

# The representation and experience of English urban fire disasters, c.1580–1640\*

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## Abstract

Fire disasters were a perennial threat to urban life in early modern England, but are yet to receive sustained attention from historians. By analysing popular literature, charitable collections and relief distribution this article reveals how urban fires were interpreted and what effect they had on individuals and specific communities in England between 1580 and 1640. Some aspects of the experience of fire disasters in early modern England are illuminated through detailed contextual readings of contemporary news reports, quantitative analyses of the collection and distribution of charitable funds, and attention to the fortunes of individual survivors of fires.

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How did early modern towns deal with crisis? Historians have asked this question since the beginnings of the comparative history of the early modern English town in the nineteen-seventies, with their crises of choice traditionally plague, dearth and poverty.<sup>1</sup> Early modern urban fires have, however, attracted relatively scant attention, despite their contemporary ubiquity. The only nationwide study is Jones, Porter and Turner's 'Gazetteer of English urban fire disasters'.<sup>2</sup> They list 172 urban fires that destroyed ten or more houses in the period 1500–1750, with many more smaller but significant conflagrations.<sup>3</sup> Several major fires stand out in the period, particularly between 1580 and 1640. The dry summer years of 1604–16 and 1630–7 caused particular problems for provincial towns, exacerbating risk produced through a cocktail of wooden buildings, inadequate ventilation and often crowded living conditions.<sup>4</sup> Wymondham, Norfolk, was devastated in 1615, with a quarter of inhabitants losing their housing, and a third losing either their houses or their property.<sup>5</sup> Other towns suffered repeatedly; Tiverton was twice very badly afflicted in 1598 and 1612, with contemporary estimates of losses

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<sup>1</sup> *Crisis and Order in English Towns, 1500–1700: Essays in Urban History*, ed. P. Clark and P. Slack (1972); P. Slack, 'The response to plague in early modern England: public policies and their consequences', in *Famine, Disease and the Social Order in Early Modern Society*, ed. J. Walter and R. Schofield (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 167–87, at pp. 167–8; J. Walter and K. Wrightson, 'Dearth and the social order in early modern England', *Past & Present*, lxxi (1976), 22–42; P. Slack, *Poverty and Policy in Tudor and Stuart England* (1988).

<sup>2</sup> E. L. Jones, S. Porter and M. Turner, *A Gazetteer of English Urban Fire Disasters, 1500–1900* (Historical Geography Research Ser., xiii, 1984).

<sup>3</sup> Jones, Porter and Turner, pp. 16–19, at p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> D. J. Schove, 'Fire and drought, 1600–1700', *Weather*, xxi (1966), 311–14.

<sup>5</sup> J. Wilson, 'The great fire of Wymondham 1615', *The Annual: the Bulletin of the Norfolk Archaeol. and Hist. Research Group*, x (2001), 29–41, at p. 30.

totalling over £200,000.<sup>6</sup> Stratford-upon-Avon was perhaps the unluckiest midland town in the period, suffering significant fires in 1594, 1595, 1614 and 1641.<sup>7</sup> This article, then, seeks to reintegrate these significant but under-researched events into the history of the early modern English town.

While the ‘Great Fire’ of London and several other local events have attracted historical attention, there has been no attempt to synthesize local studies, or to reconcile fires, and the experience of fires, with the growing global and interdisciplinary field of historical disaster studies.<sup>8</sup> Numerous natural hazards blighted early modern England – an earthquake rocked the south-east in 1580, in 1607 a freak wave flooded the south-west, in 1613 winds battered London and coastal regions – yet these events, their causes and their legacies remain under-examined in English histories. A study of a selection of fires – a distinctly man-made, but nevertheless natural destructive force – is an initial foray into this field.

Histories of environmental hazards have the potential to shed new light on aspects of social, cultural and political history. Following the work of anthropologist Anthony Oliver-Smith and sociologist Enrico Quarantelli, among others, historians have stressed that no ‘natural’ disaster is entirely natural; they are man-made, ‘social phenomena, even if triggered by extreme natural events’.<sup>9</sup> The early modern town was a site of finely balanced ‘managed uncertainty’ in terms of fire hazards, which were ‘both physical events and social or cultural occurrences’.<sup>10</sup> There is a historiographical consensus that ‘catastrophic events are to some extent cultural and socio-economic constructions’, they are time-bound and have shifting meanings.<sup>11</sup> In the early modern period, ‘naturalness’ was complicated by providential interpretations of disasters: the concept of a ‘natural disaster’ is relatively new – early modern interpretations often saw them as unnatural interruptions of the status quo.<sup>12</sup> However natural or unnatural they may be, fire disasters are an intersection of two ‘separate trajectories’, the hazard (however naturally induced) and ‘human populations whose social, economic and political organisations are

<sup>6</sup> F. J. Snell, *The Chronicles of Twyford, Being a New and Popular History of the Town of Tiverton in Devonshire: With Some Account of Blundell's School, Founded 1604 A.D.* (Tiverton, [1892]), pp. 57, 67.

<sup>7</sup> S. Porter, ‘Fires in Stratford-upon-Avon in the 16th and 17th centuries’, *Warwickshire Hist.*, iii (1976), 97–105, at p. 97.

<sup>8</sup> Such studies exist for other national and international contexts, but not England. See M. Allemeyer, *Fewernoth und Flammenschwert: Stadtbrände in Der Frühen Neuzeit* (Göttingen, 2007); C. Zwierlein, *Der gezähmte Prometheus: Feuer und Sicherheit zwischen Früher Neuzeit und Moderne* (Göttingen, 2011); *Flammable Cities: Urban Conflagration and the Making of the Modern World*, ed. G. Bankoff, U. Lübken and J. Sand (Madison, Wis., 2012); R. Bearman, ‘Stratford’s fires of 1594 and 1595 revisited’, *Midland Hist.*, xxv (2000), 180–90; C. J. Kitching, ‘Fire disasters and fire relief in 16th-century England: the Nantwich fire of 1583’, *Bull. Inst. Hist. Research*, liv (1981), 171–87; J. Lake, *The Great Fire of Nantwich* (Nantwich, 1983); A. Longcroft, ‘Fire damage in a rural community: the case of Clay-Next-the-Sea’, *Vernacular Architecture*, xxvi (1995), 18–25; Porter, pp. 97–105; D. Underdown, *Fire from Heaven: Life in an English Town in the 17th Century* (1992).

<sup>9</sup> A. Oliver-Smith, ‘Global changes and the definition of disaster’, in *What is a Disaster? Perspectives on a Question*, ed. E. Quarantelli (1998), pp. 179–96; *Disasters: Theory and Research*, ed. E. Quarantelli (1978); M. Juneja and F. Mauelshagen, ‘Disasters and pre-industrial societies: historiographical trends and comparative perspectives’, *Medieval Hist. Jour.*, x (2007), 1–31, at p. 5.

<sup>10</sup> U. Lübken and C. Mauch, ‘Uncertain environments: natural hazards, risk and insurance in historical perspective’, *Environment and History*, xvii (2011), 1–12, at p. 4; C. Mauch, ‘Introduction’, in *Natural Disasters, Cultural Responses: Case Studies toward a Global Environmental History*, ed. C. Mauch and C. Pfister (Plymouth, 2009), p. 4.

<sup>11</sup> G. Massard-Guilbaud, ‘Introduction: the urban catastrophe – challenge to the social, economic, and cultural order of the city’, in *Cities and Catastrophes: Coping with Emergency in European History*, ed. G. Massard-Guilbaud, H. L. Platt, and D. Schott (Frankfurt am Main, 2002), pp. 9–42, at p. 10.

<sup>12</sup> Juneja and Mauelshagen, p. 18.

largely culturally determined'.<sup>13</sup> Culture 'not only determines how a disaster comes about', but is also 'what constitutes a disaster in the first place'.<sup>14</sup> Thus, when analysing a 'natural disaster', we are prompted to look not only at physical and material causes and effects, but cultural productions and explanations, and must recognize the ways in which social organization constructs risk and vulnerability.

While historical disaster studies have played an important role in recent environmental histories of the 'socio-natural', their utility for social histories, for the recovery of the experience of government and of communities under stress, ought not to be lost. After all it is 'society where disasters occur'.<sup>15</sup> For E. P. Thompson, experience breaks through into the historian's study at moments of crisis.<sup>16</sup> Fire, after plague, for Keith Thomas, was 'perhaps the greatest single threat to security' in the early modern period.<sup>17</sup> It was both an immediate and latent threat to individuals and communities; more than forty-eight major blazes occurred in the period 1580–1640 alone.<sup>18</sup> Crises such as these have always tested 'the effectiveness and thus the legitimacy of political power', and during such shocks the priorities and efficiency of local and national institutions become apparent.<sup>19</sup> Moving away from the traditional focus on plague, dearth and poverty, here local and central government responses to fires are analysed to understand further the socio-political consequences of 'natural' material crises.

The decades 1580–1640 fall within a contested period of early modern English urban history. Seminal narratives of the 'crisis' of the early modern town have been tempered, particularly by Alan Dyer's research into small and market towns.<sup>20</sup> The towns under study here are market towns, and not large urban centres.<sup>21</sup> Market towns enjoyed a 'golden age' of general prosperity across the period up to 1700, while larger urban centres were more troubled.<sup>22</sup> The period before 1640 has been characterized as a time when urban fires were 'not common' – that is, the years before civil war and the dramatic blazes of London, Northampton and Warwick, with their ambitious 'urban renaissance' rebuilding projects.<sup>23</sup> Fires have been portrayed as isolated incidents without

<sup>13</sup> G. Bankoff, quoted in Juneja and Mauelshagen, p. 4.

<sup>14</sup> G. Bankoff, 'Time is of the essence: disasters, vulnerability and history', *International Jour. Mass Emergencies and Disasters*, xxii (2004), 22–42, at p. 29.

<sup>15</sup> F. Mauelshagen, 'Disaster and political culture in Germany since 1500', in Mauch and Pfister, pp. 41–75, at p. 42.

<sup>16</sup> E. P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory: or an Orrery of Errors* (1995), p. 11.

<sup>17</sup> K. Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in 16th and 17th Century England* (1971; 1997 edn.), p. 15.

<sup>18</sup> Jones, Porter and Turner, calculated from Tables 3 and 4, pp. 16–28.

<sup>19</sup> Mauelshagen, p. 58; P. Slack, 'Great and good towns, 1540–1700', in *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain*, ii: 1540–1840, ed. P. Clark (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 347–76, at p. 354.

<sup>20</sup> A. Dyer, 'Small market towns, 1540–1700', in Clark, *Cambridge Urban History of Britain*, ii. 425–50; A. Dyer, 'Small towns in England, 1600–1800', in *Provincial Towns in Early Modern England and Ireland: Change, Convergence and Divergence*, ed. P. Borsay and L. Proudfoot (Oxford, 2002), pp. 53–67.

<sup>21</sup> Nantwich had a population of around 1,000, Stratford of around 2,500 and Wymondham of around 2,200. In comparison, Bristol and Norwich, the next biggest cities after London, had populations of 15,000–20,000 (Lake, p. 30; Wilson, 'Great fire of Wymondham', p. 30; A. Dyer, 'Crisis and resolution: government and society in Stratford, 1540–1640', in *The History of an English Borough: Stratford-upon-Avon 1196–1996*, ed. R. Bearman (Stroud, 1997), pp. 80–96, at p. 90).

<sup>22</sup> A. Dyer, *Decline and Growth in English Towns, 1400–1640* (Basingstoke, 1991), p. 53; Dyer, 'Small towns', p. 66.

<sup>23</sup> Dyer, *Decline and Growth*, p. 54; P. Borsay, *The English Urban Renaissance: Culture and Society in the Provincial Town 1660–1770* (Oxford, 1989), pp. 89–95.

great impact on the long-term fortune of towns.<sup>24</sup> None of the three towns studied in detail in the final section of this article – Nantwich, Wymondham and Stratford-upon-Avon – suffered particularly in the medium to long term because of their fires.<sup>25</sup> However, such longer-term analyses, which place emphasis on trends, fortunes and ‘golden ages’, can obscure the experiences of marginalized groups that did not move within the trend of urban stability. John Patten acknowledges that ‘the devastation of a fire [is] rather obscured by this approach’.<sup>26</sup> An analysis which fades moments of crisis into blocks of fifty or 100 years for the purpose of longitudinal study, notes Eric Jones, ‘reflects a stylised approach to the study of the past . . . resulting from a conviction that such events are outside human history and cannot be accounted for on its terms . . . the past in reality was not a mill-pond occasionally ruffled by the breeze. It was made up of a ceaseless succession of adjustments and disturbances, big and little’.<sup>27</sup>

Heeding such warnings, this article aims to reclaim the experience of those afflicted by fire. While longer-term narratives show the prosperity of market towns, a short-term focus demonstrates how this prosperity was based on inequalities that the study of disaster can illuminate.

In comparing the responses to fires at Nantwich, Wymondham and Stratford-upon-Avon, this article attempts to reconcile the micro-historical ‘event’ of fire with its local socio-cultural context, and to synthesize these findings to gain a broader picture of disaster and relief. It moves between two distinct strands of urban history – the quantitative comparison of many urban centres, and the specific local study, more common in English historiography.<sup>28</sup> Such an approach is necessary in an under-researched field, with comparison enabling general themes to be drawn out, while retaining a local, experiential focus.

The first section analyses representations of fires in popular literature, and attempts an understanding of what fires ‘meant’ to those affected. Printed representations were memorializations, as well as news items designed to inform, incite sympathy and make profit. If disasters awaken communal ‘coping capacities’, part of this coping is ‘telling and retelling the story of what happened’, which in this period could invoke a Christian ‘metaphysics of disaster’.<sup>29</sup> Yet cultural coping could only go so far. In the stories themselves, as well as in their deviations from ‘fact’ and genre, the complex meanings of a fire become apparent. Disaster narratives served several functions, at once communal coping exercises, practical warnings and pleas for aid, exhibiting what Walsham has termed an ‘elasticity of discourse’.<sup>30</sup> Analysed as a corpus, and contextualized with other documents relating to the fires they describe, these elastic texts can be stretched beyond their immediate utility as sensational accounts of shocking events. They can reveal embellishment, half-truth and deviation, and the causes and motivations behind them.

These disaster advertisements then lead on to a discussion of nationwide charitable collections. Relief campaigns show how towns were perceived nationally and regionally.

<sup>24</sup> Slack, ‘Great and good towns’, p. 354.

<sup>25</sup> Kitching, p. 186; Porter, p. 103; Wilson, ‘Great fire of Wymondham’, p. 39.

<sup>26</sup> J. Patten, *English Towns 1500–1700* (Folkstone, 1978), p. 248.

<sup>27</sup> E. Jones, *The European Miracle: Environments, Economies and Geopolitics in the History of Europe and Asia* (Cambridge, 2003), p. 23.

<sup>28</sup> J. de Vries, ‘Renaissance cities’, *Renaissance Quarterly*, xlii (1989), 781–93, at p. 788; i.e., C. Phythian-Adams, *Desolation of a City: Coventry and the Urban Crisis of the Late Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1979).

<sup>29</sup> Maelshagen, pp. 66, 61.

<sup>30</sup> A. Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 1999), p. 166.

Charitable giving suggests the extent of geographic, economic and religious relationships between communities. Local government, and the temporary officials it co-opted, can also be analysed through its effectiveness at a time of crisis; the amount of relief requested is always many times greater than that received. Along with this large shortfall, local administrations spent a substantial proportion of the collected funds on relief campaigns. Looking at expenses incurred while collecting shows the degree of fiscal neighbourliness and charity among the ‘substantial members’ of devastated communities. While a national system of letters patent (‘briefs’) was in place to authorize collections, a particular collection’s success was determined by its local ad hoc collection authority. Collections’ varying degrees of success over the period emphasize the ubiquity of the problem of fire, but also the local and personal experience of fire and disaster management.

The final section discusses the distribution of relief funds. An analysis of the relief accounts for Nantwich (1583), Wymondham (1615) and Stratford (1641) demonstrates administrators’ priorities (see Figure 1). The distribution of relief was discretionary; where money was spent reveals priorities, with some sections of the community relieved over others. Engagement in local relief activities and the prioritized reconstruction of prominent functional and symbolic public buildings also alludes to the importance of the civic community in post-fire towns. Stratford’s detailed accounts for 1641 facilitate an assessment of the speed of relief and the efficiency of local bureaucracy. This section culminates by assessing the impact of fires on specific individuals, focusing on the context of the life-cycle, to provide texture to the foregoing more general analysis.<sup>31</sup>

By analysing literature, charitable collections and relief distribution, this article attempts to uncover how fires were interpreted and what effect they had on individuals and communities. There is not space here to provide a much-needed comprehensive, integrative account of urban fires across the entire period. Instead, printed fire narratives and the civic records of fires in three provincial towns illuminate the experience of early modern fire disasters, and what mitigated or contributed to those experiences.

In his reply to a ballad that no longer survives, East Dereham fire survivor Arthur Gurney takes umbrage with ‘sundrie vntruethes’ reported about his town’s 1581 fire.<sup>32</sup> In his opening epistle addressed to wealthy Dereham man Richard Atlee, Gurney revises loss estimates of £14,000 down to £8,000 and the number of houses lost from sixty to fifty-two. He claims lost property was worth £8,000 due to age and wear, whereas £14,000 was a more probable sum for the ‘reedifying or restauration of the same’. Gurney writes his ‘doleful Discourse and ruthfull Reporte’ to ‘intercept the course of an vntrueth’ which pervades ‘in diuersities of wandering reportes’ that have reached ‘her Maiestie, her Honorable counsaile, many noble, worshipful, & common personages’. Yet, by his own admission, he is victim of only ‘smal losses’ and is ‘a fellow feeler of the heauy burthen imposed vpon the townes estate’. He is also contemptuous of those who seek natural explanations, those ‘that are alwaies musling with beasts in the myre of worldly matters, & neuer vouchsafe to lend so muche as half an eye to looke vpon the sunshine of Saluation’.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>31</sup> J. Barry, ‘Introduction’, in *The Tudor and Stuart Town: a Reader in English Urban History*, ed. J. Barry (Harlow, 1990), pp. 1–34, at p. 14.

<sup>32</sup> Arthur Gurney, *A doleful Discourse and ruthfull Reporte of the greate Spoyle and lamentable losse, by fire, in the Towne of East Dearham, in the Countie of NORFOLKE: Vpon Tuesday the .18. of Iulie, this present yere. 1581.* (1581), sig. A2.

<sup>33</sup> Gurney, sig. A2r–v.

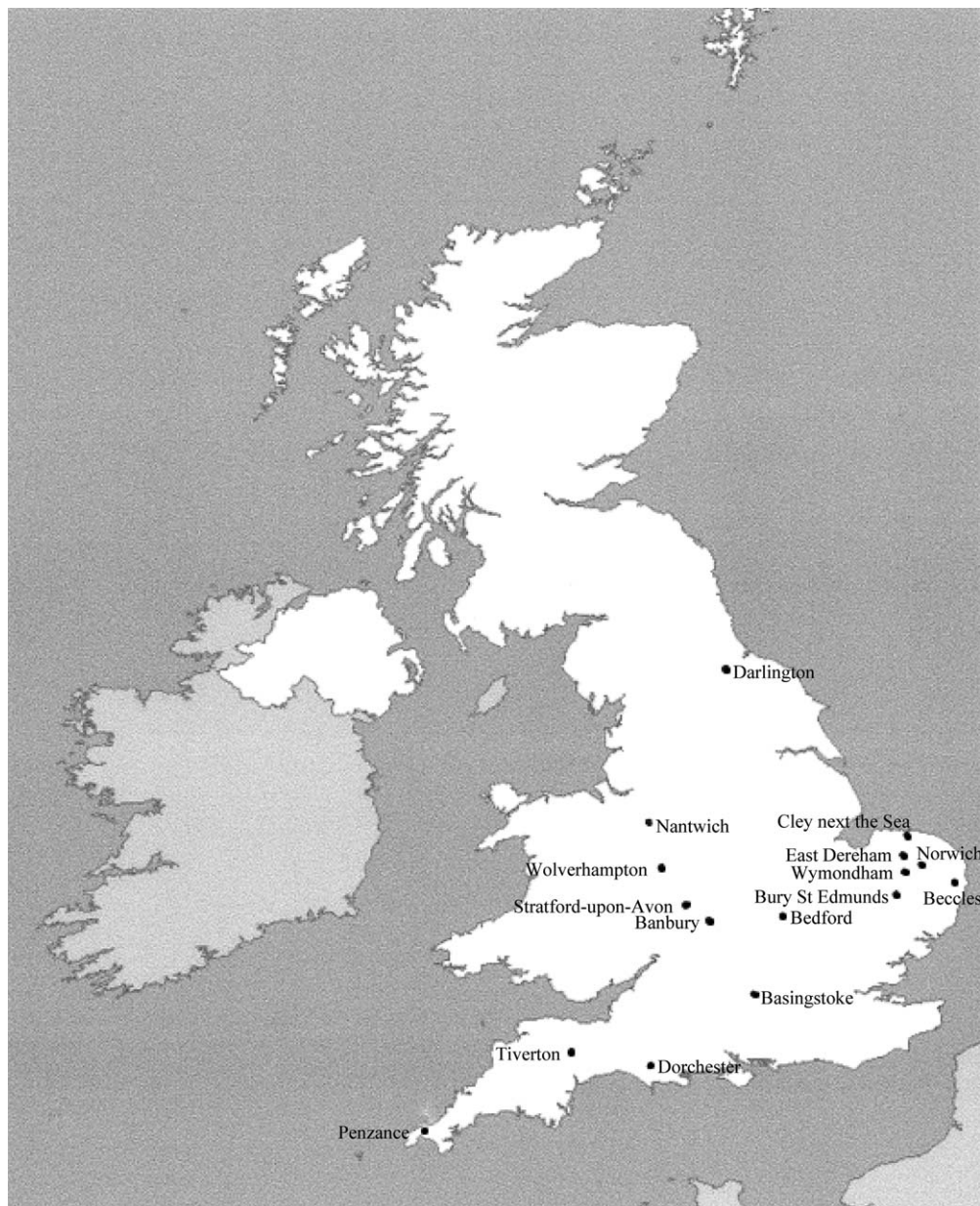


Figure 1. Burnt towns mentioned in the text

Gurney's text encapsulates the key themes running throughout popular literature on fire disasters. He identifies, and partakes in, the polemical use of statistics and representation in pamphlets. The acknowledgement of literature's diverse influence is also instructive as it was produced not only to inform, but to incite charity. Furthermore, his moralizing tone and distaste for worldly explanations demonstrate a coping strategy, albeit one designed for those like himself and Atlee, whom he implores to reform and bridle

‘those, whose religion & maners, you daily see too too [*sic*] far out of square & order’.<sup>34</sup> His self-conscious use of balladry also alerts us to the importance of genre. The work is a pamphlet containing an epistle printed in the more exclusive Roman typeface, and a ballad, printed in blackletter, the ‘type for the common people’.<sup>35</sup> This also alerts us to the intended audience for these often moralizing incitements to charity.

Ballads, broadsides, pamphlets and sermons about fires served several functions. They were practical items, containing news and persuasive accounts of events, written to inform and encourage charity among readers from commoners to the queen. This readership gave them ‘social influence’.<sup>36</sup> Their providential tone also demonstrates their religious function, as a ‘host of ballad-mongers and hacks’ used calamities, and fires in particular, as a ‘perennial homiletic theme’.<sup>37</sup> This literature also bears the hallmarks of a specific genre, with common linguistic and stylistic tropes that narrativized towns’ stories as part of a public, discursive process of ‘coping’ with disaster.<sup>38</sup> These multiple dimensions of popular disaster literature are not exclusive, and at times necessarily bleed into one another, as in Gurney’s ‘doleful Discourse’. As news items and creative accounts, pieces of ephemeral literature fulfilled several roles; and as they provide often the most complete extant accounts of fires, these are roles worth considering.

Language and rhetoric can indicate a pamphlet’s function. As part of communal ‘coping’, cheap print was a way for towns to externalize and understand experiences. Couched in providential language, cheap print narratives share common themes and literary devices. Raymond argues that pamphlets ‘combined subtlety with a tendency to be formulaic’, with readers taught to ‘tease out soteriological implications of providentially inscribed narratives by authors who saw entertainment as an opportunity for profit or for persuasion or proselytising’.<sup>39</sup> There is a tension here between this London genre and local voices. While many contemporary wonder pamphlets were written in London with information obtained second-hand, some towns had considerable authorial and editorial oversight of their public presentation in print. In Nantwich the relief committee bankrolled the printing of pamphlets; Wymondham’s ballad included the town’s brief, of no benefit to author or printer; Arthur Gurney was a resident of East Dereham; and Bedford’s Thomas Wilcox wrote about the town’s 1595 fire within two days, with his mind still ‘distempered’.<sup>40</sup> Thomas Deloney, author of *A proper newe sonet declaring the lamentation of Beckles in Suffolke* (a rewrite of an earlier ‘sonet’ by D. Sterrie), was a weaver, an author and a local, from nearby Norwich.<sup>41</sup> He is these multiple personae at once – his status and heritage ally him firmly with the townsfolk, yet his role as an author of fiction and news pamphlets also places him in the London

<sup>34</sup> Gurney, sig. A3v.

<sup>35</sup> K. Thomas, ‘The meaning of literacy in early modern England’, in *The Written Word: Literacy in Transition, Wolfson College Lectures 1985*, ed. G. Baumann (Oxford, 1986), pp. 97–131, at p. 99.

<sup>36</sup> J. Raymond, *Pamphlets and Pamphleteering in Early Modern Britain* (Cambridge, 2003), p. 26.

<sup>37</sup> Walsham, p. 116.

<sup>38</sup> Mauelshagen, p. 44.

<sup>39</sup> Raymond, p. 128.

<sup>40</sup> Kitching, p. 181; Anon., *The Araigement of Iohn Flodder and his wife, / at Norwidge, with the wife of one Bicks, for burning the Towne of Windham / in Norfolke, vpon the xi. day of Iune last 1615.* (1615); Gurney; Thomas Wilcox, *A short narration of the fearefull fire, that fell in the towne of Wooburne, in the Countie of Bedford, on Saturdaie, the 13. of September last. 1595* (1595), pp. 4–5.

<sup>41</sup> D. Sterrie, *A briefe sonet declaring the lamentation of Beckles, a Market Towne in Suffolke which was in the great winde vpon S. Andrewes eue pitifully burned with fire to the value by estimation of twentie thousande pounde And to the number of foure score dwelling houses, besides a great number of other houses.* 1586. (1586); E. P. Wright, *Thomas Deloney* (Boston, 1981), p. 13.

writing business.<sup>42</sup> The use of a largely metropolitan genre could mask local voices in fire narratives, yet towns' financial and spiritual interest urged them into partial authorship. The providentialism at play in much of the literature is repentant yet never damning. Common images of the 'stately' town, an inverted social order and the 'mirror' for other towns are conciliatory and recurrent. These images are the main tropes of the fire disaster genre, deployed as a way for towns to understand disaster and present it to others as a worthy charitable cause, as an instructive religious sign, and to locate the work distinctly within the genre.

Narratives usually begin by emphasizing the town's beauty, 'stateliness' and good situation. Information on burned market towns may well have been accurate, but the recurrence of certain phrases is formulaic. Deloney, adopting the persona of Beccles in a broadsheet ballad, claims 'late in Suffockke [*sic*] was I seen to be a stately towne'.<sup>43</sup> Similarly, Dorchester is revered as 'so famous a Towne', 'beautified with many stately buildings, and faire streets'.<sup>44</sup> Tiverton is blessed above all other western towns with 'wealth, statelnesse and beautie'.<sup>45</sup> Bury is mourned for its 'stately buildings', now reduced to 'a rude continent of heapes of stoness and peeces, of Timber'.<sup>46</sup> The towns are also variously described as being well situated, with 'fields full faire', rivers 'sweete running by', being 'good harbour for al traouellers'; such towns were 'so faire as heart could wish'.<sup>47</sup>

The aggrandizement of a town's former state is used as a backdrop for the main action, the fire. Juxtaposed with the town's splendour, its demise is illustrated with images of inversion. Preacher William Whately employs these powerfully in his sermon after Banbury's 1628 fire:

How many dwelling places are become desolate? How many inhabitants destitute of habitation? How many wealthy men, made lesse wealthy, and poore men more poore? How many rich men are become poore, and poore men beggars? How are the labours of many a father, Grand-father, great Grand-father, suddenly conuerted into smoake and rubbish, in the space of a day and night?<sup>48</sup>

Tiverton's 1598 fire had destroyed hundreds of the houses of 'the wealthiest men in the Towne', yet had left alone 'dwellings of poore and sillie men', 'a iust punishment of god ... for their unmercifullnesse' towards the poor.<sup>49</sup> The wealthiest of Tiverton in 1612

<sup>42</sup> P. Salzman, 'Deloney, Thomas (d. in or before 1600)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004; online edn., May 2007) <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/7463>> [accessed 27 March 2011].

<sup>43</sup> Thomas Deloney, *A proper new sonet declaring the lamentation [of Beccles in] Suffolke which was in the great winde vpon S. Andrewes eue last, past most pittifully burned with fire, to the losse by estimation of twentie thousande pound and vwarde, and to the number of four score dwelling houses.* 1586. (1586).

<sup>44</sup> John Hilliard and Anon., *Fire from heauen Burning the body of one Iohn Hittchell of Holne-hurst, within the parish of Christ-church, in the county of South-hampton the 26. of Iune last 1613. ... With the fearefull burning of the towne of Dorchester vpon friday the 6. of August last 1613.* (1613), sig. C2v.

<sup>45</sup> Anon., *VVofull nevves from the vvest-parts of England Being the lamentable burning of the towne of Teuerton, in Deuon-shire, vpon the fift of August last, 1612. VVhereunto is annexed, the former burning of the aforesaid towne, the third of Aprill, 1598.* (1612), sig. A3v.

<sup>46</sup> Anon., *The Woefull and Lamentable wast and spoile done by a suddaine Fire in S. Edmons-bury in Suffolke, on Munday the tenth of Aprill. 1608* (1608), sig. A4v.

<sup>47</sup> Gurney, sig. A4; Sterrie; Anon., *Lamentable News from the Towne of Darnton in the Bishopricke of Durham, being y[e] North partes of England, where was burned 273. houses, uppon the 7 day of May last past 1585.* (1585), p. 7; Deloney.

<sup>48</sup> William Whately, *Sinne no more, or A sermon preached in the parish church of Banbury on Tuesday the fourth of March last past* (1628), p. 5.

<sup>49</sup> Anon., *The True lamentable discourse of the burning of Teuerton in Deuon-shire the third day of Aprill last past, about the hower of one of the docke in the after-noon being Market day, 1598. At what time there was consumed to ashes about the number of 400 houses with all the money and goods that was therein: and fyftie persons burnt aliue through the vehemencie of the same fyre.* (1598), sigs. B1v–B2.



had ‘to lodge themselves on the cold ground, that in the morning had choice of beds’; ‘those which in the morning were worth thousands, by night had neyther, gold, siluer, plate, nor house . . . no, scarce a garment left to weare, but onely those upon their backs’.<sup>50</sup> This fire was ‘a spoyling flame’, ‘an undoer of . . . good people’ and ‘a flame of subuersion’.<sup>51</sup> In Bury fire was a ‘furious invader’ which wreaked havoc with the social order: ‘he that the day before was esteemed a man (at the least) worth two or three thousand pounds . . . was made lesse worth then nothing’. These were the men who ‘were wont to comfort the distressed, and to feed their neighbours’, now ‘in danger to perish for want of reliefe’.<sup>52</sup>

Works about ‘merchants, clothiers and craftsmen’ were the most popular in Elizabethan England, and it was these people on whom the inversion of fire narratives focused.<sup>53</sup> Tiverton is described as ‘not unknowne to many, and chiefly to English Marchants’, ‘Ten myles on this side of Exceter’, ‘the chiefe Market for Cloth’ in the west, and inhabited by ‘diuers rich and wealthy Marchants’.<sup>54</sup> Darlington in Durham was an important stop for ‘trauellers to *Barwicke*, or from thence to *London*’; here ‘a merchant lost by the said fire a thousand pounds’.<sup>55</sup> Tiverton’s 1612 fire was ‘to the utter undoing of many Merchants, and Trades-men, their wives, and children’.<sup>56</sup>

The ruin of the stately, exemplary and prosperous town, and within it the best of merchants, is used to complete the presentation of the tragedy, by urging the reader to view the town as a mirror for his or her own sins. ‘Let me be your mirrour, to liue in the Lorde’, entreats Beccles in Sterrie’s ballad.<sup>57</sup> East Dereham asks the reader ‘too now see your selues by mee . . . Whome God hath made a Myrour’.<sup>58</sup> In lamenting the fire of 1598 Tiverton’s pamphlet reminds readers that they know not if ‘miserie hangeth ouer your owne heads, nor how soone the like calamitie may happen unto your selues’.<sup>59</sup> The idea of the mirror absolved the town of guilt. Chosen to be a mirror for their contemporaries, they were ‘not the most sinners’, but ‘punished for examples [*sic*] sake’ so others ‘may by speedie Repentance pacifie the wrath of God’.<sup>60</sup> The unfortunately well-practised author of the Tiverton 1612 narrative leaves us with the clearest statement of shared guilt and partial absolution:

let not other townes or villages of this Land thinke, that the Inhabitants of Teuerton were greater transgressors, because they haue suffered the greatest punishment: nor that they did surpasse all others in wickedness, because they axceede all others in woe, but thinke that it hath pleased God to punish them for the instruction of others, that in beholding their fall, they may feare to offend, and learne by their misery, a speedy amendment.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>50</sup> Anon., *VVofull nevves*, sigs. B3v, A4v.

<sup>51</sup> Anon., *VVofull nevves*, sig. A4.

<sup>52</sup> Anon., *The Woefull and Lamentable wast and spoile done by a suddaine Fire in S. Edmons-bury*, sig. B1r–v.

<sup>53</sup> L. C. Stevenson, *Praise and Paradox: Merchants and Craftsmen in Elizabethan Popular Literature* (Cambridge, 1984), p. 21.

<sup>54</sup> Anon., *True lamentable discourse*, sig. A3.

<sup>55</sup> Anon., *Lamentable News from the Towne of Darnton*, sig. B1.

<sup>56</sup> Anon., *VVofull nevves*, sig. A4v.

<sup>57</sup> Sterrie.

<sup>58</sup> Gurney, sig. B4v.

<sup>59</sup> Anon., *VVofull nevves*, sig. C1.

<sup>60</sup> Anon., *A relation of the most lamentable burning of the cittie of Corke, in the west of Ireland, in the province of Monster, by thunder and lightning* (1622), p. 8.

<sup>61</sup> Anon., *VVofull nevves*, sig. C3r–v.

While the ‘mirror’ was a positive externalizing representation, it also had polemical and emotive effects. Such devices made pamphlets and ballads, as news, all the more immediate and applicable for their targeted readership.

As news, ephemeral literature was an ‘opportunity for profit’ as well as ‘for persuasion or proselytising’. Statistics relating to losses, often included in titles, were an integral part of this ‘news’ function. Amid vivid accounts of great personal and communal suffering, numerical statements of losses are included, all presented as fact. The inclusion of these statistics, and other overt references to the material conditions of the town, in some although not all of the popular literature, can reveal the purpose of the pamphlet, and deviations between losses in literature and other contemporary estimates can reveal their polemical purposes.

David Underdown has found contemporary overestimations of loss in *The Lamentable and Fearefull Burning of the Towne of Dorchester*. It claims ‘without partiality’ that £200,000 of damage was sustained and 300 houses were ruined.<sup>62</sup> Based on a survey of private accounts and assessments, Underdown calculated damage totalling around £40,000, and that 170 rather than 300 houses were lost, attributing overestimation to ‘hysteria’.<sup>63</sup> The first of Tiverton’s fires in 1598 was also subject to loss inflation. *The True lamentable discourse of the burning of Teuerton in Deuon-shire* claimed the town’s losses would ‘not be recouered againe, under Three or Foure hundred Thousand Ponndes’ and that ‘aboue the number of Foure Hundred houses’ and fifty people were burned.<sup>64</sup> Officially, these totals were revised down. Archbishop Whitgift had news of a similar number of houses and people burned, yet only £150,000 of damage.<sup>65</sup> Furthermore, parish registers suggest that thirty-three people died in the fire.<sup>66</sup>

The report of Tiverton’s larger 1612 fire is very different. Although nobody died, the town was devastated. The brief stated that excepting a handful of buildings ‘all the whole town’ was destroyed.<sup>67</sup> The ensuing pamphlet did not ‘descend to statistics’, the loss being so great.<sup>68</sup> It cites only one street where houses and contents were lost, valued at £50,000, and that 1,200 of 2,000 inhabitants had suffered.<sup>69</sup> Tiverton also no longer repeated overestimations in an account of its earlier fire, included as an appendix. In official circles damage in 1612 was valued at £200,000, with 600 houses lost, figures reflected in Tiverton’s 1615 grant of incorporation, which mentions two fires costing £350,000.<sup>70</sup> In the face of such tragedy, from which James I believed it was never likely to recover, Tiverton sought less to present an account of lost property and more to assert the humanitarian emergency that the town faced.<sup>71</sup> The 1612 pamphlet is conspicuous in its omission of loss statistics. The fire of 1612 was clearly not quantifiable

<sup>62</sup> Hilliard and Anon., sig. C4v.

<sup>63</sup> Underdown, p. 4; Jones, Porter and Turner agree with this estimate (see Table 3, p. 16).

<sup>64</sup> Anon., *True lamentable discourse*, sigs. B1v–B2.

<sup>65</sup> Snell, p. 57.

<sup>66</sup> W. Harding, *The History of Tiverton, in the County of Devon* (Tiverton, 1845), p. 38.

<sup>67</sup> Snell, p. 67.

<sup>68</sup> Snell, p. 67.

<sup>69</sup> Anon., *VVofull newes*, sigs. C4v, B4.

<sup>70</sup> Snell, p. 67; *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic, 1611–18* <<https://www.british-history.ac.uk/cal-state-papers/domestic/jas1/1611-18/pp291-300>> [accessed 22 March 2011].

<sup>71</sup> James I, quoted in Snell, p. 67.

or reducible to losses for contemporaries, testimony to its great psychological and social impact. Its ending plea for charity is both emotive and despondent:

in regard hereof well may you weepe day and night, and sit in solitary heavinesse without comforts of the world? such losses are sooner pittied then relieved, and it is an easie, but a good thing for men to say, The Lord which hath brought them low, can raise them up againe, which he for his mercies sake grant. Amen.<sup>72</sup>

Touting statistics in pamphlets was an important part of their news function, yet as demonstrated by Tiverton's second loss, was by no means essential. It is telling that Whately's sermon *Sinne no more* contains details of losses in the subtitle only, added later when it went to print and became a commodity. Whately focused more on moral reform than on reminding his parishioners of their losses at the time of its delivery.<sup>73</sup> Town fires may well have been a boon for the 'ballad-mongers and hacks who eked out an existence writing journalistic ephemera', yet when losses were as devastating as at Tiverton in 1612, the social function of pamphlets shifted.<sup>74</sup> Raymond notes the practice of recycling and 'reconfiguring' news pamphlets in new circumstances, to add meaning to a text.<sup>75</sup> The re-imagining of Tiverton's 1598 fire in 1612 aptly demonstrates this. In the case of Tiverton's pamphlets, salacious pulp news gave way to communal loss-bearing as a major function of the texts.

Representations of towns' losses successfully incited charity in the highest circles. Gurney noted the presence of a ballad at court and feared the effect it might have. Tiverton's 1598 pamphlet may well have reached the upper echelons of government. The devastation elicited a lukewarm response from the privy council, and it proved difficult to secure a brief in the wake of the 1598 poor law, which forbade collections from February that year. Devon officials were told to maintain a collection at churches within the Exeter diocese only, and to disperse affected inhabitants to neighbouring parishes, as 'the burthen cannot but be great to the country'.<sup>76</sup> This letter was sent on 12 April, nine days after the fire, when the local relief efforts were already in place. However, by 14 May the privy council had reversed its decision and allowed a collection, as Tiverton was extraordinary, 'the number of those wome it concerneth very great, [and] their estate very pittifull'.<sup>77</sup> The change in attitude is attributable to incipient media pressure, caused by the publishing of the 1598 pamphlet and a broadside. On 14 April the pamphlet *The true and lamentable discourse of the burninge of the towne of Tiverton in Devonshire* was registered with the Stationers' Company to Thomas Purfoot, 'vppon Condicton that hee gett further lauffull auctoritie for the publisheinge thereof'.<sup>78</sup> Purfoot had been granted the right to print fire briefs in 1587.<sup>79</sup> Whether this was published before the collection was granted or not, a ballad entitled *The burninge of the Towne of Tiverton*

<sup>72</sup> Anon., *VVofull nevves*, sig. B4v.

<sup>73</sup> Whately; with the later subtitle *A sermon preached in the parish church of Banbury on Tuesday the fourth of March last past vpon occasion of a most terrible fire that happened there on the Sabbath day immediatly precedent, and within the space of foure houres was carried from the one end of the towne to the other, with that fury, as continuing to burne all the night, and much of the next day, it consumed 103. dwelling houses, 20. kilnehouses, and other out-houses, to the number of 660. bayes and vppwards, together with 50 much malt and other graine and commodities, as amounted at the least to the value of twenty thousand pounds.*

<sup>74</sup> Quoted in Walsham, p. 116.

<sup>75</sup> Raymond, p. 125.

<sup>76</sup> *Acts of the Privy Council of England 1597–8*, p. 392.

<sup>77</sup> *A.P.C. 1597–8*, p. 452.

<sup>78</sup> *A Transcript of the Registers of the Company of Stationers of London, 1554–1640 A.D.*, ed. E. Arber (3 vols., 1875; repr. Gloucester, Mass., 1967), iii. 111.

<sup>79</sup> Kitching, p. 175.

was licensed, without higher authority required, to Purfoot on 28 April.<sup>80</sup> Meanwhile, the town had contacted the master of requests in an attempt to secure letters patent.<sup>81</sup> The combination of the court of requests, Purfoot's involvement, and the publishing of at least a ballad, had a cumulative effect and the council accepted the town's suit for the grant of letters patent. They revealingly referred to the fire in the language of the pamphlet as 'the lamentable misfortune of ... the towne of Tiverton' rather than, as previously, as a 'pittifull accydent of fire'.<sup>82</sup>

After the Nantwich fire, central authorities actively encouraged cheap print narratives. Kitching has traced the individuals crucial to Nantwich securing a brief and government backing. Among these were Alexander Nowell, dean of St. Paul's, Lord Derby and Sir Christopher Hatton; Nantwich 'had friends at court'.<sup>83</sup> The town was also strategically important for military manoeuvring at a time of increasing tension with Spain.<sup>84</sup> It is, then, not surprising to see the bishop of London personally license the pamphlet *The true discription of the burninge of Nantwiche* on 1 February 1584, eight weeks before the privy council issued a brief.<sup>85</sup> The Nantwich fire was a cause to which the queen gave, and was close to the hearts of several in high office. The authorities sought to publicize the fire and inspire sympathy with pamphlet literature. Following the queen's £1,000 donation, hundreds of these pamphlets were 'sent abroad into the counties, cities and towns as also to the bishops'.<sup>86</sup>

Literary accounts were parts of towns' coping strategies, helping to externalize and understand loss. In their parallel role as advertisements for grief, the polemical value of devastation was exploited to incite giving among the reading public in collection campaigns. It is to the success of these collections that we now turn.

Relief campaigns began before briefs were granted. Burnt towns were assisted by neighbouring parishes, who addressed their most pressing needs. This assistance came in various forms. Tiverton lodged its dispossessed in nearby villages, some with the town's own poor whose houses had avoided the fire.<sup>87</sup> Local donations of grain and other relief in kind were crucial, judging by the frequent mention of need in pamphlets and state papers.<sup>88</sup> Relief authorities were more interested in cash donations, so the only glimpses we get of non-financial relief are when it accompanied money, as at Stratford in 1641, when Richard Wright sent cash and wheat 'for his own particuler'.<sup>89</sup> Such local kinship ties must have been important in the immediate aftermath of fire, but as records just show formal, institutionalized relief we only get glimpses of this in accounts, and in passing in ephemeral literature.<sup>90</sup> After the initial devastation, neighbouring communities

<sup>80</sup> *Registers of the Company of Stationers of London*, iii. 113.

<sup>81</sup> *A.P.C. 1597–8*, p. 452.

<sup>82</sup> *A.P.C. 1597–8*, pp. 452, 392.

<sup>83</sup> Kitching, p. 179.

<sup>84</sup> Kitching, p. 186.

<sup>85</sup> *Registers of the Company of Stationers of London*, ii. 430; Kitching, p. 179; the brief is printed in J. Hall, *A History of the Town and Parish of Nantwich, or Wich-Malbank in the County Palatine of Chester* (Nantwich, 1883), pp. 106–7.

<sup>86</sup> Kitching, p. 181; and Alexander King's audit of Nantwich accounts, quoted in Hall, pp. 106–7n.

<sup>87</sup> *A.P.C. 1597–8*, p. 392; Anon., *True lamentable discourse*, sig. B2v.

<sup>88</sup> E.g. at Darnton, Durham in 1585 (Anon., *Lamentable News from the Towne of Darnton*, sig. B1); at Gamlingay, Cambs. in 1600 (see *A.P.C. 1599–1600*, p. 340); at Walton, Leics. in 1601 (*A.P.C. 1601–4*, p. 179).

<sup>89</sup> Stratford-upon-Avon, Shakespeare Birthplace Trust Record Office (hereafter S.B.T.R.O.), Saunders papers, ER1/77/5 fo. 169v.

<sup>90</sup> Anon., *VVofull newes*, sig. B4.

offered other assistance, like building materials (Devon merchants donated timber for the rebuilding of Tiverton in 1599) or sustenance.<sup>91</sup> However, there was only ever so much local communities could provide, and this necessitated a wider collection and letters patent from the monarch.

Granted briefs were highly formulaic, remaining very similar over the period. They recounted the state of the town before the fire, much like cheap narrative accounts, emphasizing its strategic importance, utility to travellers or position as a market town.<sup>92</sup> Losses were stated and certified by J.P.s, and some statement was made as to why a national campaign was needed – Stratford was ‘in great hazard to be overthrowne & undone’ if the ‘course of travellers [was] diverted’; and Penzance, having been torched in a Spanish raid, was crucial for ‘the preseruacion of this our realme’.<sup>93</sup> Briefs then stipulated collection procedures. In Penzance ‘the inhabitants ... any of them, their sufficient deputie or deputies’ bearing the brief were licensed to collect.<sup>94</sup> At Stratford, corporation officers and later Warwickshire’s J.P.s. were licensed.<sup>95</sup> The individually addressed and signed Nantwich briefs instructed bishops and J.P.s in the counties to organize regional relief, and appoint ‘men of good credit and reputation’ to collect funds to send to Chester or London.<sup>96</sup> Penzance and Nantwich show differing approaches by central government towards two important military towns. Penzance was treated with a more laissez-faire attitude than Nantwich, its citizens being allowed to collect individually, so long as they possessed a brief. When need was most pressing, after a Spanish raid, central government was willing to circumvent the ‘bureaucratic jungle’ with which the Nantwich collection committee had to deal.<sup>97</sup>

In making specific prescriptions central government sought to regulate collections. However, a strong discretionary element remained that was liable to exploitation. Richard Quayney of Stratford-upon-Avon left a detailed account of his expenses for a collecting trip to East Anglia in 1598. As an alderman working on ‘town causes’ he kept meticulous records of receipts, of what money was his and what was the town’s. Charges to the town of £5 for horse hire and 37s 2d for ‘charges in London x days and home ... Being in London 5 daies and on my way home 3 days’ do, however, seem like abuse of a discretionary system when his trip involved as much personal debt settling as charitable collection.<sup>98</sup> Stratford’s 1614 collection was so corrupt that justices Sir Henry Rainsford and Sir Richard Verney were driven to apply for a second brief to collect in different counties to secure sufficient funds.<sup>99</sup> The ‘greedy expeditions’ of

<sup>91</sup> *A.P.C. 1598–9*, pp. 564–5.

<sup>92</sup> Cf. Elizabeth I, *Elizabeth by the grace of God Queene of England, France and Ireland ... to all and singuler archbishops, bishops ... whereas we are credibly giuen to vnderstand, as well by the pitifull supplication and petition of our poore and true subiects ... of our towmes of Pensance, Mousehole, and Newlin ...* [brief for Penzance, Mousehole and Newlyn, 1595] (1595); James I, *James, by the grace of God, King of England, Scotland, France, [and] Ireland, Defender of the faith, [et]c. To all and singuler archbishops, bishops, archdeacons, deanes, and their officials: ... Whereas wee are credibly certified ...* [brief for Stratford-upon-Avon, 1616] (1616).

<sup>93</sup> James I, ‘Proclamation, 5 Dec. 1614’ [brief for Stratford-upon-Avon, 1614], *Shakespeare Quarterly*, v (1954); Elizabeth I, [brief for Penzance, Mousehole and Newlyn, 1595].

<sup>94</sup> James I, ‘Proclamation, 5 Dec. 1614’; Elizabeth I, [brief for Penzance, Mousehole and Newlyn, 1595].

<sup>95</sup> James I, ‘Proclamation, 5 Dec. 1614’; James I, [brief for Stratford-upon-Avon, 1616].

<sup>96</sup> Kitching, p. 180; Hall, p. 106; John Strype, *The Life and Acts of John Whitgift, D.D.* (4 vols., Oxford, 1822), i. 413.

<sup>97</sup> Quote from Kitching, p. 180.

<sup>98</sup> Quayney collected over £5 in rent and that ‘which was due’ to him in London alone (S.B.T.R.O., Saunders papers, ER1/77/5 fos. 182v–183v).

<sup>99</sup> S.B.T.R.O., Saunders papers, ER1/77/5 fos. 136–7.

1614 were riven with arguments, ‘unperfect and indirect, every one prefferinge his owne p’vate benefitte befor the generall good, and charitable intention of theare letters patent’.<sup>100</sup> Again the corporation was presented with many ‘bills of charges exeding theare Collectiones’.<sup>101</sup> After its 1590 fire, Wolverhampton suffered selfish collectors who collected only for the ‘privat gaine of some fewe persons’.<sup>102</sup> There were, however, some local heroes who went above and beyond for their communities. John Walley rode for 460 days in two years for Nantwich, ending up ill in bed for seven weeks after wintertime riding; he only ever claimed subsistence expenses.<sup>103</sup> Wymondham’s Phillip Cullyer was similarly public spirited. He lent £55 7s to the town to build a schoolhouse, funded six almshouses for the dispossessed poor, and at sixty-three rode between Norfolk and London seeking support for the town.<sup>104</sup> Such ‘unsung heroes’ were, unfortunately, exceptional cases.<sup>105</sup>

Alongside the abuses of the varied system of collection were more legitimate expenses paid to further collections. Wymondham and Nantwich threw large banquets for local dignitaries, spending £6 11s and £7 9s on feasts for local baron Sir Henry Hobart and Lord Leicester respectively.<sup>106</sup> The economic function of these feasts is unclear – potentially similar to more routine ‘church ales’, communal festivities where ale was sold and the profits used to fulfil parochial obligations – but their ritual importance is apparent. Ralph Bulkeley of Nantwich took down his shop and reassembled it in the churchyard so ‘my lord might there stay to hear the oration made to him’.<sup>107</sup> As part of a communal coping strategy, these expensive occasions ought not to be overlooked. In the short term, banquets did not house the needy, but their impact is not easily measured. Communal celebrations, which also aided towns’ relief efforts by ingratiating them with influential lords, might have been a welcome change from sullen streets and griping poverty. These feasts may well have been the towns’ leaders ‘putting on a brave face’.<sup>108</sup> As elite-directed events, they can also be seen to ‘reinforce the power of governing oligarchies and bolster urban pride’.<sup>109</sup> The hope of Ralph Bulkeley is all that remains of local attitudes towards such extraordinary occasions.

Other than wining and dining regional dignitaries, towns met more mundane expenses from the relief fund. Stratford’s expenses in 1641 ran to £20 15s 2d, just over 2 per cent of the total raised.<sup>110</sup> At Cley-next-the-Sea, however, £9 17s 6d was charged to the fund, nearly a quarter of what was raised.<sup>111</sup> Nantwich spent £400 (12 per cent of £3,300 raised), with £60 going to collectors and £8 written off as mislaid petty cash.<sup>112</sup> Such a discrepancy in the case of Stratford suggests that money was syphoned

<sup>100</sup> S.B.T.R.O., Saunders papers, ER1/77/5 fos. 153–4.

<sup>101</sup> S.B.T.R.O., Saunders papers, ER1/77/5 fo. 153.

<sup>102</sup> *A.P.C. 1598–9*, pp. 392–3.

<sup>103</sup> Kitching, pp. 182–3.

<sup>104</sup> J. Wilson, ‘Keeping Wymondham working: the Wymondham town book, c.1585–c.1662’, *The Annual: the Bulletin of the Norfolk Archaeol. and Hist. Research Group*, xiii (2004), 27–43, at p. 13.

<sup>105</sup> Kitching, p. 183.

<sup>106</sup> J. Wilson, ‘Wymondham town book, 1585–1620’, in *Country and City: Wymondham, Norwich and Eaton in the 16th and 17th Centuries*, ed. J. Wilson, P. Howard and A. Hinckley (Norwich, 2006), pp. 1–77, at p. 22; Kitching, p. 183.

<sup>107</sup> Quoted in Kitching, p. 183.

<sup>108</sup> Wilson, ‘Keeping Wymondham working’, p. 13.

<sup>109</sup> Walsham, p. 247.

<sup>110</sup> Calculated from S.B.T.R.O., Saunders papers, ER1/77/5 fos. 174–80v, 169v–73v.

<sup>111</sup> Longcroft, p. 20.

<sup>112</sup> Kitching, p. 183.

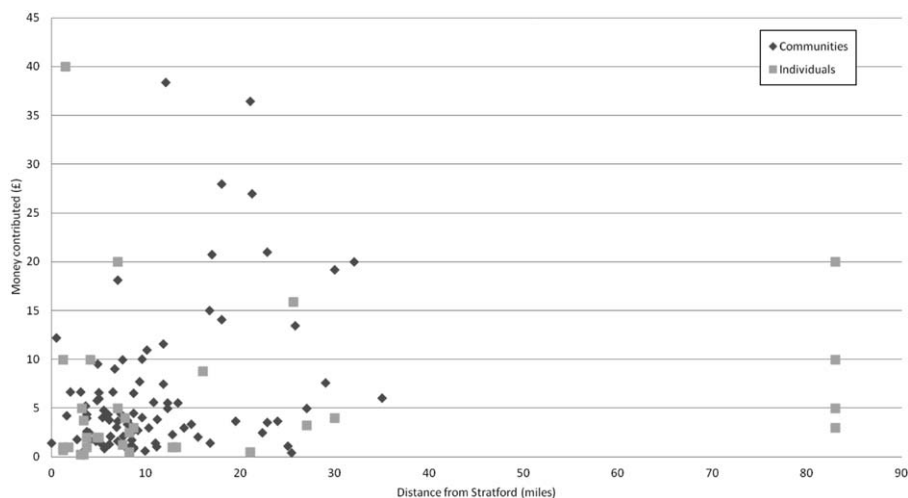


Figure 2. Distances of donations to Stratford's 1641 collection

off outside the accounts, with others like Richard Quayney taking it upon themselves unilaterally to reimburse their 'charges'. Indeed, a comparison of relief accounts also shows an unaccounted for £15 discrepancy between money collected and distributed.<sup>113</sup> Stratford's collection was, however, intensely local, mainly confined to Warwickshire, thus incurring less expense. As the chief market town for south-west Warwickshire, Stratford was able to exploit its regional economic significance to extract charity from neighbouring communities more fully than any of the other towns under study.

Despite hints at corruption, accounts show collectors' activities were profitable, with funds coming in from local and national sources. Where the location of donations was recorded, patterns of giving can be established. The atypical Nantwich collection shows no geographic or population-size pattern in charitable giving.<sup>114</sup> With central government taking a close interest in returns, borough and county officials were obliged to contribute, and consequently the only notable pattern is that Wales and the north donated very little, whereas London was most charitable.<sup>115</sup> However, in local collections some patterns can be seen.

Detailed accounts for Stratford's 1641 collection include the locations of donors. Donations can be divided into communal and individual gifts, as Stratford's recorders noted separately any donations above 10s by an individual (see Figure 2).<sup>116</sup> From a breakdown of returns from Avon Dasset recorded on the reverse of a brief, we can see that 10s was a generous amount; the average personal donation in this rural Warwickshire parish was about 3d.<sup>117</sup> In contrast, the largest communal donations came from the town of Evesham (£38 8s 4d) and the dean and chapter of Worcester (£36 9s 1d).

<sup>113</sup> S.B.T.R.O., Saunders papers, ER/1/77/5 fos. 169v–80v.

<sup>114</sup> Lake, p. 87.

<sup>115</sup> Lake, p. 87; Kitching, p. 184.

<sup>116</sup> Data from S.B.T.R.O., Saunders papers, ER/1/77/5 fos. 170–4v. All distances here and hereafter are measured from Bridge Street, Stratford 'as the crow flies'. The data is interactively mapped at <<https://mapsengine.google.com/map/viewer?mid=zBwEUWDRnHUI.kaGzwV5Yq1qGM>> [accessed 3 Oct. 2014].

<sup>117</sup> S.B.T.R.O., miscellaneous documents, Stratford-upon-Avon corporation, BRU15/7/106.

Donations from individuals came from a maximum of eighty miles away, from London, whereas communal donations were from much closer, the furthest being from Elford in south Staffordshire, and Gloucester just over thirty miles away.<sup>118</sup> Communities' obligations to give diminished after about a thirty-mile radius, while individual bonds to the town, often those of family or kinship, facilitated longer-distance giving. An incomplete document of a collection between 1614 and 1616 shows a similar geographic dispersal, where all but two of the traceable donations are from within a thirty-mile radius.<sup>119</sup> London-based Job Dighton, George Nashe, Richard Quiney and Mr. Sadler were the only donors from beyond the thirty-mile threshold. Dighton, Quiney and Sadler came from families affected by at least one of Stratford's previous fires, and Nashe had family and property interests in the town. Of ninety-two donations coming from communities, forty-six came from towns within a ten-mile radius, the area proposed by Everitt as the marketable region upon which towns could draw.<sup>120</sup> Other than London donations, receipts from individuals and communities scarcely show a difference in location.

Donations from the gentry and peerage were also limited to those with estates in Warwickshire, with £40 coming in from the earl of Middlesex, of nearby Milcote Manor, and £20 from Lord Brooke, of Warwick castle.<sup>121</sup> Middlesex's contribution is striking. Having been stripped of his government office and forced to surrender several substantial sources of income, he was, by the late sixteen-thirties, in a state of relative penury.<sup>122</sup> His gift of £40 is the largest from an individual, which may be expected from the local lord, yet not one evading debts and selling estates.<sup>123</sup> Middlesex's donation ought to be seen in the context of what Ann Hughes has called 'the interweaving and overlapping of different types of jurisdiction, authority and hierarchy' around Stratford, at once a borough, manor and parish.<sup>124</sup> Having moved to Milcote in 1636, Middlesex sought to establish influence in his manor; a substantial donation to the proudly independent corporation in its hour of need was a shrewd political manoeuvre.<sup>125</sup>

Hughes has also described an extensive network of 'godly' preachers and ministers across Warwickshire in the sixteen-thirties and forties.<sup>126</sup> From the locations of the overwhelmingly local returns from the 1641 collection, the importance of this network is clear. As briefs were read after Sunday service, an active and collaborative network of godly preachers was of undoubted importance to Stratford. Weekly lectures delivered by a rotating cast of local preachers in the town in the sixteen-thirties, and at Lord Brooke's Warwick castle into the sixteen-forties, were 'the most important foci for ministerial

<sup>118</sup> S.B.T.R.O., Saunders papers, ER1/77/5 fos. 170–4v.

<sup>119</sup> S.B.T.R.O., miscellaneous documents, Stratford-upon-Avon corporation, BRU15/13/17.

<sup>120</sup> A. Everitt, 'The market towns', in *The Early Modern Town: a Reader*, ed. P. Clark (New York, 1976), pp. 168–204, at p. 191.

<sup>121</sup> S.B.T.R.O., Saunders papers, ER1/77/5 fos. 172v, 171v.

<sup>122</sup> M. J. Braddick, 'Cranfield, Lionel, 1st earl of Middlesex (1575–1645)', *O.D.N.B.* <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/6609>> [accessed 31 March 2011].

<sup>123</sup> Braddick.

<sup>124</sup> A. Hughes, 'Religion and society in Stratford-upon-Avon, 1619–38', *Midland Hist.*, xix (1994), 58–84, at p. 60.

<sup>125</sup> Hughes, 'Religion and society in Stratford-upon-Avon', pp. 67, 76.

<sup>126</sup> A. Hughes, 'Thomas Dugard and his circle in the 1630s – a "parliamentary-puritan" connexion?', *Historical Jour.*, xxix (1986), 771–93.



association' in the area.<sup>127</sup> Among the more exotic places donating to Stratford were Sutton Coldfield (north Warwickshire), Banbury (Oxfordshire) and Tamworth (Staffordshire), whose 'godly' ministers Anthony Burgess, William Whately and Thomas Blake are known to have attended Warwick in 1640/1.<sup>128</sup> These social and professional 'godly' networks became practically important in soliciting charitable contributions.

Incomplete collection records suggest that Stratford attempted to collect money beyond the geographic reach of its economic and religious significance. There is fragmentary evidence of a fractious national collection. The account lists the losses of a few of the town and from where these individuals were to seek relief. It is highly presumptuous, with Kent expected to yield £783, Suffolk £979 and Cambridge £650, this money then to be divided among the select list of claimants. Whether this collection was ever made is doubtful, as responsibilities for collection circuits in the north and Wales remained unallocated, and at one point two of the appointed collectors refused to perform their task, having taken issue with accusations of corruption by local justices.<sup>129</sup> Similarly, a planned nationwide collection was aborted in 1641. A deputation for Edward Lord to ride to Lincolnshire and Leicestershire is unsigned and marked 'not executed'; it was drafted in November 1641, after the accounts were closed.<sup>130</sup> While fractious parish politics scuppered the 1616 collection, it may well have been the national political crisis of the sixteen-forties that stymied later collections.

The main differences between the geographic distribution of donations made to Stratford and those made to Nantwich or Tiverton can be attributed to the control of the collection process. Nantwich's collection was centrally directed, with money requested by letters signed by privy councillors and followed up by townsmen like John Walley. Tiverton's 1598 collection was centrally directed, out of enthusiasm for the recent poor law and vagrancy statutes rather than compassion.<sup>131</sup> No returns remain from this collection, but a maximum of £5,000 was set. Central government directed J.P.s to hand over any surplus poor rate funds to assize justices, and later authorized circuit justices to request 'voluntary offering' from the 'blessed'.<sup>132</sup> Counties were expected to yield designated sums, with £50 requested of Cheshire, even more than it had given to Nantwich.<sup>133</sup> These nationwide collections were successful in obtaining money from cities, boroughs, church officials and London merchants. Locally directed operations managed to gather more funds from local sources. This was down to the costs of collecting. The Nantwich and Tiverton collections required donors to send in money, with town lobbyists following up lucrative sources, whereas locally controlled collections involved townsmen riding out at personal cost, to spread briefs and request funds. Thus we see accounts like Stratford's from 1594, where the costs of collecting in Derbyshire (£8 3s 9d) were greater than what was collected (£4 3s 8d).<sup>134</sup> The law of diminishing returns had a greater effect on locally directed campaigns, in

<sup>127</sup> Hughes, 'Thomas Dugard and his circle', p. 775.

<sup>128</sup> Hughes, 'Thomas Dugard and his circle', pp. 789, 777.

<sup>129</sup> S.B.T.R.O., Saunders papers, ER1/77/5 fos. 161v–165v.

<sup>130</sup> S.B.T.R.O., Saunders papers, ER1/77/5 fo. 135v; final entries and totals were made in both the collection and distribution accounts on 5 Oct. 1641 (S.B.T.R.O., ER1/77/5 fo. 173v, ER1/77/5 fo. 180v).

<sup>131</sup> Kitching, p. 176.

<sup>132</sup> Kitching, p. 176; *Quarter Sessions Records with other Records of the Justices of the Peace for the County Palatine of Chester, 1559–1760*, ed. J. H. E. Bennett and J. C. Dewhurst (Chester, 1940), p. 48.

<sup>133</sup> Bennett and Dewhurst, p. 48; Kitching, p. 184.

<sup>134</sup> *Minutes and Accounts of the Corporation of Stratford-upon-Avon and other Records*, v: 1593–8, ed. L. Fox (Hertford, 1990), p. 29.

terms of distance travelled, as officials were unable to assess which areas were particularly receptive before they had ridden out to collect there, unlike centrally directed collections.

It may, then, seem that central government involvement was advantageous, yet a comparison of total collection returns relative to requests does not suggest so. In provincial towns, funds raised from across the organizational spectrum amount to between 10 and 15 per cent of what was lost or requested after a fire. Tiverton's limit of £5,000 (never reached) was just 3 per cent of total claimed damage, and this system was not used again.<sup>135</sup> Nantwich raised a creditable 11 per cent of funds requested, but the highest yields were at Dorchester in 1623 and Wymondham in 1615, raising 16 and 14 per cent of their claimed damage respectively.<sup>136</sup>

What these figures suggest is that central government involvement, be it through direct prescription or bureaucratic process, tended not to aid the overall gains of a town. Collections were only ever authorized for a fixed number of years, often a maximum of two, meaning collectors worked against the clock. Reticence or bureaucracy at Whitehall could take up valuable time and impede collections. At Stratford, accounts record that £125 (14 per cent of the total raised) was contributed on the day of the fire itself, most from within twelve miles.<sup>137</sup> Similarly, at Dorchester in 1623 a collection was made on the Sunday after the fire, at St. Martin's church, yielding £58 (10 per cent of the total).<sup>138</sup> At Wymondham, however, it took six years to raise £2,171 (14 per cent of losses) in a collection supervised mainly by county gentry not resident in the town.<sup>139</sup> In the immediate aftermath of fires need and generosity was at its greatest. Local collections could better address local needs. Stratford's 1641 account was open for only seven months, whereas Nantwich's was open for two years, but both raised around 10 per cent of total claimed losses.<sup>140</sup> Even accounting for the relative magnitude of the estimated damage (Nantwich at £30,000 and Stratford at £8,700) the comparison stands, Stratford raising on average £125 per month and Nantwich £138, which includes a £1,000 donation from the queen.

We ought not to be complacent about the effectiveness of local campaigns. No collection raised anywhere near the amount of money lost in the fires, and this led to many individuals going without, or with insufficient, monetary relief. There is also no way of getting at the 'dark figure' of neighbourly relief, in kind and monetary, given without recourse to local institutions. This must not be underestimated, especially in the case of Tiverton, which after seemingly raising so little, continued to grow in population and increase in trade, checked but not halted by two great fires and plague from 1590 to 1620.<sup>141</sup> The distribution of this known relief is analysed in the following section.

Distributing funds was a political exercise involving social and economic decisions, with some individuals given priority over others. A committee at Basingstoke in 1601 was required to 'doe a woorke full of charitie' and to 'make equall and indifferent

<sup>135</sup> Kitching, p. 176.

<sup>136</sup> Calculated from Kitching, p. 183; Underdown, p. 37; *Wymondham: History of a Norfolk Market Town*, ed. M. Garner and J. Wilson (Wymondham, 2009), pp. 52–3.

<sup>137</sup> S.B.T.R.O., Saunders papers, ER1/77/5 fo. 170.

<sup>138</sup> Underdown, p. 37.

<sup>139</sup> Garner and Wilson, pp. 52–3.

<sup>140</sup> Lake, p. 86.

<sup>141</sup> Harding, pp. 50–1.

distribution ... according to conscience and consideration'.<sup>142</sup> Discretionary 'charitie' necessitated distinctions between loss and need, and the latter was determined with reference to the individual and the community. Alongside this was the operation of a bureaucracy that could effectively distribute money. Accounts of relief distribution are at once records of social and economic priorities, and of bureaucratic processes. Relief distribution was as varied as charitable donation and collection. It was the responsibility of relatively discrete local groups, assembled like select vestries from those with local power. These were administrative bodies, but also constituted a 'social and political space through which authority was transmitted'.<sup>143</sup> Comprehensive accounts from Nantwich, Wymondham and Stratford invite comparisons of this politics of local support.

The process of relieving the distressed began with the potentially contentious assessment of damage, loss or need. Fires in this period occurred before any formal system of insurance; there were no specialized loss adjusters to produce documents like Warwick's 1695 'Book of reductions'.<sup>144</sup> Incipient loss adjusters can be identified in several towns. As mentioned above, early estimations of losses could be polemical and inaccurate, printed in pamphlets but later revised. While this was an opaque and impressionistic exercise in literature, relief accounts show adjustments more clearly. Loss adjustment was often conducted at the behest of those with economic interests in keeping claims down. In Cley-next-the-Sea, villager Thomas Greve was instructed by Nathaniel Bacon to 'conterre and consider who are fitt to be relieved and in what measure'. This Greve duly did, producing a 'trewe note' of the 'trewe valew of ther losse and ... remainder' which reduced losses by an average of 60 to 80 per cent and removed gentry claims altogether.<sup>145</sup> Directed by a large local landowner and deputy-lieutenant dubbed 'Mr Lawier' by his family, Greve's task was one set by an absentee official, dwelling in the south of the county, who was more acquainted with the demands of the law than the needs of the inhabitants of Cley.<sup>146</sup> Nantwich's assessment was outlined by the privy council. Losses were to be recorded in a 'perfect booke', along with 'a note of every mans abylyty to beare his severall losses'. The emphasis was on individuals' ability to contribute 'some good proportion' towards rebuilding.<sup>147</sup> The Nantwich accounts then only give the amounts paid and received by claimants, not the total damage, need or claim.<sup>148</sup> In Wymondham, where relief was controlled by outlying gentry, loss adjustment can be inferred from the regularity of losses recorded. The survey was conducted nine months after the fire, by Sir Henry Hobart and the county J.P.s.<sup>149</sup> There are ten entries for losses of £13 6s 8d, exactly one third of £40. Similarly, there are seven entries of £6 13s 4d, one third of £20. Seven specific claims ranging from £3 6s 8d to £66 13s 4d, accounted down to shillings and pence, that are a third of larger round figures, occur twenty-nine times in

<sup>142</sup> *A.P.C. 1601–4*, p. 420.

<sup>143</sup> S. Hindle, *The State and Social Change in Early Modern England, 1550–1640* (Basingstoke, 2000), p. 205.

<sup>144</sup> *The Great Fire of Warwick 1694: the Records of the Commissioners Appointed under an Act of Parliament for the Rebuilding of the Town of Warwick*, ed. M. Farr (Stratford-upon-Avon, 1992), pp. 244–54.

<sup>145</sup> Quoted in Longcroft, p. 21.

<sup>146</sup> A. H. Smith, 'Bacon, Sir Nathaniel (1546?–1622)', *O.D.N.B.* <<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/998>> [accessed 7 Apr. 2011].

<sup>147</sup> Lake, app. ii, p. 158.

<sup>148</sup> Lake, app. i, pp. 153–7.

<sup>149</sup> Wilson, 'Great fire of Wymondham', p. 33.

the ‘Book of losses’, suggesting a systematic programme of loss adjustment undertaken by Hobart and the J.P.s.<sup>150</sup>

The account of Stratford’s 1641 losses differs. As an incorporated town, it was less subject to rule by local lords and its governance was dominated by substantial townsmen. There are subsequently no discernible patterns implying adjustment in listed losses. Although undated, the account was likely drawn up between 10 March, the fire, and 17 March, the first distribution. It must have been made before 25 March, as it is dated just ‘1640’, implying the old style dating convention.<sup>151</sup> It is also arranged alphabetically by surname, suggesting it is a fair copy rather than a draft. Claims range from Edward Sulter’s eight quarters of malt, to Mrs. Wilson’s £1,175 11s 2d.<sup>152</sup> Made within two weeks of the fire, this assessment was subject to little loss adjustment. A local fire committee made up of six aldermen, the high bailiff, the town clerk, three local gentlemen, a lawyer, the schoolmaster and the vicar distributed money.<sup>153</sup> With this committee operating assessment and collection in Stratford, in contrast to the situations in Wymondham, Cley and Nantwich where out-of-town gentry or the privy council were responsible, relief assessment was more in line with immediate perceived local need, focused on the town and its inhabitants rather than on long-term or financial concerns affecting donation and collection.

Specific local sensitivities were attended to early on, and Stratford’s meticulously dated accounts facilitate an analysis of these immediate priorities.<sup>154</sup> Wymondham’s give a relative account of priorities, with relief dispensed in six consecutive distributions between 1616 and 1621. Stratford’s first distribution was made on 17 March, a week after the fire. Having received £125 in the preceding week, the town paid £111 to twenty-two claimants in the first of its major distributions. Claimants who received money at this point range from John Davies, a shoemaker, who claimed £3 10s, to Mrs. Cawdry, who claimed £442 6s.<sup>155</sup> That these twenty-two were singled out for the earliest relief gives us an idea of how badly they were affected. Large losses did not necessarily mean a personal tragedy – for someone like Mrs. Cawdry to lose £442, she had to have £442 to lose; we are unsure what percentage of her wealth this was. From the records of early relief payments we can infer that the earliest recipients had the most pressing needs. The date on which money was given adds an urgency to individuals’ losses. We have little cause otherwise to link John Davies and Mrs. Cawdry. They lived close to each other on Bridge Street, a main thoroughfare into Stratford and the site of many of the fire’s victims, Cawdry in her marital home, a former inn, and Davies in the ‘Middle Row’ with his wife and in-laws, fellow shoemakers the Wheelers.<sup>156</sup> Bridge Street was, however, a bustling mix of shops and houses, not helping to link them socio-economically.<sup>157</sup> What connects them is the extent of the personal effect of the

<sup>150</sup> Norfolk, Wymondham Abbey Muniments (hereafter W.A.M.), ‘The brief distribution list relating to losses in the fire of 1615’ (nine pages).

<sup>151</sup> S.B.T.R.O., Saunders papers, ER1/77/5 fo. 148.

<sup>152</sup> S.B.T.R.O., Saunders papers, ER1/77/5 fos. 148–50.

<sup>153</sup> S.B.T.R.O., Saunders papers, ER1/77/5 fos. 175v–176.

<sup>154</sup> The figures in this paragraph are from S.B.T.R.O., Saunders papers, ER1/77/5 fos. 169v–173v, 174–180v.

<sup>155</sup> S.B.T.R.O., miscellaneous documents, Stratford-upon-Avon corporation, BRU15/7/108. The next major distribution was made on 29 March.

<sup>156</sup> S.B.T.R.O., transcripts and notes, Richard Savage papers, ER82/6/77, [Elizabeth Cawdry’s lease]; S.B.T.R.O., R. Bearman, ‘History of the streets of Stratford-upon-Avon: Bridge Street’, unpublished report, OS 87,32, pp. 12, 35.

<sup>157</sup> R. Bearman, *Stratford-upon-Avon: a History of its Streets and Buildings* (Hendon, 1988), p. 13.

damage. The same fire destroyed much more of Cawdry's property than it did of Davies's, yet both were given the earliest relief, to sustain them. Fire affected neighbourhoods. When these neighbourhoods were diverse, they affected rich and poor indiscriminately. When, as at Tiverton, housing was more closely linked to socio-economic status, sections of society might be spared.<sup>158</sup> This was not the case in Stratford, and the fire committee responded, addressing immediate needs first and long-term considerations later.

Wymondham's first distribution shows similar compassion for immediate needs, despite its not being made until several months after the fire.<sup>159</sup> Of 331 claims, 273 resulted in a payment of some kind in the first distribution. Those excluded were a few who had lost only minor goods (the exception being Frances Porter, ominously labelled 'singlewoman', who claimed £8 in lost goods), those who lost or sustained damage to houses only, and those who suffered loss or damage to multiple houses and goods. All those whose sole house was damaged along with some of their goods were relieved. Only one man in this situation was excluded from the initial distribution, the wealthy Stephen Agas.<sup>160</sup> By relieving those whose sole house and goods were damaged first, the Wymondham committee also prioritized immediate need as soon as it could. The deployment of these funds could not have been as effective as at Stratford, however, where the local committee was better practised (1641 being the fourth fire in forty-seven years) and more responsive to local need. Distribution there began in the week after the fire, rather than the following year.

There is no mention of poor relief in either the Stratford or Wymondham accounts, and little of extra poor relief in contemporary town records. This may well have been, as Wilson suggests, because the poor continued to be relieved from parish rates.<sup>161</sup> Accounts of fire relief are concerned with those in extraordinary situations. Relief operations were not about alleviating poverty, but restoring social and economic normality; they were essentially conservative. Early relief payments were made to those who had fallen furthest from previous positions. They are an indication of how communities reconstructed themselves, not of their rebirth or reinvention.

With Stratford's accounts it is possible to continue to trace the dates of disbursements of funds. Figure 3 plots this and shows the efficiency of Stratford's relief effort.<sup>162</sup> All but £15 19s 2<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>d is accounted for, less than 2 per cent of the total collected. The fund ran a surplus, with donations coming in more frequently (on thirty-four days) than money was disbursed (on fourteen days). Up until 21 April money paid out appears to have been for subsistence, as afterwards many more distributions have conditions attached, such as 'to build' or to 'be put in Mr Bailiffs hands'.<sup>163</sup> The town certainly showed a more relaxed attitude towards payments made after that date, with far fewer being signed or marked for by recipients. This may well have been because funds were paid to those who had begun reconstruction, as the building season commenced. Before 21 April, two-thirds of receipts were signed for in some form, compared to less than a

<sup>158</sup> Anon., *VVofull newes*, sig. B2.

<sup>159</sup> W.A.M., 'Brief distribution list'.

<sup>160</sup> Wilson, 'Great fire of Wymondham', p. 33.

<sup>161</sup> Wilson, 'Great fire of Wymondham', p. 37.

<sup>162</sup> S.B.T.R.O., Saunders papers, ER1/77/5 fos. 174–80v, 169v–173v.

<sup>163</sup> S.B.T.R.O., Saunders papers, ER1/77/5 fo. 176v.

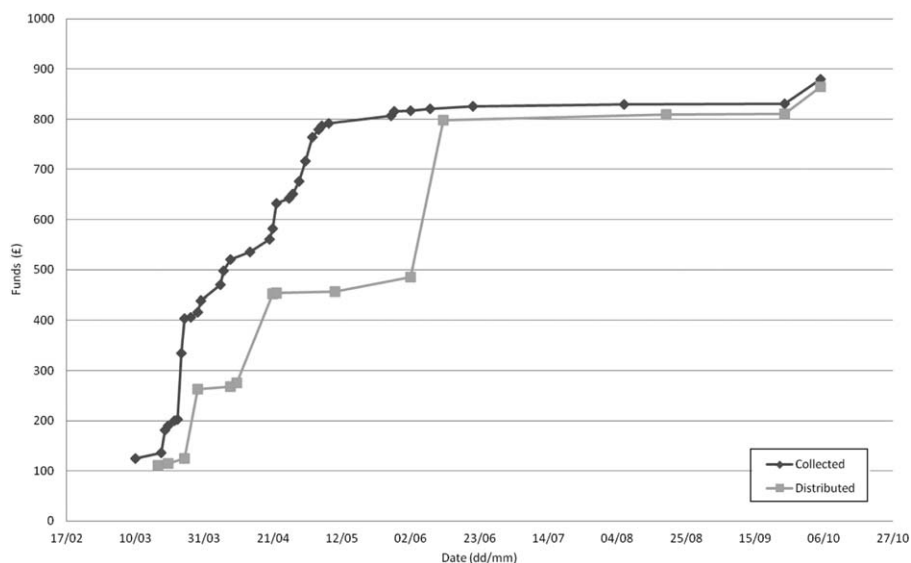


Figure 3. Collection and distribution of relief funds in Stratford 1641

fifth after money came to be more tightly specified.<sup>164</sup> Figure 3 illustrates this break between subsistence cash payments and later designated funds.

In the six weeks before 21 April there were six distribution days, yet from that date onwards, there were only eight distribution days in the succeeding thirty weeks. Funds distributed track the funds received up until late April, after which distributions are fewer and further between, allowing the total collected to rise far higher than the total distributed. During this period of capital accumulation the committee reassessed the town's needs and planned the distributions required for rebuilding, as subsistence needs began to be met and the basic functions of devastated areas restored. Indeed, the largest amount distributed in a single day, £312 10s 2d on 12 June 1641, coincided with the height of the building season, suggesting that money was paid out to those who had begun reconstruction.

In the long term, the percentage of a claim paid to an individual was important for overcoming personal losses. Wymondham and Stratford were able to pay their claimants, on average, 17.5 and 17.2 per cent of their claims respectively.<sup>165</sup> Payments at about one-sixth of claims fall very short of what was required to recover losses. With resources so tight and overall relief relatively meagre, those whom towns chose to relieve above others were particularly privileged. Two Stratford claimants conspicuously noted as 'of London' requested a cumulative £1,430 yet were given just £5 between them.<sup>166</sup> In Wymondham the privileged were the town's tradesmen. The accounts note the occupations of ten tradesmen: a grocer, a 'tradesman', a wheelwright, three butchers, two tailors, a glazier and a baker. As a group, they received an above average 23 per cent of their claims.<sup>167</sup> Stratford differs slightly. As an account administered by and for

<sup>164</sup> S.B.T.R.O., Saunders papers, ER1/77/5 fos. 174–80v.

<sup>165</sup> These are the mean averages of all individual claims to receipt ratios from each town, calculated from S.B.T.R.O., Saunders papers, ER1/77/5 fos. 174–80v, and W.A.M., 'Brief distribution list'.

<sup>166</sup> S.B.T.R.O., Saunders papers, ER1/77/5 fos. 149v, 180v.

<sup>167</sup> W.A.M., 'Brief distribution list'.

locals there was little need to note occupations, and only three are mentioned. Of these three recipients, two were original claimants, John Davies the shoemaker and Richard George the joiner. They received 28.6 and 37.9 per cent of their claims respectively, higher than the town average. Richard Mountford, mentioned as a wheelwright in his inventory, received 25 per cent of his claim.<sup>168</sup> The Nantwich accounts include a comprehensive list of occupations, but these are a modern addition.<sup>169</sup> From these we cannot tell which tradesmen were singled out, as at Wymondham or Stratford. Overall, tradesmen here were paid slightly more (£18 6s) than others (£16 8s), but personally contributed slightly more (£36 6s to £33 12s). In the light of watershed poor law legislation, these figures are telling. Before the statutory institutionalization of charity in 1598, Nantwich administrators were centrally directed to ‘regarde alwayes . . . the poorer sorte to whome the benyfyte of the collection ys cheefly intended’.<sup>170</sup> Tradesmen were treated without prejudice. Yet after 1598, tradesmen at Wymondham and Stratford received above average relief. As payers of the poor rate and masters of locally apprenticed children, the trades fulfilled a dual economic and social role. Tradesmen were important for these market towns’ economic recovery, but most immediately they were crucial contributors to social welfare through the Elizabethan poor laws.

Spending on practical and symbolic civic projects was similarly targeted. Nantwich funded a new market house with ‘two convenient rooms above for gentlemen & townes men to assemble and meete in’ on business.<sup>171</sup> Should money be left over, the town was to provide a godly schoolmaster and preacher so that Nantwich ‘may be exercised in the true knowledge and fear of God’.<sup>172</sup> The privy council’s desire to install godly ministry and ‘Protestant discipline’ was so great that if appeal funds were lacking the town was to make contributions towards the preacher’s keep.<sup>173</sup> In Wymondham a sizeable £1,000 was spent reimbursing the town charity for the loss of its market cross, schoolhouse, guildhouse and other buildings.<sup>174</sup> This was, however, in line with other payments, at 16 per cent of the estimated losses.<sup>175</sup> It is unclear whether the guildhouse was repaired, but work was swiftly commenced on the key social and economic town buildings, the schoolhouse and the market cross, funded by loans from substantial townsmen in the same spirit that saw tradesmen paid above average relief.<sup>176</sup> Relief authorities prioritized buildings in which ‘local pride’ might have been taken, structures which were also important for the economic recovery of towns’ business interests. In this sense, these rebuilding efforts demonstrate the priorities of relief administrations, rather than the immediate needs of many in burnt towns.

Behind cosmetic recovery and the stimulus for the ‘middling sort’ lay biting poverty in the most badly burnt towns. In 1622 there were said to be 400 starved and impoverished in Wymondham.<sup>177</sup> Cumulative misfortune took its toll. In the three

<sup>168</sup> *Stratford-upon-Avon Inventories 1538–1699*, ed. J. Jones (2 vols., Stratford-upon-Avon, 2003), ii, 108.

<sup>169</sup> Lake, app. i, p. 153.

<sup>170</sup> Lake, app. ii, p. 158.

<sup>171</sup> Lake, app. ii, p. 158.

<sup>172</sup> Quoted in Kitching, p. 182.

<sup>173</sup> Quoted in Kitching, p. 182.

<sup>174</sup> Wilson, ‘Great fire of Wymondham’, p. 33.

<sup>175</sup> Wilson, ‘Great fire of Wymondham’, p. 36.

<sup>176</sup> Wilson, ‘Great fire of Wymondham’, pp. 37–8.

<sup>177</sup> Wilson, ‘Great fire of Wymondham’, p. 39.

years following the Nantwich fire harvests declined, resulting in the 1586 dearth.<sup>178</sup> Stratford's fires of 1594 and 1595 came at a time of dearth and harvest failure and Wymondham's 400 poor were not helped by another bad harvest in 1622.<sup>179</sup> Plague struck Stratford in 1646, as well as social unrest and civil war into the sixteen-forties.<sup>180</sup> Dearth and plague particularly affected poorer people, those who are under-represented in fire relief accounts.<sup>181</sup> Nantwich records a payment of only £5 16s to 'The poor' in its account.<sup>182</sup> Having no estate to re-edify, we have to assume that the poor of burnt towns were provided for out of personal charity or later the poor rate. Fire accounts are in this sense limiting. They are records of property losses and reductions in material circumstance, a reminder that it is the kinds of people who bore these losses whose experiences are best recorded.

The inventories of such people reveal the long-term impact of loss on the middling sort. Richard Mountford of Stratford died in 1661 having suffered losses of £80 in the 1641 fire. He received £20 from the relief fund, half of which was put in Mr. Rawlins's hands, probably for building work.<sup>183</sup> Despite losing a substantial sum, at his death Mountford's goods were valued at £122 14s 2d and he could leave a house to his son.<sup>184</sup> Despite having lost £248, John Careles left £211 of goods on his death in 1664, including £40 in debts 'good and desparate'.<sup>185</sup> Even though he received less than 10 per cent of his claim, Careles was clearly able to regain his standing as a substantial yeoman and maltster, starting a family with his new wife Ann in 1643 and lending money to people of varying credit.<sup>186</sup> William Smart, tailor, fared less well. He received an average settlement, £28 for losses of £149, but left little in the way of goods. A partially torn inventory records only beds and bedding worth over a pound, his clothing worth pennies.<sup>187</sup> Smart was newly married at the time of the fire, with a son born in 1640. The Smarts had seven children, six after the fire; their three daughters did not make it past childhood, and their first son William died at the age of nineteen. Smart himself was a widower for fifteen years before his death in 1667.<sup>188</sup> He appears to have been unable to sustain the substantial losses he suffered in the fire. He had married relatively late, at thirty-eight, but must have been in a sound financial position to be able to lose £149. What Smart's case illuminates is the importance of the timing of disaster in an individual's life-cycle; 1641 was a crucial year for his fledgling family, yet others like Careles or Mountford who, long married and remarried, lived in relative comfort and security and were able to cope with large damage claims.

<sup>178</sup> W. G. Hoskins, 'Harvest fluctuations and English economic history, 1480–1619', *Agricultural Hist. Rev.*, xii (1964), 28–46, at p. 37.

<sup>179</sup> Hoskins, 'Harvest fluctuations 1480–1619', p. 46; W. G. Hoskins, 'Harvest fluctuations and English economic history, 1620–1759', *Agricultural Hist. Rev.*, xvi (1968), 15–31, at p. 30.

<sup>180</sup> P. Tennant, 'Stratford-upon-Avon in the civil war', in Bearman, *History of an English Borough*, pp. 110–25, at p. 114.

<sup>181</sup> M. Pelling, *The Common Lot: Sickness, Medical Occupations and the Urban Poor in Early Modern England* (1998), pp. 76–7.

<sup>182</sup> Lake, app. i, p. 156.

<sup>183</sup> S.B.T.R.O., Saunders papers, ER1/77/5 fo. 177.

<sup>184</sup> These included a substantial collection of 73½ pairs of stockings (Jones, ii. 108–9).

<sup>185</sup> Jones, ii. 122–3.

<sup>186</sup> Jones, ii. 124.

<sup>187</sup> Jones, ii. 130.

<sup>188</sup> Jones, ii. 130.



The poor, of course, left no inventories. They are significant in their absence from relief accounts. These accounts are records of how towns reconstructed themselves, concerned with those able to have lost material goods, and ‘the decay of their revenues & public estates’.<sup>189</sup> These were people who, like John Davies, stood to lose a great deal as property owners and heads of households. However, Stratford’s 1641 account of losses explicitly states that there are ‘many others of the Towne & Country, who had their Stockes utterly consumed with ye houses’ whose names are not noted.<sup>190</sup> What these accounts could never record was the experiences of lodgers, tenants and poorer family members who, having little to start off with, had little to lose in the eyes of the corporation.

Great town fires provide an opportunity to study urban communities through their printed portrayals, regional networks, governance and administration. Responses to distress reveal organizational priorities. Top among these was returning the town to its previous state by providing relief, which was targeted to alleviate distress and subsequently to repair damage. With resources very tight, choices were made to promote the trades and rebuild community property. Such decisions may well have enabled towns to prosper in the long term, but it was net prosperity, often at the price of many poor. Stratford held its position as the main market town for south-west Warwickshire after the fires of 1594–5, but 600 inhabitants (one in three) were in poverty.<sup>191</sup> While burnt towns kept up with the steady ‘snail’s pace’ of urban growth in this period, fires show that there were significant material deviations along the way, which, despite being short-lived, created subsistence crises for significant numbers of urban dwellers.<sup>192</sup> Town records of institutionalized relief can only show communities’ corporate recovery, with statistics left to relay individuals’ experiences, which are roughly, but starkly illustrated by low loss-to-relief ratios. Further local study is required to reveal the personal cost of fires, beyond monetary and property losses.

Histories of accidents have been criticized for being overly focused on administration and not enough on experience.<sup>193</sup> What an understanding of institutions, along with cultural artefacts like ephemeral literature, can provide is an awareness of the experience of individuals who were prioritized under the institutional culture that produced such records. These are the people included in the corporate ideal of the community, those discussed in public literature and who benefited from public buildings. An institutional focus is less well suited to uncovering the experiences of those mentioned only in passing, like the 400 impoverished of Wymondham. The nature of the historical record surrounding fires highlights some of the methodological difficulties of studying the propertyless in this period. They were only recorded when they came into contact with authorities, in these instances to receive relief; they are only ever mentioned as an intention in directions from government, and not in practice.

Fire was a constant threat to all, in all towns. It was realized in many, yet each responded differently. These responses reflect the social, political and economic circumstances of towns at the time of disaster, and in this sense communities’ responses

<sup>189</sup> S.B.T.R.O., Saunders papers, ER1/77/5 fo. 151v.

<sup>190</sup> S.B.T.R.O., miscellaneous documents, Stratford-upon-Avon corporation, BRU15/7/108.

<sup>191</sup> Porter, p. 103.

<sup>192</sup> J. de Vries, *European Urbanisation, 1500–1800* (1984), p. 254.

<sup>193</sup> B. Luckin, ‘Accidents, disasters and cities’, *Urban Hist.*, xx (1993), 178–90, at p. 190; R. Cooter and B. Luckin, ‘Accidents in history: an introduction’, in *Accidents in History: Injuries, Fatalities and Social Relations*, ed. R. Cooter and B. Luckin (Atlanta, Ga., 1997), p. 2.

are useful to historians across the board. Fire disasters created states of emergency, where existing political powers – the ‘substantial’ townsmen at Stratford, the gentry at Wymondham – kept control and directed relief, reflecting what Tittler saw as a ‘general willingness to see the main offices of local government filled by a narrow slice of the population’, particularly in hard times.<sup>194</sup> However, the recovery of fifteen-nineties Stratford and Tiverton, unaided by satisfactory institutional relief, alerts us to the meaningful silence in relief records. The meaning of the absence of ample recorded relief is ‘deferred’, apparent only when towns again prospered, alerting us to the barely recorded, but crucial acts of neighbourly charity which helped towns to recover.<sup>195</sup>

Ultimately, cries of ‘flames of subversion’ were overstated. Dominant groups retained and reasserted control, shaping relief efforts and recovery in burnt towns, and the pre-fire political cultures and power structures of communities remained throughout recovery, perpetuating themselves through relief organization. Fire disasters prompted processes of ‘routinization’ in which relief administrations were established as kinds of ‘exception routines’ that, in dealing with the exceptional, sought to re-establish the routines of social order.<sup>196</sup> A consequence of this return to routine was a return to routine structural inequalities. While fires caused great immediate discontinuity, after the ash had settled, the experience of recovery was as much a function of previous socio-economic positions as it was of personal distress. Just how successfully, and at what cost, recovery was achieved in towns with less-pronounced social hierarchies remains to be seen.

<sup>194</sup> R. Tittler, *The Reformation and the Towns in England: Politics and Political Culture, c.1540–1640* (Oxford, 1998), p. 184.

<sup>195</sup> S. Hindle, “‘Bleedinge afreshe’”? The affray and murder at Nantwich, 19 Dec. 1572’, in *The Extraordinary and the Everyday in Early Modern England: Essays in Celebration of the Work of Bernard Capp*, ed. A. McShane and G. Walker (Basingstoke, 2010), pp. 224–45, at p. 238.

<sup>196</sup> R. Stallings, ‘Disaster and the theory of social order’, in Quarantelli, *What is a Disaster?*, pp. 127–46, at p. 138.