

MOBILITY AND ECONOMY IN NEW TOWNS: The case of Fleetwood

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Confronted with the phenomenon of town planting, the historian's mind turns naturally to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries when many towns in England and Wales were founded, often by the patronage of the monarchy or the church. In contrast, the nineteenth century is much less remembered for its new towns because, although urban growth in Victorian Britain took place on a scale previously unknown, very few of the towns were actually planted. Normally, the pattern was one of the transformation of villages, which combined farming with domestic crafts, into factory towns which became divorced from their rural origins; but occasionally, whole new towns were created around specific industries, such as Middlesborough to exploit the iron ore of Cleveland and Whitehaven to mine the coal under the Cumberland coast.

Because the vast majority of urbanisation in the nineteenth century was closely connected with industrial progress, less attention has been paid to another group of towns which developed at the same time, the holiday resorts. These too have a dual origin. Some were initially select watering places or small fishing villages with a stretch of sand, and required substantial development which might be carried out by the local lord of the manor or by a group of smallholders, according to the prevailing structure of landownership. Others were created from nothing and were more likely to be promoted by a large landowner. The structure of landownership greatly affected the character of the resorts. In the case of development being undertaken by a group of small freeholders, it was difficult to achieve controlled planning, the result being that mean terraces and narrow streets, usually close to railway termini, formed the centre of the resort, as at Blackpool. Where there was one principal landowner who could exercise close control over the growth of a resort, a more select character was likely, as at Lytham a few miles south of Blackpool.

Seaside towns grew initially under the impulse of middle-class prosperity and the spread of railways, both of which encouraged the vogue for residential holidays on the coast, and many developed rapidly in the later nineteenth century to meet the increasing demand for day-trips and longer holidays from the working classes. Thus the railways

were of crucial importance to the economic health of the resorts, as was evidenced by the anguished cries from that lobby at the time of the Beeching closures in the 1960s. What did not occur to many town developers in the nineteenth century was that the railways which brought tourists to the coast might be used to take goods back inland, thereby adding another dimension, a port, to the economy of the town. Very few new towns sought to have a foot in both camps, and when one exists which was also planted on virgin soil, a rare creature has been discovered. Such a place was Fleetwood, at the mouth of the River Wyre and seven miles north of Blackpool, conceived in the early 1830s by the lord of the manor, Sir Peter Hesketh-Fleetwood, and begun in 1837.

The principal objectives of the enterprise were clearly indicated in the prospectus of 25 March 1837.¹ The first was clearly connected with the industrial progress made in the south of the county and seems to have been intended as a major port for the cotton trade of Lancashire: there was also an oblique reference which seemed to imply that there may be possibilities for developing a fishing port to supply the needs of large centres of population further south. The second objective was to create a resort for the industrial towns, and the vision of the founder was such that he proposed to have it 'laid out in the style of Brighton and St. Leonard's.' The claim of the prospectus, that 'the site is admirably adapted for combining the advantages of a commercial port with those of a watering place', seems to be somewhat optimistic viewed from the perspective of more than a century, and the whole development depended very much on the railway with Preston and thus with the rest of the expanding national network. Little wonder then that Sir Peter laid great stress on the Preston-Wyre Dock Railway and bore half of the cost himself, a strain which his resources could ill afford and which played a major part in his financial ruin a few years later. Nonetheless, optimism in the area was high and one contemporary observer recorded his vision that 'the once lonely desert will become a flourishing sea-port, the emporium of merchandise, the seat of riches, the habitation of industry.'²

The purpose of this article is to use the 1851 enumerators' returns in an attempt to consider whether Fleetwood fulfilled its promise and to throw light on the more general questions of population mobility and employment in a new town. Perhaps the two most crucial questions facing the historian of new towns in any period are related to the source of the initial population and its economic functions in the new environment. A town which was founded on a deserted rabbit warren only a dozen years before the 1851 census offers a particularly useful example through which to study these wider questions.

1. Immigration into Fleetwood

On the assumption that most people would move to a new town in family units, it seems useful to consider only one category of the population, namely the heads of households in their work. The following picture emerges from a survey of the birthplaces of all the listed heads of household in Fleetwood in 1851.³

It is clear that Fleetwood must have been a very Lancastrian town with 69.1% of its heads of families born in the County Palatine, and of that group almost two-thirds were born in the Fylde region. The only other sizeable regional influx was from Ireland with fifty-seven families coming into the town, which was one of the closest ports of entry for those who were seeking to escape from the famine of the mid-1840s. The remaining counties of England have been grouped into two areas, the seven northern ones of Northumberland, Durham, Yorkshire, Derbyshire, Cheshire, Westmorland and Cumberland, and the rest of the English counties, in order to make statistically viable groups.

TABLE 1

	Place of birth	Number	%
1	Parishes contiguous to Fleetwood including Thornton in which the new town was situated	138	24.9
2	The remainder of the Fylde	114	20.3
3	The rest of Lancashire	134	23.9
4	Ireland	57	10.3
5	Scotland	26	4.7
6	The seven northern counties	47	8.5
7	The rest of England	34	6.2
8	Wales	4	0.8
9	France	2	0.4
		Total 556	

There is no doubt that Fleetwood attracted the locally-born people, particularly from the Fylde, but to what extent is this an index of mobility? Do the figures represent a straightforward movement from the locality into the new town with a sprinkling of "foreigners" to add variety, or do they point to a wider mobility leading to a return to new pastures on the native heath after various other movements? Many years ago, Professor Redford suggests that the vast majority of migration which took place in Britain between 1800 and 1850 in response to industrialisation was over a very small distance, usually not more than ten miles.⁴ There is no reason to think that Fleetwood, though not an industrial town, was any different and the figures in Table 1 lend credence to the general view held by Redford. However, the place of birth, as recorded in the enumerators' returns, is clearly unsound as an index of population mobility since it takes no account of any movements which have been made between birth and the date of the census which places an individual in a given township or district. Therefore one has to consider other ways of using the returns to ascertain mobility. A new town seems particularly susceptible to such exploitation where there are no heads of household actually born in the town in question. The method used here is to take the birthplace of children as an index of family mobility, and a sample has been taken of every fifth family with at least two children. The results obtained only provide a picture of mobility during marriage, though it seems likely that where either one or both parents were born in the same parish as the children a clear case of stability is indicated.

Three sets of statistics have been obtained from this exercise: one computes the number of moves made by each family with two or more children during their married lives: another indicates the mobility patterns of single-move families: and a third shows the geographical extent of the movements.

Measured by the number of moves made the degree of mid-nineteenth century mobility was very small, with slightly more than three-quarters making their only move into Fleetwood. However, number of moves is one factor in the mobility story, but the distances undertaken is quite another.

TABLE 2

Total number of recorded moves during Marriage	Families	%
1 move	90	76.1
2 moves	11	10.3
3 moves	13	11.2
4 moves	3	2.4
Total	117	

TABLE 3

Areas beyond which families did not move during Marriage	Families	%
1 The contiguous parishes including Thornton	35	29.8
2 The remainder of the Fylde	24	20.5
3 The rest of Lancashire	28	23.9
4 Ireland	12	10.3
5 Scotland	5	4.2
6 The remainder of England and Wales	13	11.2

In fact, these statistics offer more support to the concept of localised migratory patterns, and there is a fairly close correlation between them and the figures in Table 1. In the latter list, not an index of population mobility, 69.1% are listed as born in the county of Lancaster with 45.2% in the Fylde: in the former table, put forward as an index of mobility, 74.2% were mobile only within the county and 50.3% never moved outside the Fylde. The distance from Fleetwood to Preston, towns diagonally opposed to each other across the Fylde, is twenty-two miles. Thus, in the railway age, for the main network of the Fylde was complete by 1846, almost one half of the people of Fleetwood had not moved more than that distance no matter how many moves they had made, and three-fifths of these only moved within the orbit of Fleetwood's contiguous parishes, a distance of not more than eight miles.

The picture of a closely-knit community experiencing only localised mobility patterns becomes even more apparent when one examines the range of movement of those families whose single removal was into Fleetwood between its foundation in 1838 and the census of 1851.

Thus, almost four-fifths of the families who made one move during their married lives into Fleetwood did so from within Lancashire, and almost three in every five were living in the Fylde before the new town was created. It is not without significance that the contiguous parishes, which appear to have supplied between a quarter and a third of the immigrants to Fleetwood, were all experiencing either stagnation or decline in the 1840s.

TABLE 4

The areas from which families appear to have migrated to Fleetwood (only moves since marriage are involved)		Families	%
1	The contiguous parishes including Thornton – up to eight miles	31	34.4
2	The remainder of the Fylde – up to twenty-two miles	21	23.3
3	The rest of Lancashire – up to sixty miles	19	21.1
4	Ireland	10	11.2
5	Scotland – up to two hundred miles	3	3.3
6	The rest of England – up to three hundred miles	6	6.7

TABLE 5

Parishes contiguous to Fleetwood, including Thornton	Population Movement 1841-51
Bispham	–21.0%
Carleton	+5.8%
Hambleton	–0.8%
Poulton-le-Fylde	–0.7%
Preesall	–13.1%
Thornton excluding the township of Fleetwood	–24.8%

Whilst there is no direct correlation between these figures and those in the previous three tables and whilst population may have been moving out of the parishes to the growing resort of Blackpool and the industrial towns of south-east Lancashire, nonetheless they tend to offer general support to the idea of a very localised migration contributing to the peopling of Fleetwood.

If Fleetwood is at all representative of nineteenth century new towns, the mobility involved in populating them took place within a fairly limited geographical area and was the sum total of removal for the majority of the families involved. Despite the ease of public transport, Fleetwood drew very largely on its immediate hinterland for its initial population. For six years from the opening of the Preston to Wyre Dock railway in 1840, Fleetwood was at the northern end of the English railway system and on the western side of the country. Until the opening of the main line over Shap Fell to Glasgow in 1846, the main route to the north was by train to Fleetwood, steamer to Ardrrossan and railway to Glasgow. Perhaps by this means the two families from London and one from Southampton arrived in the town, but such immigrants from the nether regions were the exception. Fleetwood was the local man's new town, probably offering a brighter economic future than working the land of the Fylde, rich though that was in many areas.

The Irish immigrants to Britain have been a constant subject of study in the census returns, perhaps because they are such a homogeneous group and because their national background to their emigration was so tragic. The method outlined above enables us to plot the detailed chronology of the Irish into Fleetwood in the fifth decade of the nineteenth century. By examining those families with one or more children it is possible to calculate the year by which they must have been resident in Fleetwood.

TABLE 6

The year by which Irish immigrants must have been resident in Fleetwood

1838	3	1842	1	1846	4	1850
1839	2	1843	3	1847	4	7
1840	0	1844	3	1848	7	
1841	1	1845	1	1849	5	

There seems no doubt that, as the effects of the famine became widespread, immigration into Fleetwood speeded up towards the end of the forties as a place which offered them a much brighter future than the misery of their homeland.

2. Employment Opportunities in Fleetwood

In a word, the attraction of any new town must be work. The anticipation of improved economic opportunities which a new town promises can be a powerful stimulus to population mobility in the twentieth century, and must have been that much more influential in the nineteenth, when growth and steadily improving standards of living were not the norm. Even greater impact is added to this point when it is remembered that Fleetwood was born during a severe crisis which lasted from 1836 to 1842: to a land suffering from the newer type of economic difficulties associated with industrialisation new town development must have seemed like a gift from heaven to locals searching for a more secure future.

The following table shows the occupational structure of the heads of households in Fleetwood in 1851.

TABLE 7

Occupational Groups		Number	%
1	Labourers	143	24.5
2	Craftsman	124	22.1
3	The Sea	66	11.7
4	The Retail Trade	48	8.2
5	Landed, Professional and Retired	40	7.1
6	Service	33	5.9
7	Hotel Proprietors and workers	22	3.9
8	Capitalists	21	3.9
9	Public services	19	3.7
10	Farmers	8	1.5
11	Paupers	5	1.0
12	Others	36	6.5

Judged by the criteria of its founder, namely to be a port and a spa town, Fleetwood appears to have made some attempt to fulfill the first object but to have failed quite conspicuously to get off the ground in the second. The existence of ferry and packet services to Ireland and west Scotland, indicated by the presence in the town of three packet porters, a packet fireman, two steamer stewards and eighteen mariners, seamen or sailors is testimony to that; in addition six women were listed as mariners' or sailors' wives, no doubt acting as temporary heads of families whilst their husbands were at sea. The maritime pretensions of the town are further indicated by the presence of land-based appendages of a port — two customs officers and a collector, a harbour master and a pierhead watchman, and four lighthouse keepers.

It is interesting that fishing, for long the principal industry of modern Fleetwood, does not seem to have figured prominently in the founder's plans, though it provided an immediate attraction to families so engaged. One of the largest single groups associated with the sea were the inshore fishermen, seventeen in all, and they provide a fascinating study of family group mobility. Using the techniques described earlier in this paper, fourteen of these families were found to originate from the Southport-Tarleton-Banks area of south-west Lancashire and a further two from Lytham in the south Fylde. Both of these were recognised centres of inshore fishing in the early nineteenth century, and this migration suggests an attempt by some families to take advantage of the new opportunities offered to their occupation in Morecombe Bay and in the Irish Sea off the Fylde coast. Furthermore, the narrow base of this specialised immigration is demonstrated by the presence of only seven surnames among the fourteen families from the Southport area; three families of Leadbetter from North Meols, two Balls from Southport, two Wilsons from North Meols and two more from Banks. However, the evidence suggests a steady movement over a number of years rather than mass movement from south to north Lancashire. Thus, Peter Leadbetter was in Fleetwood by 1844 but John and Thomas did not follow with their families until five years later; similarly, John Wilson of Banks moved in 1846 while William Wilson from the same village took his family to Fleetwood in 1849. A similar pattern is evident with the Lytham

fishermen. The two families shared the same surname and one moved in 1846 and the other four years later.

The evidence available seems to indicate that, during the first dozen years of existence, Fleetwood had made as much impact as an inshore fishing port than as a commercial port. Certainly one cannot consider an area of economic activity, which was to have been amongst the foremost in the town, as thriving when it offered employment to only 11.7%, and that included the fishermen. In searching for reasons to explain this failure to take off, one need only look southwards to the competition offered by Liverpool and Preston. The former had long been the county's principal port, and the 1820s had seen the beginnings of the attempt to make the river Ribble navigable as far as Preston and thus transfer the port from the small creek at Lytham to that town. How Sir Peter Hesketh-Fleetwood in his capacity as M.P. for Preston from 1832 to 1847 could have missed this point is baffling. It seems clear, at least in retrospect and perhaps also to contemporaries, that both Liverpool and Preston were far better placed to serve as the ports of industrial south Lancashire despite the railway connection between Fleetwood and Manchester.

The attempt to produce a watering place at the mouth of the River Wyre seems to have been attended by even less success than the port. The local historian of the town tells of it being inundated with visitors in the early 1840s and attributes 60,000 visitors to it in 1844.⁵ The holiday boom, if such it can be called, must have been very shortlived. The census returns of 1851 record no more than four hotels, ten lodging houses and one boarding house, hardly sufficient to accommodate the thousands of visitors ascribed to the mid-1840s. Perhaps seeking to find scapegoats, the contemporary observer pointed to the 'lethargy and indifference amongst local residents' and suggested that the failure of Fleetwood to make the grade as a holiday resort could be accounted for by 'the puny efforts made by those whose interests in the property of the town were greater [but who] failed to fill the inevitable void the waning newness left in its train'.⁶

However, it seems probable that no matter how energetic the inhabitants of the town might have been in promoting its development the town would never have achieved the objective set by its founder, and the explanation lies yet again in competition. Only a few miles to the south lay the small watering resort of Blackpool which had a number of superior advantages over Fleetwood. Its seven golden miles of beach contrasted favourably with the muddy estuary of the river Wyre; its aspect was to the west and the south whilst Fleetwood's was inclined to the north; and it was supported and partially developed by a wealthy and prosperous squire, Thomas Clifton of Lytham Hall, whereas the founder and benefactor of Fleetwood was virtually bankrupt by 1842.⁷ However, it cannot be argued that Blackpool was a thriving and bustling resort in 1851 — the age of working class holidays was some years away at that date. Nonetheless, the sparse provision of accommodation for visitors in Fleetwood in 1851 is an indication of its initial problems which did not trouble its immediate rival but which left a lasting impression on both the economic and morphological development of the town. Perhaps the most ironic feature of a sad story is that Sir Peter Hesketh-Fleetwood sold property in Blackpool in 1841 in order to finance the development of Fleetwood.⁸

in view of the relative failure of Fleetwood to realise its founder's dream, the picture emerges of a non-industrial town, populated by a broad social base of working-class and artisan families narrowing to a needle-like apex of professionals, capitalists and landowners. At the base of the social pyramid were the labourers, and it is an interesting comment on the slow growth of the town that the largest single group (seventy-nine) were classed as agricultural. In terms of mobility in search of new economic opportunities, this group offers an instructive micro-study which suggests that the humblest groups in society tend to migrate the smallest distances. In total there were 143 labourers of various kinds; 105 came from the Fylde and a further thirty from Ireland. Furthermore, of the sixty-five agricultural labourers born in the Fylde, no less than forty-eight (73.0%) belonged to the parish of Thornton, of which Fleetwood was a part, or to the other six parishes whose boundaries were contiguous with those of Thornton.

The second largest group were the craftsmen, amongst whom thirty-nine different trades were represented, from book-binder to bill-hanger, from painter to plasterer and from sweep to slater. The fact that fifty-five of these were involved in property construction is a reminder that Fleetwood was still a growing town, albeit rather slowly. The capitalists who provided employment in the town were few but representative of the industries associated with the port and with a typical small industrial centre — a shipbuilder, a ship owner and a railway contractor demonstrate the importance of communications to the town: eight engineers, presumably small men, would be likely to be concerned with shipping and transport; and a brewer, a gas proprietor, builders and merchants of various kinds are employers to be found in any nineteenth century town. In the same way, Fleetwood had its smattering of professional people to serve the 3,373 souls; the vicar, a Roman Catholic priest and a Wesleyan minister tended the spirits, seven school teachers developed the minds; and the barrister, the solicitor, the land agent and the auctioneer made a living. The smallness of both the capitalist and the professional groups may help to explain the relatively small number of heads in service, although the tendency was for most servants to be aged fifteen to twenty-five years and to live in with their employers. In short, despite the ambitions of its founder, Fleetwood was indistinguishable from any other provincial town scattered around the coasts of Britain, and there is no evidence to suggest that it had made steady progress along its intended path during the first twelve years of its existence.

A new town will act as a magnet in any period and particularly for those people looking for an opportunity to improve their position. The example of Fleetwood offers further evidence of the mobility patterns of ordinary folk in the nineteenth century and provides pointers to the impact of a new town on its immediate neighbourhood. The families who moved into the town in the first decade of its existence were principally working men and artisans who migrated fairly short distances, seldom more than twenty miles. In terms of increased economic opportunity and greater social mobility, Fleetwood appears to have been something of a disappointment. Twenty-two heads of household in Fleetwood were born in the neighbouring agricultural parish of Preesall and only one of them, a landed gentleman and magistrate appears to have lived anywhere outside the Fylde. Of these twenty-two, no less than fourteen were labourers of one kind or another in Fleetwood in 1851, the remainder being scattered in the craft, retail and service groups. Ten of the twenty-two were living in Preesall in 1841 and a comparison of occupations shows that none of these had improved his lot in that decade. Two remained in the same occupation, and one was too young to have one in 1841, six were listed as labourers in both census returns, and one 'farmer' became a railway labourer⁹ It would seem that nineteenth century new towns were far from being the meccas that their immigrants hoped.

NOTES—

1. For references to and quotations from the original prospectus vide R. F. Hesketh, *Sir Peter Hesketh-fleetwood, Baronet (1801-1866) Founder of the Town and Port of Fleetwood* (1951) pp. 4-5.
2. W. Thornbur, *An Historical and Descriptive Account of Blackpool and its Neighbourhood*. (1837), pp. 313-14.
3. All statistics relating to 1851 in this article are from the Enumerators' Returns, Fleetwood. H.O. 107/2269.
4. A. Redford. *Labour Migration in England 1800-1850* (2nd. ed. 1964) 183.
5. J. Porter. *History of the Fylde* (1876), p. 220.
6. *Ibid.*, 240-1.
7. Hesketh. *op. cit.* p. 7.
8. *ibid.* p. 7.
9. 1841. Enumerators' Returns, Preesall. H.O. 107/2207.

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