

Medieval Hanseatic League



King's Lynn and the Medieval Hanseatic League

By the early 13th century Lynn had become a significant market town and seaport, having grown rapidly since 1101 when Bishop Losinga of Norwich recognised it as a settlement on his Gaywood estate. He had endowed the Benedictine monks of Norwich Cathedral with the lordship. Their Priory Church of St Margaret was, nevertheless, only to be built and rebuilt through the wealth of Lynn's mercantile community, though the Norwich bishops were determined to retain their grip on the town. They had founded a second town and market in the 1140s on the Newland to the north of the first and assumed the lordship of both centres – of Bishop's Lynn – in 1205. When Lynn received its first royal charter of borough freedom in 1204, giving its merchants a degree of self-government, it was already the third or fourth port of the Kingdom.

Lynn's prominence in the Middle Ages depended on its extensive hinterland captured by the River Great Ouse and its tributaries including several counties at the heart of the nation (the great river had been diverted from Wisbech to Lynn about 1265). This privileged geographical position was reinforced by its location on England's east coast, facing Europe across the North Sea, with London and Scotland within easy reach by ship too.

Lynn and the German Hanse

German merchants from the Baltic and Hamburg secured trading privileges at Lynn in 1271 and these were confirmed, after some local disputes, in 1310. The right to maintain their own houses was a critical concession (other alien merchants had to lodge with burgesses). Lübeckers and other merchants from the East appear to be visiting English ports at the beginning of the 13th century, following traders from Gotland, to Lynn, Hull and Boston, then to London. Professor Friedland has also referred to Lynn and Boston as destinations for Hanseatic merchants trying to establish themselves in the West. The Norfolk town accepted them as "the fraternity of the German Hanse" (*fratres de hansa alemanies in Anglia existentes*, Lynn 1302). Boston and Lynn attracted the German Hanse because their extensive hinterlands offered commercial opportunities and rewards. They travelled to these Wash ports for wool in the 13th century, visiting their annual summer fairs, as did the Lübeckers in 1271.

Once the export of wool from England began to fall in the later 14th century, Hanseatic towns tended to link up with particular English ports. German trade to Boston was interlocked with the Kontor at Bergen where Lübeckers enjoyed a dominant role; their ships carried fish to the Wash and took away wool, cloth and

salt. Lynn merchants made Danzig their chief destination from the 1380s and, sure enough, it was ships from Danzig that had already started to visit the Norfolk seaport, though Hamburg and Bremen men traded through Lynn too.



Herring, timber, wax, iron and pitch were imported into England via Lynn in Hanseatic ships which sometimes carried grain from the Wash to Flanders. Wool, skins, cloth and lead were commodities taken back to Danzig and other German harbours. Lynn merchants sent cargoes to Prussia in Danzig ships and to Bergen in Lübeck bottoms, but none of them appear to have been resident in Norway or Hanseatic cities until the 1380s. Lynn was soon more heavily dependent on the Prussia trade through Danzig than any other English port.

A number of Lynn merchants and their associates seem settled in several Baltic seaports by the early 15th century, particularly in Wismar, Stralsund and Danzig. That Lynn treated independently with the Hanseatic cities in the resolution of disputes or grievances testifies to a not inconsiderable presence. Details of this commercial and diplomatic interaction can be found in the memorandum book belonging to William Asshebourne, Lynn's town clerk. In 1408 he received a letter from Lynn men in Danzig setting out their ordinances recently drawn up for "their company" there. The son of Margery Kempe married a Prussian woman and both travelled to Lynn in 1431, leaving their child in Danzig. Unfortunately, Margery's son died in Lynn and she escorted her daughter-in-law back to Danzig. There appears also to have been an exchange or transfer of sailors and artisans between Wash and Baltic seaports. A sizeable group of German shoemakers were living in Lynn by the 1420s for example. Commercial relations between England and the Hanse deteriorated following the seizure of its Bay salt fleet (from south-west France to the Baltic) by English privateers in 1449. Then all Hanseatic towns united against England after a major incident off Denmark in 1468. Peace was negotiated at Utrecht in 1473/74 after several years of sea warfare and the German delegation achieved most of its diplomatic aims. It insisted on a free gift of their former trading posts or steelyards at London and Boston and of a new one at Lynn. The Treaty of Utrecht was signed in 1474 and the English King conveyed a quay and tenements in the Norfolk town to the Hanse. Lübeck invited Danzig to take charge of the property, the complex now known as Hanse House. This is today the only surviving Hanseatic business headquarters or steelyard in England.

Post Hanseatic History

In 1537 Bishop's Lynn became King's Lynn when the charter of Henry VIII finally dispossessed the Norwich bishops and transferred full political power to the town's merchants. By the 16th century the east coast trade in corn and coal, mainly involving London and Newcastle respectively, kept the commercial wheels of this Norfolk seaport turning. Though its international trade with the Baltic and south-west France

(wine imports were substantial) continued, it was relatively less important than before. Lynn's hinterland remained the key to its success. In 1722 the travel writer Daniel Defoe was impressed by the fact that the Wash haven enjoyed "the greatest extent" of inland navigation of any English port outside London and served six counties "wholly" and three "in part" with coal, wine and provisions. Lynn was in turn a major corn exporter with granaries lining the river. But the town failed to develop any manufacturing industries in the course of the 18th century and, despite the buoyancy of shipbuilding and brewing, its population was only 11000 in 1801.

Lynn's population doubled between 1801 and 1851 as the market and port expanded with East Anglia playing a leading role in feeding London and the new industrial regions. Then the coming of the railways in the 1840s robbed Lynn of its geographical advantages as river and coastal traffic gave way to the iron road. Population fell from 20,000 to 17,000 (1851-1871). Economic recovery followed through the building of docks linked to the new national railway network which sparked the town's first industrial revolution. New factories began to supply English farmers with machinery, artificial manure and animal feed. Yet the town grew slowly because it was too remote from the industrial regions; its hinterland remained agricultural when food imports into England from America increased to compete with home farmers.

Lynn's population was still only 25000 in 1950 when a second industrial revolution was planned by local and central governments to boost its growth. This Wash seaport and market town was moreover a treasury of Medieval and Georgian architecture which needed resources for its restoration. Food, refrigeration, clothing, chemicals and light engineering were strongly represented by the 50 companies offering 5000 new jobs in Lynn between 1962 and 1971. The population of the town climbed from 28000 to 35000. The electrification of the railway line between Lynn and London (98 miles) in 1991 helped to ensure a slow but steady growth. NORA (Nar Ouse Regeneration Area) is the name given to an extensive district south of the town which is being redeveloped with housing and business facilities and a possible marina.



In 1974 Lynn and West Norfolk had united for local government and in 1981 the "Borough of King's Lynn and West Norfolk" was created. Despite the growth of suburbs and some redevelopment in the 1960s and 1970s, the Old Town of King's Lynn remains of national significance for its architectural and historic interest. Its connection with the Hanseatic League of the Middle Ages was highlighted in 2004 with the visit of the Kieler Hansekogge; then in 2005 the Borough of King's Lynn and

West Norfolk became a member of the New Hanseatic League – England’s sole representative.

In 2009 the Borough Council organised the towns first ever Hanse festival, maritime merriment was had by all.

The Archives

The [Norfolk Record Office website](#) includes a summary guide to the Borough Archives and an online catalogue, NROCAT (search on KL/C in the catalogue reference field).

The main series for the medieval and early modern periods, amounting to approximately 40 linear metres, are charters and grants of privileges, 1204-1737, hall or congregation (assembly) rolls and books, 1385-1387, 1399-1403 and 1412 onwards, registers and enrolments of charters, deeds, wills and memoranda from 1276 onwards, including the 14th-century Red Register and William Asshebourne’s book, 1408-1417, borough court records from 1296, chamberlains’ and other accounts from 1292, approximately 500 property deeds from the 13th century onwards, and records of nine religious gilds, 13th-16th centuries.

Particularly relevant for Hanseatic history are the Hall rolls and books from the 14th century onwards and Asshebourne’s book, 1408-1417, in which the town’s common clerk, entered letters and other documents relating to the town’s affairs, including mercantile and other disputes at home and overseas. There is a published calendar by D.M. Owen, *William Asshebourne’s Book*, in Norfolk Record Society, volume XLVIII (1981). Transcripts of, and extracts from, some other documents in the borough archives have been published in the *Historical Manuscripts Commission, 11th Report, Appendix 3: Manuscripts of the Corporations of Southampton and King’s Lynn* (1887) and in D.M. Owen, *The Making of King’s Lynn* (Records of Social and Economic History, new series 9, 1984).

Literature and Essential Collections

Carter A. and Clarke H.	Excavations in King’s Lynn 1963 – 1970 (London, 1977)
Friedland K. and Richards P. (eds). (Dereham 2005)	Essays in Hanseatic History: The King’s Lynn Symposium 1998
Lloyd D. W.	Historic Towns of East Anglia (Gollancz 1989)
Owen D.	The Making of King’s Lynn: A Documentary Survey (Oxford 1984)
Parker V.	The Making of King’s Lynn (Chichester 1971)
Pevsner N.	The Buildings of England: Norfolk North-West and South (Penguin Books 1999)
Richards Paul	King’s Lynn (Chichester 1990)
Williams N. J	The Maritime Trade of East Anglian Ports 1550 – 1590 (Oxford 1988)
Wren W. J.	Ports of the Eastern Counties (Lavenham 1976)

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