The Market Towns of Southern England 1500–1700

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The market was a vital institution in pre-industrial England, for it was the principal means by which rural produce was exchanged and urban goods and services sold to the countryside; in the possession of a market lies the distinction between a large village and a small town. It is widely assumed that, while markets enjoyed a period of prosperity during the reign of Elizabeth, the boom was terminated by the period of the civil war. The second half of the seventeenth century was marked by the decay of the smaller market towns. The intention of this paper is to put forward a thesis which accepts the prosperity of the period before 1640 but which asserts that markets were thriving between the 1650s and the 1690s; we shall examine the peculiar development of marketing in southern England against this background. Typical of the erroneous view of the development of market towns is the work of Clark and Slack,[1] which portrays the smaller towns as too numerous even for the business generated by the rural economy in the sixteenth century, and failing seriously by the second half of the seventeenth—'the decline of some smaller market centres in the later seventeenth century is likely to have pushed the total number of towns slightly downward',[2] while the 'late seventeenth century rationalization in marketing pushed many smaller market centres out of business'.[3] The smaller markets are said to be too fragile to withstand the pressures of competition from the larger towns and the growth of private dealing outside the market place, while the alleged stagnation in the agricultural sector of the economy and improved road transport made matters worse.

In fact there is very little evidence to support these assertions. Where sound statistics can be reconstructed, as outlined below, they point to a very substantial increase in the total number of markets between the 1650s and the 1690s; when a decline in numbers sets

[1] P. Clark and P. Slack, *English Towns in Transition* (Oxford, 1976).
[2] *Ibid*., pp. 7–8.
[3] *Ibid*., p. 110.

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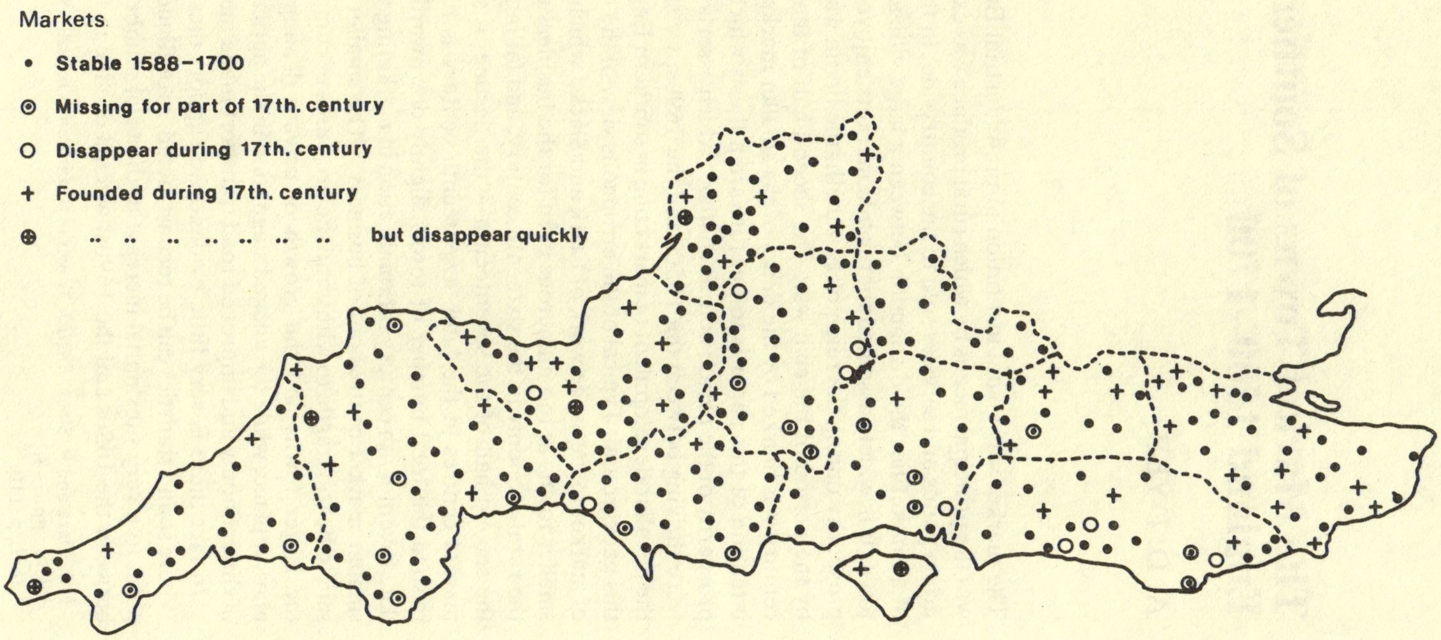

in, reflecting, we presume, reduced prosperity, it starts slowly in the early eighteenth century, is uneven in application and only removes a part of the seventeenth-century growth. It is curious that such a clear-cut movement has remained in obscurity for so long. A source of unintentional misunderstanding is the excellent chapter in the *Agrarian History* by Professor Everitt, in fact the only recent published study of the subject.[4] Its terms of reference end in 1640, but it relies in part on market lists dating from 1673 and 1690; since its aim is principally to examine the static aspects of a broad system, it tends to understate the amount of change within the period. Professor Everitt states, quite legitimately, that the total number of markets in England and Wales up to 1673 is about 810, with the small number of dying markets being replaced by a roughly equivalent number of new ones.[5] But the expansion lies beyond his terminal date of 1640, so that although his list includes all the markets in operation *at some time* between 1500 and 1673, it exaggerates the number in existence *at any one time* within his period. Add to this the fact that the decline in market numbers in the south-west of England (a topic to which we must return) has been noticed and assumed to be national, rather than an eccentric provincial variation, and we have the principal reasons for the obscurity under which the subject has always lain.

A careful examination (Table 1) of the available listings of market towns reveals that there were only about 644 in England and Wales

TABLE 1: *Number of recorded markets*

	1588	1611	1635/56	1673	1690	1720	1792	Percentage change 1588-1673	Percentage change 1588-1690
North	128	125	120/126	159	177	155	160	24.2	38.3
Wales	54	55	55?	63	65?	68?	68	16.7	20.4
Midlands	101	106	102/103	121	123	116	114	19.8	21.8
East Anglia	59	62	55/61	65	75	70	62	10.2	27.1
Home Counties	71	74	71/76	78	87	90	80	9.9	22.5
South	231	234	205/222	234	265	252	238	1.3	14.7
England and Wales	644	656	606/643	720	792	751	722	11.8	23.0

[4] A. Everitt, 'The Marketing of Agricultural Produce', in *Agrarian History of England and Wales*, ed. J. Thirsk, vol. IV (1967), pp. 466–592.
[5] *Ibid*., p. 467.

in 1588, 656 in 1611 and rather fewer than this in 1635 and 1656. Yet there is a dramatic expansion in the second half of the seventeenth-century, with totals of 720 in 1673 and as many as 792 in 1690. Assuming a level of 650 in the early years of the seventeenth century, these figures propose an incease of about 11 per cent by 1673 and 22 per cent by 1690. Here we have the statistical base for accepting Professor Everitt's static numbers before 1640 but also for the assertion that there occurred a very substantial increase in the number of market towns between the 1650s and 1690s. Yet behind this simple expansion there lies a more complex regional pattern. In terms of timing, most of the development takes place before 1673 in the north, Wales, and especially the midlands, while in the home counties and East Anglia the main phase of expansion takes place after 1673. In terms of the extent of the provision of new markets, most regions achieve a rough parity by 1690, except for the north which is notably more vigorous than the others. Against this background we may see that the south of England grows rather less than the other regions, and remains static until after 1673, a unique feature. This summary in fact obscures contrasted trends within the region which will be examined below, but whether seen on a regional or a national scale, the whole phenomenon is significant in both the agrarian and the urban history of the period.

Before looking at the movement in more detail, it would be wise to cast an extra-critical eye on the sources employed, since the expansion does contradict accepted views. The figures for 1588 are based on William Smith's *Particular Description of England* which omits several counties (including Somerset) but is otherwise accurate where it can be checked against more local sources, with the proviso that a feature of the Elizabethan period seems to have been the number of markets which died out before, or around 1588, and the frequency of small markets which flit in and out of existence during these early years.[6] Figures for 1611 derive from Speed's *Theatre*, which gives only total numbers for the counties but which seems both up-to-date and to have employed local experts in some regions.[7] The levels for 1635 are based on *The Direction for the English Traviller*, supplemented by *Villare Anglicanum* for 1656.[8]

[6] Ed. H. B. Wheatley and L. Ashbee (1878), pp. 6f. Welsh figures from *The Description of Pembrokeshire*, ed. H. Owen (Cymmrodorion Record Society, Record Series, vol. I, p 1, (1892), pp. 140–1, part 3, passim, and *The Taylor's Cushion*, ed. E. Pritchard (1906), vol. I, pp. 74–82. Both date from about 1602–3.

[7] J. Speed, *Theatre of the Empire of Great Britaine* (1611).

[8] These anonymous publications appear to have run through several editions.

Both are anonymous, hack publications whose reliability varies very widely from county to county, and are therefore too unreliable to provide an accurate picture when taken in isolation, but when used together they do at least establish the broad pattern of stability, or even mild decline, during these two decades. Blome's *Britannia* of 1673 is the most reliable of all.[9] Blome appealed for local correspondents in the prospectus of the work, who would, among other duties, return details on 'all market towns known unto you'.[10] The text makes clear that there was a ready response, though the standard of accuracy even where no volunteer came forward remains very high. Adams's *Index Villaris* of 1690 provides a bare listing of market towns, but seems to have been conscientiously compiled—certainly his contemporary Gregory King used it in his own calculations, which set a high standard of accuracy.[11]

Although internal evidence would thus suggest that these listings are generally reliable, they can be checked from other sources. The obvious first resort is the grants of market charters in the central government records: although they often confirm the dating and rough extent of the movement, their weakness is that they do not reveal how long it took to establish the market after the grant, whether an illegal market already existed, and whether new ones ever materialised or died out soon after foundation; the majority which were revivals of medieval markets could claim that they needed no new charter.[12] Far more informative are contemporary county histories and topographical works which were appearing in greater numbers at just this time, and whose authors knew their markets intimately. Kent, for instance, is listed with only twenty markets in 1588, twenty-four in 1611 and thirty-one in 1673, a dramatic increase of which one might well be suspicious; however the county historians confirm the trend, with Lambarde, dated to 1570–96, listing a maximum of twenty-three, while Kilburne notes twenty-eight in, or shortly before, 1659.[13] Other regions tell the same tale, with Burton's *Leicestershire* detecting eleven or twelve

[9] R. Blome, *Britannia*. . . (1673).

[10] R. A. Skelton, *County Atlases of the British Isles 1579–1850* (1970), p. 141.

[11] D. V. Glass, 'Gregory King's Estimate of the Population of England and Wales', in *Population Studies*, III (1949–50), pp. 341f. The figures in the tables for the 1720s are based on *Magna Britannia* (1720–31), and those for 1792 on Parliamentary Papers, *Royal Commission on Market Rights and Tolls*, First Report (1889).

[12] The most easily accessible are the writs of *ad quod damnum*, Public Record Office, Chancery Petty Bag series, C.202.

[13] W. Lambarde, *A Perambulation of Kent* (1826), p. 53; R. Kilburne, *A Topographie or Survey of the County of Kent* (1659), p. 370.

markets in 1622 to compare with the twelve listed by Speed in 1611, while Fleming's detailed descriptions of Westmorland and Cumberland of 1671 confirm exactly all the details given by Blome in 1673.[14] These examples could be multiplied to a tedious extent:[15] it must suffice to state that the general reliability of the national listings is always confirmed, and in no case is support given to the natural suspicion that variations in the number of markets might merely reflect changes in the accuracy of the listings.

In any case, other evidence can be brought forward to support the thesis of expanding market prosperity after 1650. The building and rebuilding of market halls and similar structures is well documented, and although many date from the previous period of prosperity in the Elizabethan and early Stuart reigns, there is a distinct phase of construction between the 1650s and 1690s.[16] In Berkshire, for instance, a county which shows an unusual failure to add any new markets in our period, the prosperity of the existing towns is reflected in the building of market halls, often of considerable pretension, in Abingdon, Faringdon, Wallingford and Windsor between 1670 and 1690.[17] This activity must reflect both civic pride and the aspirations (as opposed to the actual experience) of the market owners, but in the smaller towns, the ones chiefly at issue here, these expensive buildings were an investment which could not have been justified in the absence of prosperity since they were paid for from the profits of tolls and dues and reflect contemporary confidence in the profitability of the foundations concerned. Surviving accounts of income from market tolls are fragmentary and difficult to interpret, but the few examples that can be assembled do point in the same direction; for example, the income of the great Farnham corn market apparently reached a peak in the 1690s.[18]

The regional variations in this pattern of stability followed by expansion are shown at their most extreme in southern England. Here, as shown in Table 2, virtually all possible permutations are to be found. Berkshire is one of the very few English counties showing no change in its market towns; the others can be roughly divided

[14] W. Burton, *Description of Leicestershire* (1622), p. 4; *Description of... Westmorland by Sir Daniel Fleming*..., ed. G. F. Duckett, *Description of Cumberland by Sir Daniel Fleming*..., ed. F. S. Ferguson, Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society (Kendal, 1882, 1889).

[15] E.g. from the topographical works of John Norden.

[16] See the volumes of the *Victoria County Histories*, and Pevsner's *Buildings of England* series.

[17] N. Pevsner (ed.), *Berkshire (Buildings of England)* (1966).

[18] *Victoria History of the County of Surrey*, vol. II (1905), p. 587.

TABLE 2: *Number of recorded markets (southern England)*

	1588	1611	1635	1656	1673	1690	1720	1792
Berkshire	12	12	12	12	12	12	12	12
Cornwall	21	22	21	21	21	26	27	23
Devon	36	37	24+	30	32	40	40	30
Dorset	21	18	18	17	20	21	22	16
Gloucestershire	24	25	25	24	28	28	26	29
Hampshire	19	18	17	18	16	24	16	19
Kent	20	24	23+	28	31	30	30	28
Somerset	33?	33	23+	30	31	35	30	31
Surrey	6	8	7	9	7	10	8/9	11
Sussex	17	19	17	17	15	18	16	19
Wiltshire	22	19	18	16	21	21	24	20
Total	231	234	205+	222	234	265	251/2	238

into two groups, an orthodox English one, typified by Kent and Gloucestershire, and a south-western pattern seen at its clearest in Devon, Somerset and Hampshire. In the more orthodox group, proximity to London seems to be the dominant influence. In Kent and Surrey there are two zones which contain concentrations of new markets. The first lies within a twenty-mile radius of London. Here St Mary Cray appears to be an Elizabethan foundation, Bromley is first recorded in 1635, Westerham in 1659 and Dorking in 1656, Northfleet in 1659 (although it did not last long after 1673), Woolwich and Ewell in 1673 and Woking and Chertsey soon after 1673. With the exception of Northfleet and Woolwich, which owe their growth to the Thames shipping and shipbuilding trades, these towns must owe their creation to the trade in foodstuffs for the London market, growing even more strongly in the seventeenth-century. These are collecting points which channel agricultural produce, predominantly grain, on its way to the capital. Further out from London there is another zone, mostly within the radius 35–60 miles, which may well also be connected with the London food trade, but in a less straightforward fashion. In the southern half of Kent, Goudhurst, Smarden, Tenterden, Lydd and Folkestone are all first recorded in 1659, while Elham (1635) and Wye (1588) are rather earlier.[19] In a similar position lie Cuckfield (first listed in 1673, after a grant of a charter in 1670)[20] and Storrington (1673) in Sussex and Haslemere in Surrey (1690). It may well be that these towns are prospering on the movement of foodstuffs to the coast for

[19] Details for 1659 from Kilburne, *Kent*.

[20] G. O. Cowley, 'Sussex Market Towns 1550–1750' (unpub. M.A. thesis, London Univ., 1964), p. 144.

shipment to London as much as on the direct overland supply, but in either case they reflect the expansion of the region closely influenced by provisioning the London food market. It is significant that there are very few failed markets in Kent and Surrey—only Northfleet and Sittingbourne disappear before 1700 in Kent, while in Surrey only Leatherhead, recorded in the mid-sixteenth century, dies out,[21] although Godalming loses its market for a period in the 1670s. Thus both counties, and Kent in particular, represent a striking picture of growth in the market-town sector of the economy. The only county which may be compared with them is Gloucestershire, which shows stability until shortly before 1673, when Fairford and Painswick join the lists, with Moreton-in-Marsh and Coleford added by 1690. There seems no pattern here, beyond the filling-in of gaps in the coverage provided by the existing towns.

The characteristics of the south-western group are a loss of markets in the first half of the seventeenth century, often continuing up until 1673, followed by a recovery which lasts longer than in other areas. Devon, Hampshire and Somerset are most typical of this group: in the case of Devon, the towns which fail in the earlier seventeenth century tend to be in unfavourable positions—Combe Martin and Bampton, near the fringes of Exmoor and too close to their competitors, Bradninch (too near to Cullompton) and Chagford and South Brent on the edge of Dartmoor. Expansion is not achieved until 1690, when Topsham, Lifton and Sheepwash are briefly added to the total, though Hartland proved a more durable town. Somerset shows a very similar pattern, with Porlock, North Petherton, North Curry and Wrington added by 1673 and Chewton Mendip, Castle Cary and Stowey in 1690. A feature of the counties lying to the east of Somerset is that they contain 'lost' towns which never recover from the early seventeenth-century slump. In the case of Wiltshire these include Ludgershall, which is not recorded after 1588, and Castle Combe, last listed in 1653 except for a brief appearance in 1690; Great Bedwyn too is listed only in 1588 and 1792. The towns which lose their status in the 1630s and 1640s but recover later lie in the southern half of the county near Salisbury Plain—Wilton, Hindon, Warminster and Market Lavington, with Downton on the Dorset border. Only two new towns appear in Wiltshire: Swindon in the north is a permanent addition from 1673, but Maiden Bradley is only recorded in 1690. Dorset is a simpler case, with no new towns and the straightforward loss of Corfe Castle

[21] J. Aubrey, *Natural History and Antiquities of the County of Surrey* (1719), vol. II, p. 251.

and Abbotsbury, both in coastal positions which one would expect to be commercially weak, between the 1630s and 1660s, while Chideock, in a comparable position, is listed only in 1588, with a brief revival in 1690.

Hampshire is curious in registering its greatest losses in 1673 rather than earlier. Its losses begin with Southwick, not recorded after 1588—a predictable decline in view of the proximity of competing centres. Havant and Bishops Waltham follow by 1643, Fareham by 1656 and Stockbridge by 1673; these losses are not restored until 1690, but they are then joined by new foundations. Whitchurch and Overton in the north, Fordingbridge in the west and on the Isle of Wight, Yarmouth and Brading are all added by 1690. The losses in Hampshire reflect in part the elimination of competing weak centres, while the new markets may reflect increasing metropolitan demand in the north and the rise of food shipping in the south. Sussex represents the most easterly extension of this 'south-western' group of counties. It contains a number of towns not recorded after the period of decline—Pevensey and Bramber disappear after 1588, Broadwater and Robertsbridge after 1637. Its markets reach their nadir in or about 1673, later than many others, for Shoreham, Eastbourne, Ditchling, Hailsham and Winchelsea all drop out briefly at this point. On the other hand there is a compensatory wave of new foundations which pre-dates this turning point, for Eastbourne is listed after 1635, as is Battle, while Storrington and Cuckfield are introduced in 1673.

What general principles underlie this complexity of patterns within the individual counties? A number of quite distinct factors are at work. We may assume that the basic expansion in market numbers, despite the variations in its timing, is due to specialisation in the rural economy as it responds to commercial pressures, with the subsequent need for more markets to dispose of surpluses and import commodities in short supply. This trend is in full swing in the south-east in the Elizabethan period—we should probably find some new foundations in Kent and Surrey before 1588 if the evidence existed. We may suppose that this movement spreads into the Highland Zone by the later seventeenth-century, accompanied by the modernisation of substantial pockets of subsistence farming within the Lowland area, accompanied by a further intensification of specialised production for the market in even the most advanced areas under the stimulus of expanding urban and export demand. This thesis would suggest that the whole of the southern region would be influenced by the 1670s by such a trend, since few districts lay beyond the reach of coastal or navigable river outlets to more distant consumers.

However this relatively simple picture is complicated by a number of factors. The development of rural industry created new markets not connected directly with the agrarian sector, markets based both on dealing in raw materials and products and supplying a growing class of wagearners with most of their food: this may well explain part of the expansion seen in Devon, Somerset and Gloucestershire, with their textile industries.[22] To this should be added changes in consumer demand within rural society, for it seems clear that generally only the middling and upper groups in the countryside could afford either the time or the money to visit markets— Carew notes that in the Cornwall of the 1590s the husbandman's lot had recently improved to the point where he could afford 'to bestow weekly at the markets for his provision of necessity and pleasure'.[23] Changes in the size and prosperity of this relatively small class which actually patronised these urban markets as consumers rather than dealers will undoubtedly have had an effect on the numbers and prosperity of markets in the localities concerned. Here we may have one of the reasons behind the curious decline in market numbers in the south-west, for we know that the downland regions were experiencing a polarisation of landownership in which the smaller proprietors were being squeezed out: communities composed of a few substantial farmers and their labourers would create fewer customers for markets.[24] This might help to explain the losses of counties like Sussex, Wiltshire and Hampshire, but there are others where the pattern of declining markets does not correspond to the distribution of downland— like Dorset— or where there are no downs, as in Somerset and Devon. But where sheep farming was important, the poor wool prices of the period after about 1620 may well have intensified this aspect of the downland regions.[25]

One feature which does emerge fairly clearly is that the new market towns tend to be placed in or beside areas which are, or were, forested. These districts with their 'wood–pasture' economy

[22] Compare the establishment of markets at Redruth and Boscastle by 1690, reflecting the growth of Cornish mining and quarrying.

[23] *Richard Carew of Anthony*, ed. F. E. Halliday (1953), pp. 138–9.

[24] Thirsk, *Agrarian History*, IV, pp. 65–6; C. E. Brent, 'Employment, Land Tenure and Population in Eastern Sussex, 1540–1640' (unpub. D.Phil. thesis, Sussex Univ., 1973), p. 349.

[25] Thirsk, *Agrarian History*, IV, p. 641.

which combined cattle raising, dairying and a variety of rural crafts and industries were growing in population in the seventeenth century, for they combined the lure of land newly cleared from woodland and the chance of extra employment in the industrial sphere. These areas had in the past been under-urbanised, for they tended to be largely self-sufficient or to trade through the towns which lay on the borders— this explains the fact that in 1588 there were fewer towns in proportion to their area in Surrey, Sussex and Kent than in any of the other counties in southern England.[26] The Weald, which stretches across these three counties, contains many of their new towns, from Haslemere in Surrey and Cuckfield in Sussex to a cluster in the weald of Kent, including Goudhurst, Tenterden and Smarden. Areas with a similar character in western Somerset and north-western Wiltshire contain a series of newly founded markets, including Swindon. Here we may expect that increasing industry and the spread of production of stock and dairy products for distant consumers together lead to the penetration of these previously inward-looking districts.

It seems generally accepted that the Restoration period was marked by an agrarian crisis, and it may at first sight seem odd that the years of instability and depression in the rural economy should coincide with the period of market expansion. The crucial period for most farmers seems to have begun a decade or so later than the market boom, which in turn appears to have ended rather earlier than the depression, so the two are not necessarily connected; but we know that specialised corn-growing regions continued to prosper, especially in those southern regions with ready access to the urban and export markets. Dairying and stock-rearing districts also enjoyed a modest prosperity, as we have already seen, but we should not necessarily connect this with market formation, since these activities never depended as much on local markets as the corn growers did, for they tended to trade through fairs, and their stock, being self-propelled, could be taken much farther to market. The depression affected landowners by reducing their income from rents, but privately owned markets— and many of the new foundations fall into this category— would promise a modest income without any great capital investment apart perhaps from the cost of the market charter granted by the crown.

[26] Expressed in terms of square miles per market town, Kent scores 82, Sussex 86 and Surrey 127. By 1690 these figures had been reduced to 55, 81 and 76 respectively. The other counties in the region varied between 48 (Dorset) and 82 (Hampshire) in 1588 and 45 (Gloucestershire) and 65 (Devon, Hampshire and Wiltshire) in 1690.

Thus it is clear that both the general expansion of market numbers in the later seventeenth-century and the atypical decline in the south-western counties which preceded it are the result of a complex set of factors which deserve more study at a more local level. This uncertainty should not, however, be allowed to obscure the fact that we have here an important and unrealised phenomenon in the agrarian and urban history of the seventeenth-century.