

# A County Town in Transition: The Great Fire of Warwick, 1694

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ON THE AFTERNOON OF 5 SEPTEMBER 1694 Warwick, a town of about 3,000 people and one of England's network of county capitals, was struck by fire.<sup>1</sup> Such an experience was hardly unusual for an early modern town: the combustible character of vernacular building materials and the close-packed nature of the built environment ensured that sizeable urban conflagrations were not uncommon.<sup>2</sup> However, what made the Warwick fire so special was the scale of the disaster, the nature of the response to it, and the rich body of documentary and physical records generated by the event. Among the holdings of the Warwickshire County Record Office is a corpus of fire archives—much of which has now been edited by Michael Farr in a magnificent edition for the Dugdale Society—and this collection provides a striking insight into an urban community in a state of short-term crisis and long-term transition.<sup>3</sup> In this, Warwick parallels other cases where a fortuitous survival of a particular document, or group of documents, has permitted the social structure or belief systems of a pre-modern local society to be plumbed in depth. The use of inquisitorial archives by Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie and

<sup>1</sup> For studies of the Fire of Warwick and the rebuilding see T. Kemp, *History of Warwick and Its People* (Warwick, 1905), pp. 59–63; A. Oswald, 'Warwick and its architecture, II: the rebuilding after the fire of 1694', *Country Life* (7 September 1951); *VCH Warwickshire*, vol. VIII (London, 1969), pp. 429–30; W.T. Rhys, 'Warwick, a study in urban geography' (MA dissertation, University of Wales, 1962), pp. 47–58; P. Borsay, 'The English urban renaissance: landscape and leisure in the provincial town, c.1660–1770' (PhD thesis, University of Lancaster, 1981), pp. 123–98; M. Turner, 'The nature of urban renewal after fires in seven English provincial towns circa 1675–1810' (PhD thesis, University of Exeter, 1985), pp. 215–29, 272–84.

<sup>2</sup> E.L. Jones, S. Porter and M. Turner, *A Gazetteer of English Urban Fire Disasters, 1500–1900*, Historical Geography Research Series, 13 (1984); J. Patten, *English Towns, 1500–1700* (Folkestone, 1978), pp. 60–3; S. Porter, 'Fires in Stratford-upon-Avon in the sixteenth century', *Warwickshire History*, 3 (1976), 97–105; S. Porter, 'The Oxford fire of 1644', *Oxoniensia*, 49 (1984), 289–300; S. Porter, 'Town fires: the case of Tiverton', *Devon and Cornwall Notes and Queries*, 33 (1977), 345–8; P. Borsay, 'Fire and the early modern townscape', in P. Waller, ed., *The English Urban Landscape* (Oxford, 2000), pp. 110–11.

<sup>3</sup> The main Fire records are filed in two boxes of documents in the Warwickshire County RO, CR 1368, WA. 4. The key items from this collection, together with other relevant archives, have been reprinted in M. Farr, ed., *The Great Fire of Warwick, 1694: The Records of the Commissioners Appointed under an Act of Parliament for Rebuilding the Town of Warwick*, Publications of the Dugdale Society, 36 (1992). Though I initially consulted and used the Fire records in their original form, all references below are to the more accessible Farr edition.

Carlo Ginzburg to recover the mental worlds of the inhabitants of Montañou in the Pyrenees and Montereale in the Friuli can serve as examples from southern Europe. For Britain there are David Hey's deployment of Richard Gough's *Antiquities* to reconstruct the life of the village of Myddle in Shropshire, and Charles Phythian-Adams and Helen Dingwall's analysis of rich census and taxation records to recover the socio-economic structure of Coventry and Edinburgh.

More pertinent to the case of Warwick is David Underdown's study of Dorchester, *Fire from Heaven*, which takes the major conflagration of 1613—in which it was estimated that about half the town was burnt—as a starting-point for a general study of the seventeenth-century community.<sup>4</sup> However, it would seem that the archives that remain for this fire are nowhere near as voluminous as those for Warwick, which probably has the finest set of surviving fire records for any early modern provincial town. Among these the principal ones deployed in this essay will be the act of parliament, the Commissioners' (or Fire Court's) order book, the Estimates of Losses (individual inventories of loss submitted by the sufferers), the Booke of Estimates of the Loss by Fire (a tabulated summary of the inventory data), and the petitions presented to the Fire Court. The catastrophic nature of the event which overcame Warwick was to reveal much that under normal circumstances would have remained concealed about the town's inner workings. Momentarily the crust of the community was prised open and something of its internal structure exposed. But it must be remembered that what we see is more in the fashion of a snapshot than a moving picture. To understand the static image it will be necessary to place it in a longer time-frame. Moreover, compelling as the micro-history of the Fire might seem it will make little real sense unless placed in a wider regional and national context.

This essay will begin by providing a brief narrative of the Fire and the rebuilding programme. Attention will then turn to what can be learnt from the reconstruction about urban design, and especially planning. The socio-economic context to the rebuilding programme will next be explored so as to discover something about Warwick's long-term economic trajectory and its social structure. A similar analysis will be made of the political context to determine where power lay in the town. In addressing these issues, attention will also be paid to how the lessons from Warwick relate to urban centres as a whole, in particular to the middle-ranking regional centre. In the conclusion it will be argued that the intensely dramatic, highly localised event of September 1694, and the various written and physical records it engendered, provide a window not only on a specific community but also the urban system as a whole when both were in a state of flux.

<sup>4</sup> E. Le Roy Ladurie, *Montañou: Cathars and Catholics in a French Village, 1294–1324*, trans. B. Bray (Harmondsworth, Middx, 1980); C. Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, trans. J. and A. Tedeschi (London, 1980); D.G. Hey, *An English Rural Community: Myddle under the Tudors and Stuarts* (Leicester, 1974); C. Phythian-Adams, *Desolation of a City: Coventry and the Urban Crisis of the Late Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1979); H. Dingwall, *Late Seventeenth-Century Edinburgh: A Demographic Study* (Aldershot, 1994); D. Underdown, *Fire from Heaven: Life in an English Town in the Seventeenth Century* (London, 1992).

## A narrative of the Fire

The Fire started on the south side of the High Street, in the vicinity of the Quaker meeting-house, and close by the West Gate (see Figure 7.1 for a map of Warwick in 1711). In all likelihood the immediate cause was a piece of burning kindling, being carried by someone who had visited a neighbour to obtain a light for their household fire. In his early nineteenth-century history of Warwick, William Field recorded how 'it is related, as a person was crossing a lane, with a piece of lighted wood in his hand, a spark flew from it, and fell on the thatch of an adjoining house, which was soon in flames'. Thereafter events unfolded with dramatic speed. A letter, dispatched to the bishop of Worcester four days after the calamity, reported that 'by a violent and tempestuous wind then blowing from the south west, [the fire] was soe swiftly carried through the principal and cheif trading parts of the town, that within the space of half

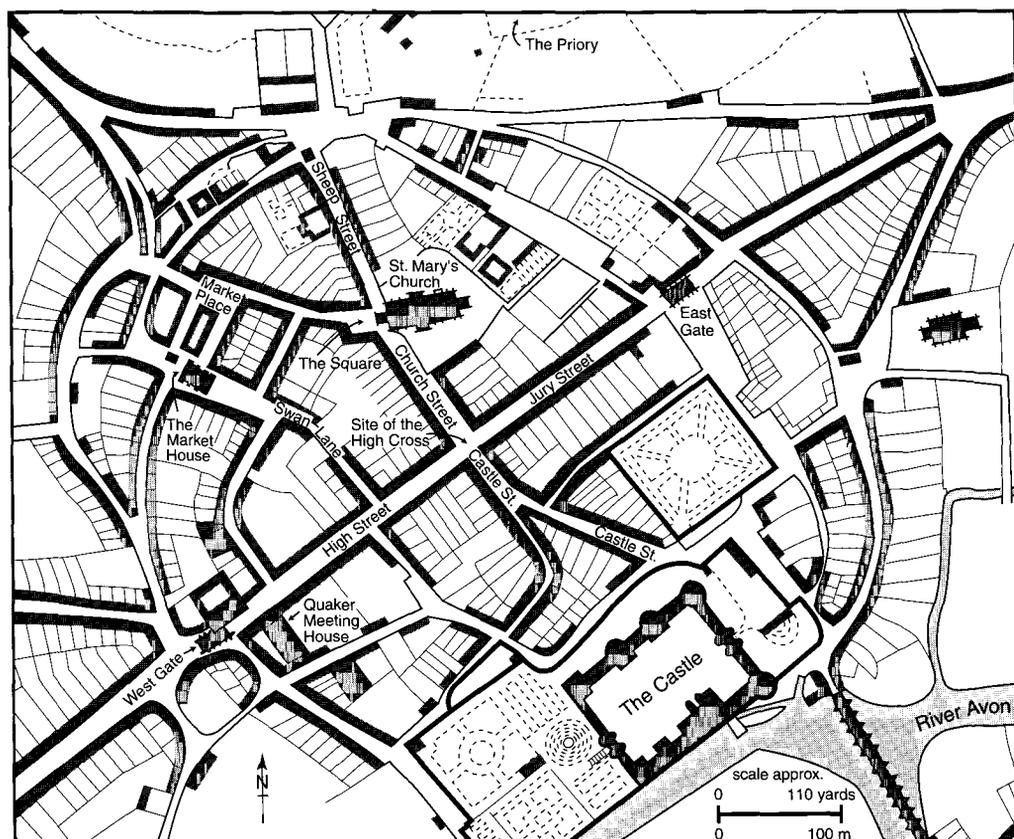


Figure 7.1. Warwick in 1711, based on James Fish's plan (*Warwickshire CRO, CR 217*).

an hour, severall places, and farr distant from each other, were all in flames at once'.<sup>5</sup> It appears from this account that the flames spread not along a continuous front but by leaps and bounds, as the high winds projected clumps of burning thatch across the town, igniting a series of independent fires that eventually coalesced into one huge conflagration. It was the multi-centred character of the fire that made it so difficult to contain—given the limited fire-fighting methods and technologies then available—and that transformed a potentially minor incident into a catastrophe of national proportions.

In the immediate aftermath of the Fire several attempts were made to calculate the losses. The financial damage was put at between £90,000 and £120,000, and the physical destruction at between 250 and 460 houses. However, these claims were inflated by the shock of the event and the need to elicit external relief. The *Booke of Estimates*, compiled from detailed inventories submitted by the sufferers, provides a more reliable figure, indicating damage to 157 properties valued at £60,000 (though aspects of the manner in which this figure was calculated suggests that £40,000 would be more realistic).<sup>6</sup> Comparison with the destruction wrought by other town fires of the period is difficult, since it is probable that many of the claims made, as initially at Warwick, were impressionistic and exaggerated. But it seems likely that the losses incurred at Warwick were among the ten highest for any fire in the seventeenth century.<sup>7</sup> The destruction was concentrated within a dog-legged central zone, stretching to the north and west, that included the socially, economically, culturally and politically most prestigious areas of the town.

In the Hearth Tax returns of the 1660s and 1670s, the wards that included the damaged streets—Jury Street, High Street, Market Place and Castle Street—contained the highest number of hearths per tenement and the greatest proportion of householders given some formal mark of status (for example, Mr, Mrs, Esq.), and the fewest number of non-assessed (and therefore poor) households.<sup>8</sup> The burnt area fringed the marketplace and accommodated Warwick's most fashionable and prosperous retail businesses, it contained the administrative headquarters for the corporation and county, and it housed the splendid medieval church of St Mary's, which was seriously damaged. Had the Fire struck one of the suburbs, where the town's poor were concentrated and economic life was more agriculturally orientated, then the level of disruption would have been more limited and—in all probability—little consideration would have been

<sup>5</sup> W. Field, *An Historical and Descriptive Account of the Town and Castle of Warwick and of the Neighbouring Spa of Leamington Spa*, 1st publ. 1815, repr. (East Ardsley, 1969), p. 10; Farr, *Fire*, p. 4.

<sup>6</sup> Historical Manuscripts Commission, *Portland MSS*, vol. vi, p. 555; *Warwick County Records*, vol. ix, *Quarter Session Records, Easter 1690 to Michaelmas 1698*, ed. H.C. Johnson and N.J. Williams (Warwick, 1964), p. 101; Farr, *Fire*, pp. 5, 231–43; Borsay, 'Landscape and leisure', pp. 127–9, 195–8.

<sup>7</sup> Jones et al., *Gazetteer*, pp. 16–19.

<sup>8</sup> Warwickshire County RO, QS/11/3, 5, 7, 50; Rhys, 'Warwick', pp. 40–3.

given to the rebuilding.<sup>9</sup> As it turned out, the conflagration devastated Warwick's urban core, an area which also abutted the castle, the principal residence of Lord Brooke. Here were powerful motives for paying close attention to the process of reconstruction.

The response to the Fire was a phased one. The immediate concern was to bring some sort of order to the inevitable confusion, and in particular to find shelter and supplies for several hundred displaced persons. In the medium and longer term, however, the focus shifted to the problems of rebuilding the shattered fabric—to deciding what form the new landscape was to take and how the business of reconstruction was to be administered and financed. It is these areas where the documentation is most profuse and where this essay will concentrate. Three key mechanisms were put in place to facilitate the rebuilding: a nation-wide brief was issued to raise money (a common practice on the occasion of major fires),<sup>10</sup> a private act of parliament was obtained to establish the parameters of the exercise and invest it with the necessary authority, and a Court of Commissioners or Fire Court was established under the act to oversee the complex and contentious day-to-day business of reconstruction. The letters patent for the brief are dated 8 December 1694, the act received the royal assent on 11 February 1695, and the Fire Court first convened on 29 April 1695.

It is unlikely that much serious building work was attempted or permitted until the court had met. The Fire had occurred close to the end of the building season; moreover, to allow people to jump the gun would have been a recipe for chaos and would have undermined fatally the rebuilding plan the authorities had in mind. A similar delay happened in the case of the Great Fire of London, which had broken out on 2 September 1666, but where building work did not get under way until the spring of the following year.<sup>11</sup> Much of the secular reconstruction at Warwick was probably completed within two years of the start of activities. When Celia Fiennes visited in 1697, she recorded that the 'streets are very handsome and the buildings regular and fine'. However, she also noted that 'the ruins of the Church still remains the repairing of which is the next worke design'd'.<sup>12</sup> Providing homes and workplaces was clearly the priority, but by the late 1690s the court's attention was turning increasingly to the town's spiritual fabric. Much of the work on St Mary's had probably been completed by 1700, but the failure of the new tower forced a rethink on the design of the church and prolonged its completion. Edward Strong, one of Wren's master masons at St Paul's, was called in for advice, and the tower was reconstructed abutting the west end

<sup>9</sup> In the Hearth Tax returns, the four suburban wards—Smith Street (leading into Coten End), Saltisford, Bridge End and West Street—generally contained the lowest number of hearths per tenement, the lowest proportion of householders with status assignments, and the highest number of non-assessed households. Each of the suburban wards also contained thirty or more thatched barns in a survey of thatched and timber buildings carried out in summer 1696; Farr, *Fire*, pp. 270–83.

<sup>10</sup> W.A. Bewes, *Church Briefs* (London, 1896).

<sup>11</sup> S. Porter, *The Great Fire of London* (Stroud, 1996), pp. 92, 116.

<sup>12</sup> *The Journeys of Celia Fiennes*, ed. C. Morris (London, 1947), pp. 114–15.

of the nave.<sup>13</sup> The Fire Court met for the final time in November 1704 (when the powers of the commissioners under the act ceased), and though a number of sites still remained vacant and there were bills and financial matters to be settled, the rebuilding had to all intents and purposes been completed within a decade.<sup>14</sup>

## Design, construction and planning

From the mid-to the late seventeenth century, a transformation was under way in the design and construction of urban buildings in England.<sup>15</sup> In very broad terms this can be characterised as a shift from a vernacular to a classical tradition. The impact was first felt in London, with the reconstruction after another fire—the Great Fire of London of 1666, in which over 13,000 properties were destroyed—proving a powerful engine of change.<sup>16</sup> In the provinces the effects of the building revolution appeared more sporadically and slowly, and only fully manifested themselves during the course of the eighteenth century. One of the major problems for historians in trying to gauge the extent to which attitudes were altering is the inertia in the landscape exerted by the existing building stock. The opportunities to innovate were always restricted by the unwillingness of townspeople to modify or jettison their existing properties. In this context towns where there was a major fire, which necessitated large-scale reconstruction, are able to reveal what might be done given the opportunity and impetus to rebuild. Warwick provides a valuable insight into how far changing attitudes to urban design had already infiltrated the provincial mind-set by the 1690s.

The reconstruction of central Warwick broke with vernacular practice in five principal areas. First, the use of traditional building materials—with their associated methods of construction—was either severely curtailed or outlawed. The dominant materials in Warwick's pre-Fire landscape were wood for timber framing, wattle and daub for infilling, and thatch for roofs—all natural materials prepared by the builders or others. The Fire legislation and court replaced these with brick, tile, slate, stone and lead. All new buildings in the borough were to be constructed using these non-flammable materials.<sup>17</sup> Though existing houses in the suburbs were exempt, and the

<sup>13</sup> Farr, *Fire*, pp. xxvii, 97, 441, 520; P.B. Chatwin, 'The rebuilding of St Mary's church, Warwick', *Transactions of the Birmingham Archaeological Society*, 65 (1943–4), 1–39.

<sup>14</sup> Farr, *Fire*, pp. xxx–xxxii, 105–12, 366.

<sup>15</sup> P. Borsay, *The English Urban Renaissance: Culture and Society in the Provincial Town, 1660–1770* (Oxford, 1989), pp. 42–59; M. Girouard, *The English Town* (New Haven and London, 1990), pp. 122–6; D. Cruickshank and P. Wyld, *London: The Art of Georgian Building* (London, 1975); D. Cruickshank and N. Burton, *Life in the Georgian City* (London, 1990), pp. 97–189; J. Ayres, *Building the Georgian City* (New Haven and London, 1998).

<sup>16</sup> Porter, *Great Fire*, pp. 70–1, 157; P. Borsay, 'The London connection: cultural diffusion and the eighteenth-century provincial town', *London Journal*, 19/1 (1994), 21.

<sup>17</sup> Farr, *Fire*, pp. 16, 127–8.

thatched roofs on the surviving outbuildings in the core area were not always replaced as the act required, the impact on the appearance of the town must have been dramatic.<sup>18</sup> Second, a standard house design—of two storeys of ten feet (3 m) each, with cellars and garrets—was imposed on the properties rebuilt in the central streets. This introduced elements of uniformity, symmetry and proportion not to be found in Warwick's vernacular buildings. Third, the model post-Fire house also effectively marked the demise of the jettied façade, so characteristic of timber-framed construction, in which succeeding floors of a building were built to overhang each other. Furthermore, accretions to the house, which might upset the clean lines of the façade and clutter up the street at ground level, were strictly regulated. Trap-doors, open grates, windows, posts, seats and suchlike had to be built within the foundations, and shop stall-boards were not permitted to extend further than twelve inches (30 cm) when opened out. Two shopkeepers who tried to evade the terms of the legislation were ordered to re-erect their stall-boards to meet the regulations.<sup>19</sup> Fourth, a model roof plan was adopted by the court which replaced the traditional design (that included prominent face-on gables) with a standardised hipped roof running parallel with the street, containing a single row of small dormer windows. When a leading citizen attempted to bypass the regulations by constructing two rows of dormers, the court required these to be dismantled and ordered that nobody 'build contrary to the schem or draught brought in by Mr Phillips [the court's appointed carpenter] of the roofs of all houses to be rebuilt, and that they put up one row of luthern lights and noe more in the fore front of their houses'.<sup>20</sup> Fifth, though the act eschewed prescribing the form of exterior decoration to be used, it is clear from the actions of the court and the surviving physical evidence that vernacular types of ornamentation were replaced with the classical orders, as exemplified in the deployment of pilasters, capitals and cornices.

The revolution in urban building was not simply a matter of how individual properties were designed. Also at stake was the notion of the collective landscape. The emphasis on uniformity reflected a desire to create a more cohesive fabric, and one that was in some measure planned. This represented a major change in attitudes. Between the Black Death and the Restoration, and in contradiction to developments in Renaissance Europe, it is difficult to point to a credible tradition of English town planning.<sup>21</sup> Attempting to assess when precisely the tide turned is even more problematic than in the case of individual houses, since by definition planning requires a large canvas to work on. The matter was further complicated by the fact that England

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 64, 78, 96, 270–83, 315.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 85, 126–7.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 26, 37, 87–8, 126.

<sup>21</sup> M. Aston and J. Bond, *The Landscape of Towns* (London, 1976), pp. 109–35; C. and R. Bell, *City Fathers: The Early History of Town Planning in Britain* (Harmondsworth, Middx, 1972), pp. 63–77.

was already well stocked with towns, a legacy of the great phase of urban creation during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Unlike Ireland, where there was great scope for the establishment of new settlements, England—with about 800 urban centres in the late seventeenth century, compared with little over 100 in Ireland *c.*1659—had scant need to construct new towns.<sup>22</sup> Conflagrations which required large-scale reconstruction thus provide a valuable test of attitudes to planning. Significantly, whereas such events in Tudor and early Stuart England had not generated any substantial physical replanning, the opportunity was seized, to a greater or lesser degree, following the fires at London (1666), Northampton (1675), Warwick (1694) and later Blandford Forum (1731).<sup>23</sup>

Not that the Fire provided Warwick with a *tabula rasa* for planning. The majority of the town's properties survived the disaster. Even where a building was destroyed, the pre-Fire pattern of land usage and ownership (which was highly fragmented in the core area)<sup>24</sup> remained, seriously restricting the scope for development. The net effect of these factors, together with the practical necessity to rebuild the town as quickly as possible and the financial implications of any scheme adopted, meant that there was never any likelihood that the town's ground-plan would be remodelled along the lines of a Renaissance *nouvelle ville*. London had faced exactly the same problems when it had been forced to reject the ambitious post-Fire plans of those such as Wren, Evelyn, Hooke and Newcourt.<sup>25</sup> However, despite these severe limitations, a substantial degree of change was achieved on the planning front at Warwick. There was a certain amount of widening and straightening of thoroughfares. Though even minor alterations could provoke a good deal of controversy, as the widening of Swan Lane demonstrated, some success was achieved.<sup>26</sup> When to this is added the changes in the three-dimensional landscape—common building materials, uniform house and roof design, the abandonment of jettying, and the proscription of accretions which cluttered the road—the effect was the creation of a new type of street: one characterised by its terrace-type structure and a greater sense of spaciousness and order.

If the Renaissance street represented one method of creating a more cohesive landscape, by drawing individual properties into a unified structure, the square provided an even more radical and fashionable solution. The first classical square was introduced

<sup>22</sup> J. Langton, 'Urban growth and economic change: from the late seventeenth century to 1841', in P. Clark, ed., *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain*, vol. II, 1540–1840 (Cambridge, 2000), p. 466; P. Clark, ed., *Small Towns in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 90, 154–5, essays by Clark and Gillespie; B.J. Graham and L.J. Proudfoot, *Urban Improvement in Provincial Ireland, 1700–1840* (1994).

<sup>23</sup> Turner, 'Nature of urban renewal'; Jones et al., *Gazetteer*, pp. 51–8; T.F. Reddaway, *The Rebuilding of London after the Great Fire* (London, 1951), pp. 40–90; Porter, *Great Fire*, pp. 92–115.

<sup>24</sup> The 157 damaged properties in The Booke of Estimates were owned by 104 different people.

<sup>25</sup> Porter, *Great Fire*, pp. 94–105.

<sup>26</sup> Farr, *Fire*, pp. 14–20, 28, 59, 92, 95, 123–4, 327, 353–4.

into Britain by Inigo Jones at Covent Garden in London in the 1630s, and it became a characteristic feature of the development of the West End of the metropolis after the Restoration. The square constructed at Warwick was—along with the more ambiguous case of that at Whitehaven—the first to be built in a provincial town, pre-dating even Queen Square in Bristol (begun *c.* 1699).<sup>27</sup> There had been no specific reference in the act to a square, and the notion first appears in the records only at the end of July 1695 when the court ordered that for ‘for the greater grace and ornament of the Church of Saint Maries, and convenience of this Borough . . . a large and spacious place, square or street . . . be opened over against the west front of the said church’. Though at this stage there appears some uncertainty over precisely what was to be built, later orders referred exclusively to the ‘new square’.<sup>28</sup>

This confirmed the innovative character of the project, even if the area set aside was to prove tiny in scale and the scheme’s impact was compromised by the decision to rebuild the church tower—after signs of structural failure—so that it projected into the square. One of the declared functions of the new feature, as we have seen, was to highlight the presence of the church. This was indicative of the fact that, though during the rebuilding much emphasis was placed on uniformity, there was a recognition that planning also involved establishing a sense of spatial hierarchy. The area around the church was one prestige zone, representing as it did the spiritual centre of the town. The point where the town’s four main streets—Jury, High, Church and Castle streets—intersected, the location of the High Cross and an area which Leland had called the ‘beauty and glory of the town’, was another obvious site of special significance and was treated as such in the rebuilding. The three private properties on the spot were required to be rebuilt with three instead of the standard two storeys, and their façades were given elaborate decorative treatment, which included the use of giant angle pilasters (each house deployed a different order) and large modillion cornices.<sup>29</sup>

### The socio-economic context

The Fire imposed a huge financial burden on Warwick. Returning the town to ‘normality’ involved not only the heavy costs of reconstruction but also the need to provide short- and medium-term relief for the homeless and workless who, at least temporarily, had lost their means of livelihood. The question inevitably arises, where did all the money come from? In the direct aftermath of the Fire, collections were made

<sup>27</sup> J. Summerson, *Georgian London* (Harmondsworth, Middx, 1962), pp. 27–112; S. Collier with S. Pearson, *Whitehaven, 1660–1800: A New Town of the Late Seventeenth Century: A Study of Its Buildings and Urban Development* (London, 1991), p. 31; W. Ison, *The Georgian Buildings of Bristol* (Bath, 1978), pp. 140–3.

<sup>28</sup> Farr, *Fire*, pp. 33–4, 71.

<sup>29</sup> *VCH Warwickshire*, vol. VIII, p. 421; Farr, *Fire*, pp. 18, 34, 36, 65, 126.

among the nobility and gentry, the four hundreds of the county, and the cathedral clergy and parishes of the town of Worcester.<sup>30</sup> These moneys were probably deployed primarily to minister to the immediate needs of the sufferers. More substantial, and of greater long-term significance, was the sum raised on a nation-wide brief, the letters patent for which were issued by the lord chancellor at the request of the county quarter sessions. William Thomas, the editor and continuator of the 1730 edition of William Dugdale's *Warwickshire*, put the sum gathered on the brief at £11,000, a figure confirmed by an 'account of all the Charity Money receiv'd for the relief of the Distressed sufferers' among the Warwick Castle manuscripts. This placed the total relief money collected at just under £18,000. However, it is unlikely that the sums raised represented more than a small proportion of the costs incurred as a consequence of the Fire. Moreover, rebuilding the church consumed a substantial share of the brief money—probably over half—and prompted Thomas's comment that 'very little [of the brief money] came to the relief of the poor sufferers'.<sup>31</sup> In these circumstances it seems probable that the majority of the moneys used to service the secular rebuilding programme were raised privately from within the resources of the local community and its hinterland.

That Warwick was able to cope with these heavy demands was indicative of the fact that by the late seventeenth century it was a flourishing town and one whose inhabitants had the confidence to invest in the future. In this it shared in a wider trend in which traditional regional capitals—many of them county and diocesan towns, several of which had suffered economic decline or stagnation during the early modern period through the erosion of their industrial base—found a new path to prosperity as service centres. Geared to meet the expanding consumer, administrative, professional, residential and leisure needs of their surrounding region, they catered in particular to the growing urban demands of the gentry. Alongside Warwick might be cited county and cathedral towns like York, Winchester, Salisbury, Gloucester, Chester and Worcester.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Farr, *Fire*, pp. 2–7.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. xiii–xiv, xxx–xxxii, 425, 509–30; W. Dugdale, *The Antiquities of Warwickshire Illustrated*, 2nd edn, rev., augmented and continued by W. Thomas (London, 1730), p. 439; P.B. Chatwin, 'The Great Fire of Warwick, 1694', *Transactions of the Birmingham Archaeological Society*, 67 (1947–8), 35–41.

<sup>32</sup> P. Slack, 'Great and good towns, 1540–1700', in Clark, *Cambridge Urban History*, vol. II, pp. 355–9, 373; A.L. Beier, 'The social problems of an Elizabethan country town: Warwick 1580–90', in P. Clark, ed., *Country Towns in Pre-Industrial England* (Leicester, 1981), pp. 48–53; A.D. Dyer, 'Warwickshire towns under the Tudors and Stuarts', *Warwickshire History*, 3/4 (1976–7), 128; D.M. Palliser, *Tudor York* (Oxford, 1979); J. Hutchinson and D.M. Palliser, *York* (Edinburgh, 1980), pp. 46–8, 56, 67–70; A. Rosen, 'Winchester in transition, 1580–1700', in Clark, *Country Towns*, pp. 155–62, 170–84; *VCH Wiltshire*, vol. VI (London, 1962), pp. 129–31, 141–3; P. Clark, 'The civic leaders of Gloucester, 1580–1800', in P. Clark, ed., *The Transformation of English Provincial Towns, 1600–1800* (London, 1984), p. 313; N. Alldridge, 'The mechanics of decline: population, migration and economy in early modern Chester', in M. Reed, ed., *English Towns in Decline, 1350–1800* (Leicester, 1986), pp. 30–46; I. Mitchell, 'The development of urban retailing, 1700–1815', in Clark, *Provincial Towns*, pp. 261–2, 275–7; G. Talbut, 'Worcester as an industrial and commercial centre, 1660–1750', *Transactions of the Worcestershire Archaeological Society*, 10 (1986), 91–102.

A comparison of various data drawn from late sixteenth- and late seventeenth-century Warwick suggests a marked expansion in the range of occupations supported by the town. A key factor behind this was the emergence of a specialist sector of 'luxury' trades and sophisticated services.<sup>33</sup> The *Booke of Estimates* and the inventories associated with this—though they cover only a minority of the inhabitants—provide rich evidence of how far Warwick had already travelled along this road by the 1690s. Among those listed are: in the medical and quasi-medical professions, a Dr of Physic, a surgeon, six apothecaries and six barbers; in the legal profession, four attorneys; among the textile and clothing trades, two mercers, two woollen drapers and two milliners; in the skilled metalware trades, a watchmaker, two goldsmiths and two gunsmiths; among the catering and drink trades, a confectioner, a distiller and fourteen innkeepers or innholders; and three joiners, two pipe makers, a bookseller and a harpist.

Radiating from the crossing of High, Jury, Church and Castle streets there existed a prestigious shopping zone. The corner properties—given special architectural treatment after the Fire—were occupied by men out of the top drawer of Warwick's trades: Devreux Whadcock, a mercer; Robert Blissett, a woollen draper and son of the mayor; and John Bradshaw, an apothecary who serviced the local gentry, such as Sir John Mordaunt at Walton.<sup>34</sup> The next nine properties abutting Whadcock's on the north side of High Street included an apothecary, a watchmaker, Warwick's premier inn, the Swan (no doubt much frequented by the town's high-class consumers), a milliner, and George Tongue, the bookseller, among whose losses were 'his bookes and all sorts of working instruments and paper, wax, wafers, ink and quills with several other good' [*sic*] valued at £80.16s.0d. The nine properties abutting Bradshaw's on the south side of the street included two further apothecaries, three barbers, a cutler, saddler and woollen draper. High Street was also home to the gunsmith Abraham Ducomin. He shared the same trade as Nicholas Paris, whose Jury Street premises were four properties down from Robert Blissett, and whose losses included 'timber for stocking guns', tools, fuel and 'goods belonging to the shop' to the value of £73. Paris was something of a Renaissance man since his talents stretched to clock making, water- and fire-engine construction, gilding and decorative wrought-iron work. Some of his output in the last of these categories was of a highly ornamental character, commanding an extensive market; it

<sup>33</sup> A.D. Dyer, 'The corporation of Warwick, 1545–1588' (BA thesis, University of Birmingham, 1963), for the occupations of members of the corporation; *VCH Warwickshire*, vol. viii, pp. 505–7; PRO, E.179/259/7, Free and Voluntary Gift, Borough of Warwick, 1661; the *Booke of Estimates* in Farr, *Fire*, pp. 231–43. In addition I am indebted to Dr L. Beier for permitting me to see a list of occupations drawn from a sample of 159 wills of Warwick inhabitants, 1543–1602. For the presence of luxury trades, and the legal and medical professions, see P. Styles, 'The social structure of Kineton Hundred in the reign of Charles II', in P. Styles, *Studies in Seventeenth-Century West Midlands History* (Kineton, 1978), pp. 157, 170–4; R.A. Cohen, 'Documents concerning Dr William Johnston, physician of Warwick', *Transactions of the Birmingham Archaeological Society*, 78 (1962), 55–9.

<sup>34</sup> Warwickshire County RO, Mordaunt MSS, CR. 1368, 1/17, 4/45, 4/72.

is claimed that churches in Taunton and Frome in Somerset and Salisbury in Wiltshire displayed examples of his craftsmanship.<sup>35</sup>

The rich concentration of luxury crafts, services and shops in central Warwick points to the sources of the town's late Stuart prosperity. Had the Fire occurred a century earlier it is highly unlikely that there would have been either the money or motivation to reconstruct the town in the manner undertaken in the 1690s. Moreover, the fact that Warwick chose an expensive, high-grade, classical rebuilding, rather than a low-cost, low-status vernacular alternative, reflects not only the wealth and confidence of the community but also a consciousness of the intimate relationship between the town's economic well-being and its physical profile. What attracted the regional élite, Warwick's target market, to use the town's consumer facilities was not simply the nature of these facilities, but also the environment and ambience in which they were embedded. The Fire, disaster as it was, presented an ideal opportunity to remodel Warwick's landscape along lines that reinforced its developing role as a fashionable and prestigious location. Classical architecture and street improvement turned the central thoroughfares into elegant shopping malls that enhanced the status value of the luxury products on sale, made consumerism a pleasure and recreation in its own right, and provided arenas of social display.<sup>36</sup> The post-Fire reconstruction can thus be seen as an astute exercise in what today might be called place-marketing or image-repositioning,<sup>37</sup> an important feature of an economic regime in which there was fierce competition between towns to capture the expanding surplus wealth of the middling orders and gentry. The advantages of investing in place and image were demonstrated by the entry in Daniel Defoe's popular guidebook, *A Tour Through the Whole Island of Great Britain* (1724–6), which reported that Warwick 'is now rebuilt in so noble and beautiful a manner, that few towns in England can make so fine an appearance'.<sup>38</sup>

If one effect of the Fire was to enhance Warwick's status *vis-à-vis* other urban settlements in the vicinity, another was to expose and reinforce social divisions within the town. As we have seen, the area in which the most serious damage occurred, the central streets, also happened to be the most prestigious part of the town. Reconstructing this in the classical style utilising brick, tile and stone must have created a powerful visual contrast between Warwick's core, and its poorer and socially inferior periphery, still built in a vernacular fashion. It would also have emphasised the apparent roughness and rurality of one part of the community, and the elegance and urbanity of the

<sup>35</sup> P. Borsay, 'The English urban renaissance: the development of provincial culture, c.1680–c.1760', *Social History*, 5 (1977), 586.

<sup>36</sup> For a similar process in Chester, see J. Stobart, 'Shopping streets as social space: leisure, consumerism, and improvement in an eighteenth-century town', *Urban History*, 25 (1998), 15–20.

<sup>37</sup> G. Kearns and C. Philo, eds, *Selling Places: The City as Cultural Capital, Past and Present* (Oxford, 1993).

<sup>38</sup> D. Defoe, *A Tour Through the Whole Island of Great Britain*, ed. G.D.H. Cole and D.C. Browning, 2 vols (London, 1962), vol. II, p. 84.

other. Significantly, the less-well-off streets which abutted the Fire zone and received some damage, in particular The Butts and Joyce Pool (on the northern edge of the town centre), were exempted from various provisions of the rebuilding act—such as those relating to house dimensions, de-thatching of existing buildings and street widening—suggesting that it was thought inappropriate to impose the new building standards on these areas.<sup>39</sup>

The circumstances of the rebuilding provided a further opportunity to raise the tone of the central area by relocating, as the act phrased it, those ‘Noysom Trades, and Perilous in respect of Fire . . . Exercised in the Principal Publick Streets . . . to the great Annoyance and Dread of the Inhabitants there’. In summer 1696 the court banned butchers—messy and smelly trades—from High Street, Church Street, Castle Street, Jury Street and Sheep Street. The previous autumn the court, having been informed that the tallow-chandler Richard Good ‘is now building a house for making candles in the Jury Street neer the house of Andrew Archer, Esq., and which is adjudged will be an annoyance to the same’, ordered Good to halt the construction of his workshop (which he subsequently vacated). Archer was one of the two county MPs for Warwickshire and a member of the court—the meeting which issued the order against Good was one of the few occasions on which he attended the proceedings—and he clearly saw this as an opportunity to remove a blot on his personal landscape. However, no attempt was made to eject Good’s neighbour, the smith Nicholas Paris, who lived only three doors from Archer. Paris’s trade was a potential fire risk, and therefore would seem to fall within the terms of the act, but he did not produce the same stench as a candle-maker, and—as we have seen—he ran a high-status consumer business that would have enhanced the image of the street.<sup>40</sup>

## The political context

One of the most striking features of the response to the Fire was its legalised and bureaucratic character. A special act of parliament was obtained, a nation-wide brief issued (collection for which really does appear to have stretched the length and breadth of the country, and the returns from which were processed by two of London’s leading banks), and an on-the-spot organisation was created, centred on the Fire Court, which controlled the reconstruction down to the minutest detail. This points to the extent to which provincial society—and in particular the provincial town—was able to deploy the machinery of Westminster and the metropolis to tackle local problems and issues. Increasingly parliament was being used by town authorities to pass special acts to deal with urban improvement, in areas such as navigation, paving, scavenging, street

<sup>39</sup> Farr, *Fire*, pp. 123–4, 126, 128.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 47–8, 62, 111, 130, 372–3. Paris went on to acquire part of Good’s vacant land.

widening and lighting.<sup>41</sup> In this sense the state should not be seen as an oppressive, centralising force—particularly once the policy of widespread remodelling of corporations pursued by Charles II and James II had been abandoned—but rather an enabling phenomenon which specific localities could call upon to facilitate their particular interests. Landowners in eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century Ireland also ‘sought the sanction of the state for their urban improvements by petitioning for the grant of market or fair patents’, though it must be said that the English state played a much larger and more direct part in urban formation through its colonial policy in seventeenth-century Ireland than it was to do at any point in early modern England.<sup>42</sup> The creation of the Fire Court, and its attendant bureaucracy, was also indicative of the capacity of provincial society to create, in alliance with the state, new forms of local government where and when this was necessary. The emergence and proliferation of urban improvement commissions during the course of the eighteenth century was evidence of the flexibility and creative potential within the system.

One characteristic of these commissions and other similar bodies was their capacity—as Paul Langford has argued—to widen participation, especially among the middling orders, in the process of governance.<sup>43</sup> However, this was not a feature of the Warwick Fire Court. Altogether thirty-five different men, together with the current mayor, sat on the eighty-six sessions of the court recorded in the formal minute book.<sup>44</sup> At each meeting there was an average attendance of between seven and eight people. Almost all of the commissioners were drawn from the Warwickshire gentry and nobility. The corporation presence on the court appears to have been slight.<sup>45</sup> This suggests where the real power lay in a town like Warwick, which was dependent upon its county status. The annual assizes, the regular meeting of the county bench of justices at quarter sessions and the presence of the county administrative buildings ensured that Warwick was a natural focal point for the gentry. In practice the town drew its clientele more from the Felton rather than the Arden zones of Warwickshire, a bias reflected in the choice of Fire commissioners who came predominantly from Warwick and the area to the south of it.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>41</sup> P. Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People: England, 1727–1783* (Oxford, 1999), chapter 9; E.L. Jones and M.E. Falkus, ‘Urban improvement and the English economy in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries’, in P. Borsay, ed., *The Eighteenth-Century Town: A Reader in English Urban History, 1688–1820* (Harlow, 1990), pp. 128–45; R. Sweet, *The English Town, 1680–1840: Government, Society and Culture* (Harlow, 1999), pp. 42–73.

<sup>42</sup> Graham and Proudfoot, *Urban Improvement in Provincial Ireland*, p. 1; R.A. Butlin, ‘Irish towns in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries’, in R.A. Butlin, ed., *The Development of the Irish Town* (London, 1977), pp. 77–90.

<sup>43</sup> P. Langford, *Public Life and the Propertied Englishman, 1689–1798*, 1st publ., 1991 (Oxford, 1994), pp. 207–87.

<sup>44</sup> The act named a rather larger number than this as commissioners, though several of these were not active court members. A rough minute book records one further (and seemingly final) session of the court on 8 Nov 1704.

<sup>45</sup> The current mayor was named as a commissioner, as were Thomas Newsham (the town clerk), Lord Brooke (the town recorder) and William Colmore (one of the two Warwick MPs and an alderman). However, the latter two could hardly be said to ‘represent’ the corporation.

<sup>46</sup> A. Hughes, ‘Warwickshire on the eve of the Civil War: a “county community”?’’, *Midland History*, 7 (1982), 46. I have identified the principal seats of thirty of the thirty-six commissioners who attended the court; of these seats eight were located in Warwick, seven to the north of the town, and the remaining fifteen to the south.

About a third of the commissioners could be said to be reasonably active, and seven—judging by their attendance record—were the central figures, participating in more than half of the court's sessions. One of these was the mayor, who changed on an annual basis. Two of the other six were the administrative workhorses of the court, John Newsham (county treasurer, and a professional tax receiver since at least 1665) and his son Thomas (a lawyer and for many years town clerk of Warwick).<sup>47</sup> The remaining four were the key local power brokers: William Bolton (lord of the manor), William Colmore (one of the town's two MPs at the time of the Fire), and the two major landowners on the town's periphery, Sir Henry Puckering at the Priory and Lord Brooke at the Castle.

Of these four, the pivotal figure was Brooke. He attended fifty of the eighty-six sessions of the court, and his son Francis—who would often be present if his father did not attend—twenty-nine sessions. It would of course have been perfectly natural for Brooke to have made a number of visits to the court, as many of the local gentry did, as a gesture of concern and support. But for a person of his status and wealth to have attended with such frequency, and to have spent his time dealing with what were often the pettiest of matters, suggests the importance that he attached to the town and its rebuilding. Brooke was an immensely wealthy magnate. In 1695 his receipts amounted to £26,000 (an income equivalent to that of the Duke of Newcastle) placing him in the very top tier of the English landed aristocracy.<sup>48</sup> Though his landed empire stretched across the country, its hub was Warwick, and the castle was its nerve-centre. Lack of surviving correspondence makes it difficult to be precise as to Brooke's agenda for the rebuilding of the town. Nonetheless, it is likely that he saw the disaster as an opportunity to remodel Warwick into a fitting ante-chamber for his power house, somewhat along the lines of that most charismatic of palace-town exemplars, Versailles. Of course, the precise circumstances of Warwick would always make Louis XIV's court capital the loosest of prototypes.

Far more important in practical terms as a model was the case of London. Brooke's position, and the social and political business attendant on this, ensured that he spent a good deal of time in the metropolis; for example, his accounts register family expenses of almost £900 for a visit to the capital between November 1694 and March 1695. This would ensure his familiarity with the remarkable changes underway in London's landscape since the Restoration—alluded to earlier in this essay—and which set the standard for fashionable urban architecture throughout Britain. The single most dramatic contribution to transforming the face of the metropolis was the Fire of 1666. Though no grand plan was imposed, the City of London was rebuilt using brick and a

<sup>47</sup> *Warwick County Records Hearth Tax Returns*, vol. I, ed. M. Walker, with an introduction by P. Styles (Warwick, 1957), pp. lxxvii–lxxix; *Warwick County Records*, vol. IX, p. xxvi; W.R. Ward, *The English Land Tax in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1953), p. 42.

<sup>48</sup> Warwickshire County RO, Warwick Castle MSS, Accounts 1695–1698; J.V. Beckett, *The Aristocracy in England, 1600–1914*, 1st publ., 1986 (Oxford, 1988), p. 288; G.E. Mingay, *English Landed Society in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1963), p. 21.

series of standard house designs. The legislation which governed this<sup>49</sup> offered a blueprint for other towns seriously affected by fire to draw upon, and it is clear that it heavily influenced the Warwick act, not only in general terms, but also down to the specific level, with whole passages being reproduced verbatim. What part Brooke had in this cannot be recovered, but it is improbable that he—as recorder of Warwick and a member of the House of Lords—was not deeply involved in the drafting of the act and its passage through parliament (which coincided with his residence in the capital during the winter of 1694–5).

During his sojourns in London, Brooke would also have witnessed the continuous expansion of the West End and the critical part played by squares in introducing an element of planning to this. No doubt he yearned to introduce a similar feature in the rebuilt Warwick. Sir John Lowther appears to have had the same idea when he laid out the ‘new’ town of Whitehaven outside his mansion, The Flatt. But, unlike Lowther, Brooke was not dealing with a greenfield site. Given the space involved, building a square would require a significant realignment of Warwick’s ground plan. Yet the scope for manoeuvre here was severely limited by the existing, highly fragmented pattern of land ownership and leasehold. To make matters worse, Brooke does not appear to have owned a single property in the burnt area.<sup>50</sup> Nonetheless, as we have seen, Warwick got its square, albeit a scaled-down version of its metropolitan prototype. How was this facilitated? When the court came to pay compensation to ‘the severall proprietors of the ground taken away and laid into the new square’ (which included the construction of a new street), five parties were paid, as shown in Table 7.1.<sup>51</sup>

It is clear that two key plots of land were involved. One was the site of the parsonage. In this case there is every reason to assume that the minister and corporation (which provided and maintained the vicarage) would have supported the scheme, since the square—whose plan included a new parsonage—was constructed and located to enhance the setting of the rebuilt church. The other crucial plot, contributing almost fifty per cent of the entire project, was owned by Mr Chernock (he at least was to be paid the compensation). Chernock does not appear in *The Booke of Estimates*, where

**Table 7.1.** Land bought to form The Square, Warwick, 1696.

Owner or ground	Area (sq. ft )	% of overall scheme
Edward Chesley	448	3
Mr Chernock	6,493	48
Parsonage Ground	4,233	31
Oken’s Ground	1,845	14
Pebble Lane	477	4

<sup>49</sup> London’s acts were 18 & 19 Car. II, c. 7 and 8.

<sup>50</sup> See the *Booke of Estimates*, in Farr, *Fire*, pp. 231–42.

<sup>51</sup> Farr, *Fire*, pp. 71–2.

the property is listed as owned by a Mrs Murcott. She presumably must have sold the plot to Chernock in the aftermath of the Fire, and certainly by summer 1696. The logic of the sale becomes clearer when one realises that in all probability Chernock was—as the castle accounts put it—‘Fran. Chernocke, gentleman, receiver to Lord Fulke Brooke’.<sup>52</sup> If this is the case, then it seems not unlikely that Brooke persuaded or paid Chernock to purchase Murcott’s property—Brooke avoiding direct purchase himself since this might have compromised his position as a member of the court—with the intention that the plot—transferred to the court after a compensation payment of £67 10s.—should become the core of the new square.<sup>53</sup>

The square lay on an axis that ran roughly north–south through Warwick along Sheep Street (the present Northgate Street), Church Street, past the High Cross (removed after the Fire), and along Castle Street up to the ditch and walls of the Castle. Today this close integration of castle and town is difficult to grasp since, in the late eighteenth century, in a piece of breathtaking urban re-landscaping involving the demolition of many properties, the great house was sealed off from the town.<sup>54</sup> The original Castle Street was terminated midway and now ends abruptly in a high wall. However, in the late seventeenth century members of the ruling élite did not turn their backs on towns. A suitably improved urban appendage to their estates was a sign of civility, status and dominion. The rebuilding of Warwick to form an attractive entrance to the castle demonstrated where power lay in the town. The reconstructed landscape was a material articulation of Brooke’s authority. In this it reflected the economic influence (demonstrated in the roll-call of local tradesmen listed in Brooke’s accounts) and political clout wielded by the castle.

The Greville (Brooke) interest was a dominating if not uncontested factor in the town’s politics. Between 1695 and 1727 the family held one of the two parliamentary seats continuously. For the five elections between 1701 and 1710 Grevilles occupied both seats after the corporation offered them to Brooke for his two sons Francis and Algernon, a position of paramountcy only brought to an end by the death of Francis and—most significantly—his father, shortly after the general election of 1710.<sup>55</sup> However, if Brooke’s influence was stamped all over the rebuilding it should not be assumed that his wishes ran contrary to those of the corporation. There might have been more signs of resistance had not it been clear that, when it came to the process of reconstruction, the interests of town and castle converged. A fashionable remodelling of Warwick’s landscape not only enhanced the image of his lordship and his mansion, it

<sup>52</sup> I am grateful to Michael Farr for drawing my attention to the probable identity of Chernock.

<sup>53</sup> For a detailed investigation of the property changes involved in the building of the square, though one that does not identify the Chernock connection, see S.G. Wallgrove, ‘Town planning in Warwick after the Fire: the making of a new square’, *Warwickshire History*, 9/5 (1995), 183–9.

<sup>54</sup> *VCH Warwickshire*, vol. VIII, p. 432.

<sup>55</sup> P. Styles, ‘The corporation of Warwick, 1660–1835’, *Transactions of the Birmingham Archaeological Society*, 59 (1935), 54; Kemp, *History of Warwick*, p. 65; *VCH Warwickshire*, vol. VIII, p. 499.

also provided the local tradesmen with a powerful new tool to improve the town's appeal as a centre for the regional élite.

## Conclusion

The study of urban fire—its causes, course and impact—can be a valuable exercise in itself. Conflagrations were an important part of the everyday experiences and fears of townspeople in early modern England, and deserve to be investigated as such. However, in this essay, fire and the response to it have been treated as a window through which to explore a broader set of issues. The crisis and the rich documentation generated by it revealed, with a clarity that would not obtain under normal circumstances, fundamental features of late Stuart Warwick and towns of a similar type. Three areas specifically have been addressed. First, that of urban design. The scale of the reconstruction, and the character of documentation associated with it, provide a special (and in some senses unique) insight into provincial attitudes during a period of major architectural transition from vernacularism to classicism. The adoption in Warwick of innovatory approaches not only to the design of houses but also to wider units in the landscape, such as the street and square, and the capacity of the town's building industry to implement these approaches together suggest the potential that existed within the provinces for the introduction of classicism. Pockets of modish street and square development around the turn of the century in towns such as Bristol, Birmingham, Liverpool, Manchester, Whitehaven and Bideford reinforce this notion of provincial receptivity to change.<sup>56</sup> Many of the ideas came, of course, from London; but these had to be accepted locally and adapted to the circumstances of each particular landscape and community.

The willingness and capacity of a town to introduce architectural change depended much upon its economic and social context, and this was the second area examined. It was argued that rebuilding Warwick in the most up-to-date style dovetailed closely with its developing role, evident well before the conflagration, as a high-status consumer, service and residential centre. Catastrophic as the Fire was in the immediate term, it compelled the town to invest heavily in a modern prestigious physical infrastructure and image from which it reaped substantial medium- and long-term benefits. During the eighteenth century Warwick flourished as a fashionable county town, with the introduction of horse-racing (from at least 1707), assemblies and a theatre,<sup>57</sup> and the presence of sophisticated services like bookshops, a circulating library, a public subscription library

<sup>56</sup> Borsay, *English Urban Renaissance*, pp. 64, 74–9, 96–8.

<sup>57</sup> Warwickshire County RO, CR. 1368, 2/24, 2/100 and Shirley MSS, CR. 229, 2/2; *VCH Warwickshire*, vol. VIII, p. 512; Kemp, *History of Warwick*, pp. 173–7, 190.

(from 1792), fashionable private schools and several major architectural practices.<sup>58</sup> In fulfilling such a role Warwick was not unique. The late Stuart and Georgian eras were a golden age for those towns able to play the part of a centre for their regional élite.<sup>59</sup> And what is clear in such places is the close correlation between economic function and physical form, as fashionable country towns—not necessarily county towns as such, nor necessarily all that big in terms of population—were the beneficiaries of substantial investment in their built environment. The transformation in the appearance of places like Ludlow in Shropshire, Ashbourne in Derbyshire, or Stamford in Lincolnshire points to the widespread process of physical ‘image repositioning’ that was under way.<sup>60</sup>

Third, the economic dependence of such towns on their local gentry must to some degree have restricted their autonomy. In the case of Warwick the composition of the Fire Court, with the dominating presence of the county élite, is highly suggestive of where power lay. Even more suggestive was the frequent attendance at the court’s meetings of Lord Brooke. The process and programme of the rebuilding reflected his interest and influence in the town. That Warwick accommodated an immensely wealthy aristocratic family and that the castle was such a crucial factor in its day-to-day affairs could hardly be said to be a typical feature of English urban settlements. There were curiously few examples in England of the German *Residenzstädten*, where a town was used as a power base by a religious or secular potentate. In Ireland the pattern was more common: one thinks of the Butlers at Kilkenny (examined in John Bradley’s essay) and of the many cases—as Susan Hood shows in her contribution—where eighteenth-century landlords were establishing or ‘improving’ towns in close vicinity to their homes, and were doing so in a manner which had obvious parallels with the case of Warwick.<sup>61</sup> Yet Warwick was not unique in England. Nottingham, Whitehaven, Petworth and Wilton are all examples of towns that lived in the shadow of a great family and house. Moreover, landlords drawn from the major gentry and aristocracy,

<sup>58</sup> *VCH Warwickshire*, vol. viii, pp. 508, 513; J. Fergus, ‘Eighteenth-century readers in provincial England: the customers of Samuel Clay’s circulating library and bookshop in Warwick, 1770–72’, *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America*, 78 (1984), 155–213; D. Fowler, ‘Reading and writing in Warwick, 1780s–1830s’, *Warwickshire History*, 15 (1999–2000), 68–84; H.M. Colvin, ‘Francis Smith of Warwick, 1627–1738’, *Warwickshire History*, 2/2 (1972–3), 3–13; H.M. Colvin, *A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects, 1600–1840*, 3rd edn (New Haven and London, 1995), pp. 495–8, 551–2, 882–90, 902–3.

<sup>59</sup> A. Everitt, ‘Country, county and town: patterns of regional evolution in England’, in Borsay, *Eighteenth-Century Town*, pp. 97–113.

<sup>60</sup> D. Lloyd, *The Concise History of Ludlow* (Ludlow, 1999), pp. 103–30; D. Lloyd, *Broad Street: Its Houses and Residents Through Eight Centuries* (Birmingham, 1979), pp. 48–62; J. Harris, ‘The architecture of Stamford’, in A. Rogers, ed., *The Making of Stamford* (Leicester, 1965), pp. 82–6; *An Inventory of Historical Monuments: The Town of Stamford*, Royal Commission on Historical Monuments England (London, 1977), p. xliii and *passim*; A. Henstock, ed., *A Georgian Country Town: Ashbourne, 1725–1825*, vol. i, *Fashionable Society*, vol. ii, *Architecture* (Ashbourne, 1989, 1991).

<sup>61</sup> T.W. Freeman, ‘Irish towns in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries’, in Butlin, *Development of the Irish Town*, pp. 109–21; Graham and Proudfoot, *Urban Improvement in Provincial Ireland*, pp. 7–8, 24.

through their possession of urban properties and estates, were to play an important role in the development of London and many provincial towns from the late seventeenth century.<sup>62</sup> The relationship between castle and town at Warwick, so strikingly revealed in the response to the Fire, was therefore one that found resonances throughout the British urban system. Indeed, the same may more generally be argued of architectural and socio-economic change in Warwick as a whole, where the transition under way—of which the events of 1694 catch a snapshot—mirrored a wider process of transformation affecting many regional capitals.

<sup>62</sup> Beckett, *Aristocracy*, pp. 262–86; D.J. Olsen, *Town Planning in London: The Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*, 1st publ. 1964, 2nd edn (New Haven and London, 1982); C. Chalklin, *The Provincial Towns of Georgian England: A Study of the Building Process, 1740–1820* (London, 1974), pp. 57–139; R.S. Neale, *Bath, 1680–1850: A Social History, or a Valley of Pleasure, Yet a Sink of Iniquity* (London, 1981), pp. 95–170, 226–63.

ANNGRET SIMMS

**Change and Continuity in an Irish Country Town: Kells, 1600–1820**

This paper explores the factors which led to changes in the social and physical fabric of the town of Kells in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. There were major dynamics at work. Kells' physical framework was destroyed during the Confederate Wars and, as part of the Cromwellian settlement, Lt Col. Richard Stephens was confirmed as the owner of the town in 1654. On the basis of a Valuation of Kells compiled in 1663 it is possible to reconstruct the social topography of the town at that time. The valuation indicates that new English and Scottish settlers took the place of the former merchants in the town. The charter granted by James II in 1689 establishing Kells as a free borough set the scene for the recovery of the town, where a new corporation maintained a Protestant hegemony, which lasted into the middle of the nineteenth century. In 1706 Stephens sold Kells to Thomas Taylor. In the late eighteenth century the Earl of Bective, a successor to Thomas Taylor, succeeded in giving Kells the attributes of an attractive estate town. The tenants took an active role in redeveloping individual properties within the town. The 1817 estate maps show substantial houses with formally laid-out gardens. The proprietorial geography of Kells in 1817 is well reflected in the terrier accompanying the estate maps and emphasises the importance of the urban middlemen.

PETER BORSAY

**A County Town in Transition: The Great Fire of Warwick, 1694**

In 1694 Warwick was devastated by a dreadful fire, one of the most damaging urban conflagrations of the Stuart period. The shock of the crisis, the way the town responded and the rich documentary and physical evidence generated provide a special insight into the basic features of county towns, and the character and trajectory of their long-term development. The first part of the paper provides a 'narrative' of the Fire and the administrative responses to it. In the second part the way in which the rebuilding and the associated replanning transformed the appearance of the central area of the town, from a vernacular to a classical landscape, is explored. The third part examines the socio-economic context of the reconstruction, in particular the way it reflected and reinforced Warwick's social structure and its economic role as a regional capital. The final part explores the manner in which the rebuilding reveals the pattern of power in the town, highlighting the influence of the county gentry and of Lord Brooke at the castle. The paper seeks to show that though Warwick may have been exceptional in terms of the short-term crisis which it faced in the 1690s, it was not unique in terms of the broad forces which shaped its reconstruction, and which can tell us much about the position of county capitals at the time.

# Abbreviations

BL	British Library
<i>Cal. S. P. Ire</i>	<i>Calendar of State Papers, Ireland</i>
HC	House of Commons
JCHAS	<i>Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society</i>
JRSAI	<i>Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland</i>
KTCM	Records of the Corporation of Kells, 1685–1787: NLI MS 25446, 8 vols
LPK	C. McNeill, ed., <i>Liber primus Kilkenniensis</i> (Dublin, 1931)
NA	National Archives [Dublin]
NHist.	<i>Northern History</i>
NLI	National Library Ireland
<i>Parl. Gaz.</i>	<i>The Parliamentary Gazetteer of Ireland</i>
PP	Parliamentary Papers
PRIA	<i>Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy</i>
PRO	Public Record Office
PRONI	Public Record Office of Northern Ireland
RO	Record Office
TCD	Trinity College, Dublin
UH	<i>Urban History</i>
UHY	<i>Urban History Yearbook</i>
VCH	<i>Victoria County History</i>