

THE SMALL TOWNS OF NORTH HAMPSHIRE 1660 – c. 1800 PART 1: ECONOMY

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ABSTRACT

After the Restoration, there was a cultural, economic and social revival that was led largely by London, but was soon evident in the larger towns. Peter Borsay's study of this new wave of prosperity in the provincial towns of England between 1660 and 1770 explored how this English 'urban renaissance' occurred. The extent to which this revival was evident in the numerous smaller English towns has been investigated for a few places, but little such research has been undertaken on the smaller towns of southern England. This study, in three parts, of the small towns of north Hampshire (Alton, Andover, Basingstoke, Kingsclere, New Alresford, Odiham, Overton, Stockbridge and Whitchurch) from 1660 to c. 1800 goes some way to redress the balance.

This first paper will explore the economic background to the revival in the north Hampshire towns. Two further articles will treat, firstly, population growth and urban development, and secondly, the case for an 'urban renaissance' in the north Hampshire towns.

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to investigate the economy of the north Hampshire towns of Alton, Andover, Basingstoke, Kingsclere, New Alresford, Odiham, Overton, Stockbridge and Whitchurch. Only Andover and Basingstoke were incorporated. Andover was granted a charter of incorporation in 1599, and Basingstoke was granted its third such charter in 1641; both remained in force until the reorganisation of the borough system in 1835. Additionally Andover, together with Stockbridge and

Whitchurch, were parliamentary boroughs throughout the eighteenth century (VCH, iv, 131–2, 301, 350, 351, 484).

Although a relative backwater, north Hampshire shared in the developments in the economy and communications apparent nationally. All the towns experienced population growth, residential expansion, and even cultural refinement. Consideration here of the economy relates to the agriculture and industry of the area, and to the development of transport and communications networks within it.

AGRICULTURE

Agriculture was the mainstay of the economy of north Hampshire. As befitted principally a chalk downland area, arable farming with corn production (particularly wheat and barley) predominated and was made possible by intensive sheep-folding. Sheep were pastured on the downs by day and close-folded at night on the lower arable land. Although kept mainly for their dung, sheep were also valued for their lambs, mutton and wool (Betty 1986, 121–2). The late seventeenth to early nineteenth centuries saw continuing advances in farming methods and productivity, notably the enclosure of open arable fields and conversion of former chalk downland to arable. Early enclosures by private agreement were followed in the eighteenth century by enclosure acts, particularly during the Napoleonic Wars (1793 to 1815) when corn prices were very high (Betty 1986, 197–9). In 1767, Arthur Young noted the considerable flocks between Winchester and New Alresford and

the hops grown in very large quantities near Farnham (Young 1768, 175, 181).

The 1795 *History of Hampshire* commented that in Alton (and other parishes near the Surrey border), more hops were being planted than previously, due to the good reputation and high prices of Farnham hops, and also that sheep stocks in Hampshire parishes had been reduced by a third, because of recent enclosure. However, most parishes still had very large flocks and the county a total stock of about 350,000 sheep. A list of parish stockholdings reveals that Kingsclere had the greatest by far, 12,000 sheep, with Andover and Whitchurch having 5,000 sheep, the second largest number each. Overton had 4,000 sheep, Alton, 1,500, Basingstoke, 1,400 and Stockbridge, 500. New Alresford and Odiham are not listed. Kingsclere also had 1,000 acres on which cattle were bred. Also near the border with Berkshire considerable quantities of oak and elm were produced (Warner 1795, iii, 2, 4–5, 12–14, 19).

Weekly markets were held during the late eighteenth century at Alton, Andover, Basingstoke (for corn, especially barley), Kingsclere (principally by sample, at the Swan and George inns), New Alresford (for corn and sheep), Odiham, Stockbridge and Whitchurch (by sample only) (*UBD*, 23, 31, 48, 168, 199, 316, 488, 936; Warner 1795, i, 29, 48). Overton's market had long since fallen into disuse (*UBD*, 184; Everitt 1976, 176). By 1810, sale of corn at Alton market was by sample (Vancouver 1810, 401). All nine towns held regular fairs during the year. In the 1790s these included: Basingstoke, two for sheep and two for cattle and a statute fair for servants; Overton, four for sheep and lambs; Stockbridge, three principally for sheep; and Whitchurch, one for toys and one for pigs and sheep (*UBD*, 23, 31, 48, 168, 184, 199, 316, 488, 936). However, the most important Hampshire fair was Weyhill Fair, near Andover. Daniel Defoe, writing of the early 1720s, described it as the greatest sheep fair in the country, supplying ewes for store sheep for Bedfordshire, Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Hertfordshire, Kent, Middlesex, Oxfordshire, Surrey and Sussex (Defoe 1974, 289). In the 1790s, Weyhill Fair was supplying the whole

of the west of England with hops produced in Hampshire and Surrey, particularly at Alton, Farnham and nearby parishes (*UBD*, 48).

INDUSTRY

Cloth remained the most important industry in Wessex, but was of only minor importance on the chalklands. Unlike pastoral farming, arable farming on the north Hampshire chalk afforded few opportunities for secondary employment. In the seventeenth century, new types of cloth were introduced, called 'medleys' or 'Spanish cloths', more lightweight than the traditional broadcloths. Older cloth centres like Andover, Newbury and Reading did not adapt to the new manufacture and the old trade declined rapidly, in contrast with the West Country towns that prospered on the new cloths (Betley 1986, 189, 190). Defoe noted that Alton and Basingstoke manufactured druggets and shalloons, and Andover shalloons, but otherwise Hampshire, Kent, Surrey and Sussex were 'not employ'd in any considerable woollen manufacture' (Defoe 1974, 142, 180–1, 288).

Cloth was still being produced in Andover and Basingstoke in the 1790s, when Alton had an increasing manufacture of corded druggets, figured barragons, and sergedenins, and barathees, barragons, serges and shalloons were being made at Whitchurch (*UBD*, 31, 48, 316, 936). By 1810, however, the cloth industry of Andover, Basingstoke and Whitchurch had declined due to the war, but that of Alton was thriving, including a reviving manufacture of silk and worsted tabbyreens, largely for the American market. Built in 1769, Overton silk mill afforded constant employment for many women and children in 1810. Near Overton there were two paper mills, one making paper for the Bank of England notes (Vancouver 1810, 399–400, 402–5; *UBD*, 185).

Malting was of considerable importance in north Hampshire throughout the period, particularly in Andover, Basingstoke, Kingsclere (mainly for the London market), Odiham and Overton. In 1810, Basingstoke and Odiham had a leather manufacture, and Kingsclere slaugh-

tered fat calves weekly for the London market (*UBD*, 48, 185, 488; Vancouver 1810, 396, 397, 402, 405).

Andover and Basingstoke also prospered by virtue of their position on the Great Western Road. Celia Fiennes described Basingstoke in 1691 as 'a large town for to entertaine travellers and commodious' (Morris 1982, 52) and later as having 'a good trade being a Road' (Morris 1982, 75). In the 1792 *Universal British Directory*, both Andover and Basingstoke were described as great thoroughfares, and Stockbridge as a noted thoroughfare (*UBD*, 47–8, 199, 315–6). Most north Hampshire towns no doubt also benefited to a degree from the increasing volume of passenger and freight transport over the period, as evidenced by investments made in improving facilities at existing inns and building new inns. For example at Overton, the New Inn was built in the mid eighteenth century, and the White Hart (dating from at least 1442) was refurbished in 1770 at a cost of £90 (Deveson 2000, 22–3). At Stockbridge, the New Inn was substantially altered and extended in 1745 at a cost of £300 (HRO 77M87/59).

TRANSPORT AND COMMUNICATIONS

In England in the late seventeenth century heavy goods were transported mainly by water as this was relatively cheap. Road carriage was generally limited to short hauls to and from markets and the nearest water transportation, or the long distance carriage of more valuable goods such as cloth (Albert 1972, 6). Stage waggons for transporting goods and passengers were introduced in the mid sixteenth century; stagecoaches for carrying passengers followed a century later. Stagecoach travel became increasingly popular and by 1700 a network of stagecoach services linking London with provincial and other centres was emerging. Early stagecoaches were primitive, but by the 1780s, improvements in coach design enabled travel smooth enough to read a book. Journey times also improved after the practice of re-horsing stagecoaches at intervals, introduced in the 1730s, became widespread (Ransom 1984, 20,

28). However the maintenance of the roads by parishes could not overcome the problems caused by increasing traffic, which was exacerbated in the 1690s by the serious disruption in coastal trade due to hostilities with France (Albert 1972, 8, 21).

Road improvements

Transport improvement was initiated at a local level, whereby interested groups petitioned Parliament for the authority to undertake road improvements. Embodied in the first Turnpike Authority of 1663 was the principle that road users should contribute to the costs of road repair; this remained the basis for most road improvements well into the nineteenth century (Albert 1972, 12, 14). Parishes' responsibilities for the maintenance of main routes lessened as more turnpike trusts became operative (Albert 1972, 24), but repair of local roads remained their responsibility (Ransom 1984, 23). Early turnpike activity concentrated mainly around London and the West Country cloth towns (goods were sent overland due to the shortage of river transport); the route from Bristol and Bath to London was almost complete by 1728. By 1750, many of the principal London routes were virtually all turnpiked, together with several important inter-provincial routes. The numbers of turnpike trusts established peaked between 1751 and 1772, the years of 'Turnpike Mania', with southern England a principal area of activity. The many factors underpinning this boom in investment (including domestic market expansion and export growth) resulted in larger traffic volumes and demands for less costly, more reliable communications all year round (Albert 1972, 37–8, 44, 49, 51, 56).

In north Hampshire the first Turnpike Act was that of 1718 on the road between Basingstoke and Reading. This and earlier turnpike activity in the Reading area was stimulated by the overland transportation of huge quantities of goods to Reading for shipment to London (Albert 1972, 38, 44, 202). From Reading, on the Kennet and near the Thames, barges

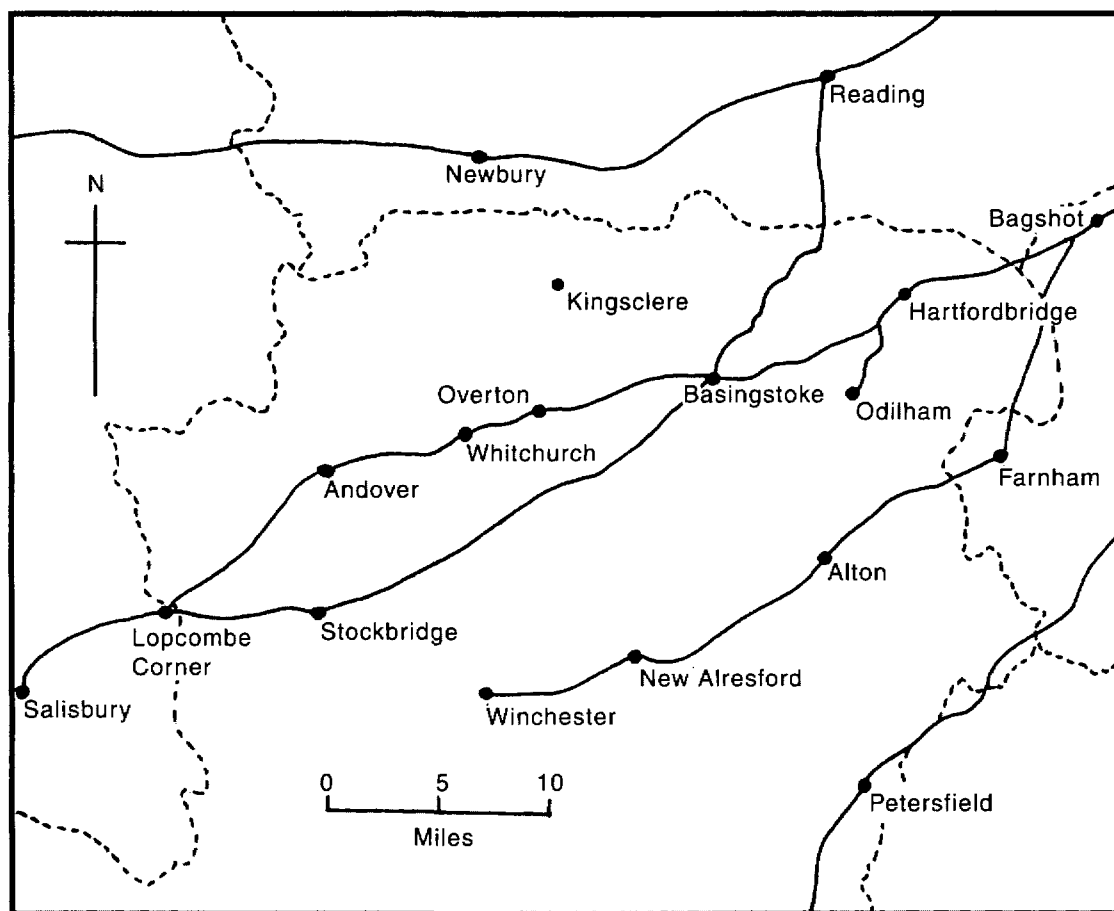


Fig. 1 North Hampshire turnpike road system by 1757

transported great quantities of malt, meal and timber to London, and brought back coal, salt, groceries and other goods that Reading traded into the countryside (Defoe 1974, 291).

In 1737 an Act was obtained for improving part of the Great Western Road from Hartfordbridge Hill to Basingstoke and Odilham, in need of repair 'by reason of many heavy carriages passing' (HRO 44M69/G1/125). Other Acts for improvements on this major route through Hampshire followed: in 1753 from Winterslow to Harnham Bridge (Albert 1972, 206); in 1755 from Basingstoke to Winterslow (Lopcombe Corner) via Overton, Whitchurch and Andover

(HRO 44M69/G1/128); and in 1757 between Bagshot and Hartfordbridge Hill (HRO 44M69/K4/11) (Fig. 1).

The alternative route between Basingstoke and Lopcombe Corner via Stockbridge obtained its Act in 1756 (HRO COPY 736/2). The more southerly east-west route through Hampshire, from near Bagshot to Winchester via Alton and New Alresford obtained its Act in 1753 (HRO 44M69/G1/127).

Turnpike Acts on more minor routes and cross-routes in north Hampshire continued throughout the eighteenth century. For example, the route from Oxdown Gate,

Popham Lane (near Basingstoke) to Winchester and beyond obtained its Act in 1759 (HRO 44M69/G1/129) and that from Whitchurch to Aldermaston Great Bridge via Kingsclere in 1770 (HRO 5M52/TR6). However, an Act did not guarantee improvements would follow. Improvements on the route from Bishops Waltham to Odiham via New Alresford (which obtained its Act in 1758) (HRO 44M69/G1/130) were never completed and the scheme dropped, due to disputes over the siting of toll-gates, and fears that the tolls would raise insufficient revenues (HRO 45M83/PZ3).

Contemporary views on the state of Hampshire roads were rarely documented. However, in 1810 Charles Vancouver (having surveyed Hampshire for the Board of Agriculture) found the roads '[i]n general, good; some, the very best in the kingdom' (Vancouver 1810, 391).

Volume of road traffic

The volume of passenger and freight traffic on the road towards the end of the eighteenth century was considerable. Contemporary trade directories list the regular coach and waggon services available at each town (except Kingsclere and Overton, omitted from the 1784 *Hampshire Directory*, and Basingstoke and Whitchurch, with briefer descriptions of services in the 1792 *Universal British Directory*). If not entirely accurate, they do give an idea of the volume of passing traffic. Towns on the Great Western Road in north Hampshire probably experienced the most traffic, with Andover possibly the busiest. In 1784 Andover had a variety of daily, thrice-weekly and weekly coach services between London and Bath, London and Exeter, London and Salisbury, London and Taunton and Oxford and Salisbury. Andover also had waggon services between London and the south-west, notably Exeter and Taunton, operating several days a week, and a twice-weekly service between London and Frome (*HD*, 57–8). Russell's, the principal carrier between London and the West Country from the late eighteenth century, maintained a substantial loading from Andover into the nineteenth century (Gerhold

1993, 2, 5, 25). In contrast Kingsclere, on a minor route, had no coach services listed in 1792, and only two waggon services: weekly to Newbury (on Newbury's market day) returning the same day, and weekly to and from London (*UBD*, 448).

Postal communications

Originating during the Elizabethan period, a commercially viable postal service existed by the 1630s (Brayshay 1992, 121–134). Late in the seventeenth century, post was dispatched three times a week on the Great Western Road from London to Plymouth. The principal Hampshire post stages were Andover, Basingstoke and Hartfordbridge. By 1684, due to increased business, a branch ran from Hartfordbridge to Alton, and on to Petersfield and Portsmouth, also to Winchester, Southampton and the Isle of Wight. Each town received its own sealed mail bag from London and the post-boy carried a by-bag for post dispatched between stages along the route. The same procedure applied on the return journey (Robinson 1953, 30–2).

For most of the eighteenth century mail was carried by post-boys on horseback (Ransom 1984, 29). Responses to the bishop of Winchester's visitation inquiry of 1725 indicate that most north Hampshire towns were post towns in their own right, receiving their own post bag. However, Kingsclere obtained its mail from Newbury, Overton from Basingstoke and Stockbridge from Winchester (Ward 1995, 4, 6, 9, 16, 77, 78, 101, 103, 104, 142).

Mail services were revolutionised in terms of speed and security from 1784, when the first mail coach left Bristol for London, and was so successful that mail coach services were extended to fourteen other routes the following year. By 1797 over twenty-two such services operated out of London and over fourteen others carried mail between provincial centres. Mail coaches also carried passengers to maximise profits (Ransom 1984, 29). In 1784, most north Hampshire towns had a post service three times a week to and from London; exceptionally New Alresford enjoyed an almost daily service (*HD*, 47, 50, 57, 63, 98, 159, 161). By the

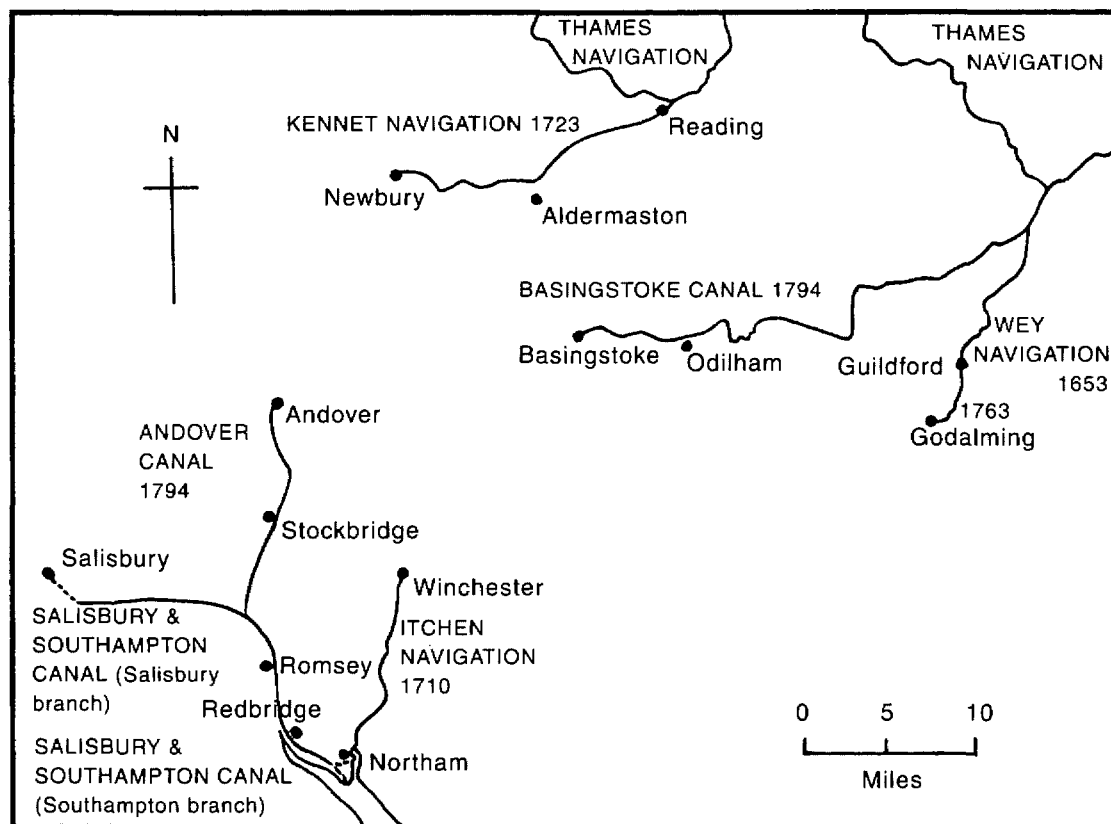


Fig. 2 Inland navigation in southern England

1790s, access to post services had improved considerably. Most towns had an almost daily mail coach service and Overton was receiving mail directly. However Kingsclere obtained its mail three times a week from Newbury by postman and Stockbridge sent and received post to and from London three times a week (*UBD*, 23, 31, 51, 185, 200, 316, 488, 936). Improved mail services also meant improved access to London newspapers, as they were dispatched free by the post office (Robinson 1953, 95–6, 121).

Waterways

Throughout the period (and up to the introduction of the railways) the cheapest way to transport goods was by water, via coastal trading

or inland navigation. Hampshire itself was not well served by navigable rivers. To the north, the Thames, always navigable, was subject to numerous improvements, and the Kennet was made navigable to Newbury by 1723. To the west, the Avon was made navigable from Christchurch to Salisbury by 1684. To the east, the Wey was canalised from the Thames at Weybridge to Guildford by 1653, and the navigation extended to Godalming by 1763 (Hadfield 1969, 15, 22–3, 166–7, 188).

Southampton had no navigable rivers to facilitate the inland distribution of goods that went overland instead. Efforts were made to improve the Itchen, but the Test was more difficult to improve and remained unaltered until the later eighteenth century (Welch 1966, 3). The Itchen

was made navigable to Winchester by 1710, and improvements continued during the eighteenth century. Wharves were sited at Northam. The Basingstoke canal affected trade adversely on the river in the early nineteenth century. At this time trade on the Itchen was chiefly one-way; goods were transported up to Winchester, but barges returned empty (Hadfield 1969, 160–4). Commercial traffic ceased in 1869 (Hampshire Archivists Group 1973, 19).

The Basingstoke Canal Act was obtained in 1778 for a canal from Basingstoke to the Wey, near Weybridge, but work did not begin until 1788, delayed by the American war and the recession that followed. It opened in 1794, the first of the ostensible agricultural canals built. Basingstoke inhabitants hoped to gain in three ways from a canal linking Basingstoke with the Thames: cheaper transportation of timber to the Thames dockyards for shipbuilding; cheaper, better quality coal from London instead of inferior coal from Winchester, and transportation of cornmeal directly to the London markets without carting it to the wharves at Aldermaston, Reading, Staines and Chertsey. It was anticipated that cargoes up to London would be principally of timber, malt and flour; down traffic would carry mainly coals. Once opened, there was also considerable local traffic in chalk, vast quantities being carried from the pit at Odiham. Wharves were established along the route, including at Basingstoke and Odiham (Vine 1968, 22, 34, 41–2, 45, 52, 98). From the start the Basingstoke canal did not carry the expected tonnage or earn the predicted tolls, and shareholders never received a dividend. Commercial traffic on the canal to Basingstoke ceased in the early twentieth century (Hadfield 1969, 153–5, 158).

In 1789 an Act was obtained for a canal from Andover along the Anton valley to Fullerton (where the Anton joins the Test), and along the Test valley to Redbridge on Southampton Water (Welch 1966, 3). It was completed in 1794 (Fig. 2). Wharves were built at Andover, Romsey and Stockbridge (a wharf already existed at Redbridge) (Hadfield 1969, 170–1). The proposal for this canal outlined several expected benefits, including better access to

imported coal especially in the area north of Andover, Andover to regain its old corn trade (previously lost to Newbury when the Newbury navigation was completed), and Stockbridge, with little or no trade, to engage in trade (HRO 5M52/TR3/26). Coal and building materials were carried up from Redbridge, and agricultural produce was brought down. However, as with the Basingstoke canal, trade on the Andover canal did not meet expectations and shareholders never received a dividend (Hadfield 1969, 171). The canal was sold to the London and South Western Railway Company in 1857 (Watthews 1973, 17).

The Salisbury and Southampton canal obtained its Act in 1795. This canal formed two branches of the Andover to Redbridge canal above. One branch was to run from Kimbridge near Romsey to Salisbury. The other was to run from Redbridge to Southampton, through a tunnel under West Marlands, and then divide, one part going to the sea at Godshouse Tower, the other to Northam on the Itchen estuary. Progress however was slow and beset by financial difficulties. By 1803 the Salisbury branch was open to Alderbury Common (overland transport via wooden railway and turnpike road completed the link to Salisbury), and the Southampton branch was also unfinished, being navigable in 1804 from the west end of the tunnel to Redbridge. Financial difficulties continued and the company struggled to keep the canal open (Welch 1966, 4, 9, 17–19). Traffic ceased on the Redbridge to the tunnel section by late 1806 and probably soon after on the Salisbury branch (Hadfield 1969, 186).

In 1810, Vancouver noted that, despite the inconveniences and disappointments surrounding the building of the Andover and Basingstoke canals, these, together with the Kennet Navigation, had brought considerable trade advantages to Hampshire (Vancouver 1810, 393).

CONCLUSION

During the eighteenth century, north Hampshire had an overwhelmingly agrarian economy

principally of wheat and barley production. Some cattle breeding took place at Kingsclere, and in the Alton area hop-growing became increasingly important. Industry was agriculture-based, and was characterised by a declining cloth industry, except at Alton, and the increasing importance of malting. North Hampshire was producing not only for local markets, but also for the London, South West and American markets.

Also significant to the economy of towns on major through-routes were the services provided to support the growing volume of passenger and freight traffic on the roads.

Considerable improvements were made to the transport and communications infrastructure of north Hampshire from the late seventeenth century, in response to increasing road traffic, and the demand for more reliable communications. By the 1750s turnpike activity had concentrated on the major through-routes, but by the end of the century, many minor routes were also turnpiked, so that north Hampshire (and indeed the whole county) was well served by a comprehensive network of turnpike roads. Postal communications also improved over the period, particularly following the introduction

of mail coach services after 1784. The area was also benefiting from the trade opportunities provided by improved water transportation following the completion of the Itchen and Kennet Navigations, and the opening of the Basingstoke, Andover, and Salisbury and Southampton canals. However, when the transport infrastructure of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Hampshire is viewed as a whole, it is not surprising that the canals were not the commercial success that had been anticipated. They were operating against a background of widespread coastal trading (in peacetime) and an above-average turnpike road system (Hadfield 1969, 16, 19), on which a complex network of local and long distance freight services was already firmly established.

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 44M69/G1/128 Turnpike Act: Basingstoke through Overton, Whitchurch, Andover, to Lopcombe Corner.
 44M69/G1/129 Turnpike Act: Oxdown Gate, Popham Lane to Winchester.

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