier, sold it* to Thomas Busse, of Pembury, clothier, when it was occupied by John Couchman, another clothier. In 1627 John Dunck, clothier, was in occupation, and in 1648 Robert Day of Tudeley sold it to William Farrant of Tonbridge, both parties being clothiers.[2] It is probable that these sites on the edge of the town were chosen because the town was a strategic centre for the parish ; this made it a convenient place for deposit and collection by the carders, spinners and weavers, and for final dispatch to London. On the verge of the town there was enough room for the erection of workhouses, where many of the finishing processes were done. The house that Thomas How, clothier, leased in 1655 at the north end of the town had a copper in the workhouse, and a hurdle, " tainter ", planks and joists in the workshop, suggesting that cloth was both dyed and stretched on the premises.[3] There were several weavers, and one or two dyers in the town. The simpler processes of spinning and carding were probably a part-time occupation of the cottagers, their wives and children. Yet these crafts were as much carried on in the country as in the town.

The traffic along the main road brought a livelihood to a small number of people. It was much used by travellers to and from the Continent going *via* Dieppe and Le Havre. Following the outbreak of the Civil War in 1642 Thomas Weller, the chief parliamentary supporter in Tonbridge, was ordered to arrest all suspected persons ; for many

[1] *K.A.O.*, Gordon Ward Collection, U442 Q7 (Town Wardens accounts 1579–1742).
[2] *T.U.D.C. Archives :* deeds, 1612–48.
[3] *K.A.O.*, U55 T438.

" have resorted lately from beyond the seas to England and have landed at Rye, and have disposed themselves into diverse parts of the Kingdom ".[1] Much of London's and especially the King's fish came from Rye, for which reason it was known as the " Rippiers Way ". Further, though some of the textiles from the Goudhurst and Cranbrook district may have gone by road to Maidstone, and thence by water to London, much was sent through Tonbridge. The ironmasters of the Tonbridge area, and of north east Sussex, were the other great users of the road.

Two classes of tradesmen in the town served the road traffic, the innkeepers and the carriers. There were probably about half a dozen inns. The Bull at the north end, the Rose and Crown and the Swan in the market place, and the Angel at the bottom of the town would seem to have existed through most of the period. There were carriers in the town probably keeping up a regular communication with London on the one hand and Rye on the other. Goods might be carried either by packhorse or waggon, and single travellers could probably hire horses to be left at the next convenient inn on the route.

The town was chiefly important as a commercial centre for the neighbouring parishes. About the market almost no information has survived : like most other markets in the county nothing is known about its customs and regulations. It was held weekly, on Friday. In 1671 the town was granted the right to hold a monthly cattle market, reflecting the importance of cattle breeding for the farmers of the Weald of Kent.

Most of the townspeople were engaged in non-industrial trades and crafts, such as the production and sale of food and drink, clothing, building and agricultural trades, and general services. It is possible to gain a rough picture of the number of people in each occupation from the Parish Clerk's Register for the 1660's. In the decade 1661–71, 125 tradesmen and professional people are mentioned, probably a majority of the adult male inhabitants. Their occupations are arranged in the Table (see p. 159).

One is impressed, first, by the small number in the food and drink category, apart from the butchers. There was probably only one baker in the town at a time, reflecting the fact that home baking was usual : for the same reason only one brewer appears, and there are no grocers, for a garden was appendant to almost every house. As the large number of butchers suggests, only meat was in high demand from the average householder ; for the cottager with only an acre or two of land, and all but a few townsmen would have needed meat for most of the year.

[1] Camden Miscellany, Vol. III, *Papers relating to Proceedings in the County of Kent*, London, 1854, p. 1.

TABLE

THE DISTRIBUTION OF THE TRADES IN TONBRIDGE TOWN[1]

Food and Drink		*Clothing*		*Agricultural Trades*	
Butcher	9	Tailor	10	Wheelwright	1
Victualler	2	Shoemaker	7	Blacksmith	7
Miller	2	Mercer	3	Girthmaker	1
Baker	1	Glover	3	Awlblademaker	2
Brewer	1	Cordwainer	2	Saddletreemaker	1
Maltman	1	Sheerman	2		
	16		27		12

Building, etc.		*Textiles*		*General Services*	
Sawyer	1	Clothier	3	Locksmith	1
Carpenter	6	Weaver	4	Midwife	1
Joiner	2	Dyer	1	Turner	1
Nailer	2	Flaxdresser	1	Carrier	3
		Hempdresser	2	Cooper	2
				Sexton	1
				Currier	1
	11		11		10

Professionals		*Labourers*		*Miscellaneous*	
Scrivener	1	Labourer	25	Soldier	1
Schoolmaster	1	Servant	4	Translator (?)	1
Doctor and chirurgeon	3				
Parish clerk	2				
	7		29		2

Almost all those in the clothing trade were shoemakers and tailors, the group in general suggesting the lack of specialists, such as hat- or dress-makers. These were usually found only in the larger towns. The glovers were an exception : they were to be found in the rural as well as the urban part of the parish, and in the neighbouring rural parishes, and may represent a modest local in dustry.

The strength of the carpenters and joiners in the building trade reflect the fact that almost all building was of wood : naturally there were no bricklayers and the only reference to a mason in the period is one referred to as being engaged on the Earl of Clanricard's stone mansion of Somerhill, a mile to the south-east of the town, in 1611.

Some of the rest it was natural to find in any rural society like the blacksmiths, wheelwrights, and toolmakers. There was probably at least one saddler and turner in the town throughout the period. The remainder any society, urban as well as rural, would have possessed, such as the locksmith and the midwife. On the whole trades were

[1] Church of St. Peter and St. Paul, Tonbridge, Parish Clerk's Register, 1660–81.

restricted to the necessities of life, there being an absence of specialized or luxury trades. It is probably not an untypical picture of a small market town largely dependent for its livelihood on the local farmers.

At the head of the urban society were a handful of gentry and professional men. There were one or two gentlemen living in the large detached houses on the verge of the town, such as John Skeffington, Esq., *d.* 1639 on Dry Hill, owner of nearly 500 acres in Hildenborough.[1] There was a master and usher at the School and the Church was served by the vicar and his curate. The other professional people were a lawyer and scrivener, a land surveyor, and two or three chirurgeons.

Despite the small size of the town, and the unspecialized nature of its economy, wealth was very unevenly distributed. Poverty loomed large in the lives of a large number of the inhabitants. The seriousness of the problem is shown by the Hearth Tax of 1664. An act of 1662 had exempted from payment of the tax all householders who were normally excused from paying parish rates, that is, those whose house was worth under £1 per annum, or possessed property or goods valued at less than £10. These people lived either just on the subsistence level, or were paupers. In the assessment of 1664, 51 per cent. of the inhabitants were non-chargeable. Old age or infirmity naturally accounted for some of the poverty: there were nine widows among those exempt, and some of the male householders would have been disabled or old. A comparison with the overseers accounts of the parish for the 1670's show that these people received most of the poor relief. Yet the fact remains that a large proportion of the inhabitants were able bodied poor, barely able to make ends meet. While many were of course labourers, most of the trades would seem to have had members living on the subsistence level.

Other inland Kentish towns, such as Ashford, Cranbrook, Maidstone, Sevenoaks and Westerham, had comparable poverty figures. It was to some extent a reflection of the decline of the cloth trade in the latter half of the seventeenth century. Thus Cranbrook, the centre of the industry, had the highest poverty rate of any Kentish town. Yet a study of the figures for the smaller towns of other parts of southern England, in Surrey and Hampshire, shows that this poverty was a national problem, not a local one based on the decline of a regional industry.[2]

Few records survive of these poorer inhabitants, for most had no real property and little personal estate. On the other hand there are a group of probate inventories at the end of the century which throw light

[1] *P.R.O.* Wards 7/94/263.

[2] Kent Hearth Tax, 1664, *K.A.O.* Q/Rth; ed. *C.A.F.* Meetings, *Surrey Record Society*, Vol. 17. (*Surrey Hearth Tax, 1664*), 1940; Hampshire Hearth Tax, 1664, *P.R.O.* E179/176/565.

on the wealth and standard of living of the more substantial tradesmen.[1] Naturally the majority were men with moderate personal estates, under £50. Most of the property of these people consisted of household goods, with £2 or £3 of ready money or of debts owing to them, and stock in trade of quite small value. James Sharelock, sawyer, *d.* 1688, had £3 in ready money, £1 in debts, saws, a grindstone, wood and tools worth £1/17/–, and clothes valued at £2; the remainder of his inventory estimated altogether at £35/10/–, consisted of household goods.

There were also a significant number of tradesmen with substantial personal estates, including large stocks in trade and sums lent out on bond. Thomas Castell, chirurgeon, at his death in 1696, had debts owing to him worth £80, " bottles and salves and other things belonging to chirurgery " in his shop valued at £30, and only £12/10/– of household furniture. Finally, there were one or two very wealthy tradesmen, such as Joseph Puxty, *d.* 1702, whose personal estate was valued at £580/10/–. He was a tanner on a very large scale, his stock including " 220 backs " worth £242, 142 hides valued at £113/8/–, " 64 calves skins and one hogskin " worth £8/16/–, " ten loads of bark " at £12/10/–.

It would perhaps be possible to divide the inhabitants into four groups according to wealth. Half the population were " the poor ", with personal estates of under £10 in value. These consisted of labourers, and depressed artisans and craftsmen. Another 30 per cent. of the inhabitants, with estates worth between £10 and £50, were the smaller tradesmen. The more substantial tradesmen, with personal estates of between £50 and £200 in value, comprised perhaps another 15 per cent. Above them were the handful of rich townsmen with goods and money worth over £200.

The houses of the wealthier half of the population of the inhabitants represented in the inventories were normally of two storeys with garrets under the roof, and perhaps with cellars. On the ground floor there may have been a shop, facing the street, perhaps a hall, still often the main room of the house, a kitchen, parlour or buttery, and possibly a brewhouse, wash-house, or bakehouse at the back. Above were the bedchambers, usually described by the rooms over which they lay, like " the parlour chamber " or " the brewhouse chamber ". Typical of the larger house was that occupied by Giles Roberts, barber, *d.* 1691, with a shop, hall, parlour, butteries, wash-house and brewhouse on the ground floor, and above a " hall chamber ", " shop chamber ", " buttery chamber ", " parlour chamber ", " brewhouse chamber ", " closet next the shop chamber ", and " chamber over the entry ", as well as garrets and a cellar. The house of John Willard, tailor, *d.* 1687, was far smaller, with a shop, hall and buttery, and a " chamber next the street ", and a " backward chamber ".

[1] *K.A.O.*, Rochester Probate inventories, DRb/Pl.

The furniture of the hall or parlour consisted of a large table with forms, stools or chairs, perhaps an oval or drawing table, a cupboard, some cushions, hangings or glassware. The hall of James Sharelock, sawyer, *d.* 1688, had a table, six stools, a little table, a little form, a cupboard, glass cage and settle. There were no carpets, and only sometimes curtains. In the kitchen or buttery were the cooking utensils, the brassware and pewter, drinking vessels and glassware. The bed, with its hangings, mattress and bolster and blankets, was often the most valuable item of furniture in the house. John Skinner, cooper, *d.* 1688, had a canopied bedstead, with hangings, a flock mattress, blue curtains, a counterpane and cloth of printed linsey woolsey, with a buckram ceiling and three blankets worth £7/3/6. Often the bedroom was filled up with chairs, stools, a table or two, a chest of drawers, and perhaps a looking-glass. Yet by our standards the houses were draughty and cheerless.

Finally, the Kentish town of the seventeenth century differed from many modern towns in the pace of its growth. It is its comparative stability at this time that has enabled us to study Tonbridge over a period of 100 years. We have seen that the population only rose by 20 to 30 per cent., and that the plan of the town hardly altered. Although there may have been some increase in the standard of living, one cannot detect any change in the distribution of trades and occupations. Not until after 1740, when the Medway became navigable up to Tonbridge and Tonbridge became the " port " of the western part of the Weald of Kent, did the town begin to grow quickly. Within 100 years the population quadrupled, and the face of the town was transformed. Since then the town's growth has never been arrested.