MAURICE BERESFORD. — *New Towns of the Middle Ages : Town Plantation in England, Wales, and Gascony.* London, Lutterworth Press, 1967, XX & 670 pp.

The habit of wishing contemporary preoccupations on to the past constantly enriches historical study. The Victorians gave us constitutional and economic history; in this century we are interested in town-planning, for urgent reasons, though not yet with any obvious results, and as the last strips and patches of green in England dwindle and vanish, English historians are increasingly busy with topographical enquiries. Professor M. W. Beresford has been a distinguished exponent of historical topography for some years, and his studies of medieval settlement have happily led him to enquire into medieval town-making. English urban history moves sluggishly and fitfully, like a lava-flow; a major essay on plantation towns represents a sudden and fiery advance.

The title of the book is a challenge. The public debate on town-planning since the Second World War has appropriated the term New Towns to the communities developed under the New Towns Act of 1946, but Professor Beresford is concerned to show that the Middle Ages also had their Crawleys and Cumbernaulds, and in substantial numbers. The bastides or plantation towns of Gascony, nurtured by Edward I, have been a familiar ingredient of English history for some time, and Edward's foundations in north Wales are no longer news, although the work of the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments has added greatly to our knowledge of them in recent years. Beside these, however, we can now stand 171 towns planted in England between 1066 and 1370, and 84 in all Wales. The Gascon tally is 124, so with Falmouth (founded 1613) thrown in as long stop there are 380 entries in the present gazetteer.

The subject is probably larger than even these figures suggest. As a civil institution, every town must have been created or endorsed at some time by a sovereign authority : the problem is to distinguish and date the act. Professor Beresford's present criterion of plantation is that the town should have started on a virgin site, with the demonstrable or implied approval of the lord of the soil. Organic towns, promoted villages, do not count, and it is just as well that they do not, because they are as yet unnumbered. There were some 250 major towns in medieval England, cities and boroughs represented in Parliament and, or, taxed at the rate of one-tenth on movable goods instead of the rural fifteenth, but there were also many places that were towns by other tests. They include all but a handful of the country's present 338 cities and boroughs, and a great many of its urban districts, besides various villages, hamlets, and open spaces. Despite appearances, towns like Scunthorpe and Barrow-in-Furness, that are entirely products of modern industrial society, are exceptional in England; most modern towns have something of an urban past.

Although there have been some interesting excavations recently, such as those at Thetford and Winchester, we still know relatively little about Anglo-Saxon towns, but surer ground begins with Domesday Book, and there was evidently a sustained enthusiasm for town planting in England and the Welsh march for two centuries after the Conquest. This was immediately followed by a great campaign of chartering and building in Gascony, and by Edward I's exertions in north Wales. Faced with this large subject, the historian has an embarrassing number of courses open to him, but they may not all be to his choice. What we want ultimately to know about towns, planted and unplanted, is what they were like, and what difference they made to men's lives, to society, to what we call history. On the way, we can be reassured and instructed by learning what evidence there is for the conclusions that are drawn. Professor Beresford is a master of the evidence, and his techniques are admirable. He has to write, however, against a background of uncertainty about medieval towns in general, and with very little evidence from the plantations themselves. They were a subordinate class, though an important one, and they did not produce, or have not kept, records of their own in the quantities that the older and less thoroughly-explored towns can show. They were unevenly successful, and many were failures; they can be weighed against other towns in general terms, but they cannot often be examined in detail. The evidence of their foundation can be excavated from the records of these who founded them, but the evidence of their life, of their functions and malfunctions, has too often disappeared.

In the absence of court rolls and act books, Professor Beresford has done heroic work with the materials that he has : with charters and rentals, but also with plans, and overgrown hilltop sites. In a literal sense, he has put planted towns on the map. He has also set them against their older neighbours, charted their progress, explained and illustrated their appeal and uses when the population was growing in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and shown how political disturbances occasionally and economic recession eventually checked and ground down enthusiasm for them until new foundations petered out in the later Middle Ages, and town-making passed out of fashion in England until a new turn of the economy stimulated it again in the eighteenth century. He has also marshalled his evidence in an admirable gazetteer, which will be the basis of much further study. He is disarmingly modest about his topographical arguments: a more cautious man, he says, might say this and that, might disagree. Perhaps he might, but he had better not until he has tramped the site himself. Other commentators will have to follow Professor Beresford both to the documents and to the market place, and they will be continuously grateful for his guidance. *New Towns of the Middle Ages* is not itself a social history, but it is a substantial aid to that and to other investigations.

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