

Drapery in Exile: Edward III, Colchester and the Flemings, 1351–1367

BART LAMBERT

University of York

MILAN PAJIC

Strasbourg University and Ghent University

Abstract

Throughout the fourteenth century, Edward III issued several letters of protection encouraging Flemish textile workers to establish their trade in England. During the centuries that followed, historians have disagreed about the newcomers' contribution to the development of English drapery. Lacking in each debate were quantifiable data related to the presence of Flemish cloth-workers on English soil. This article argues that, between 1351 and 1367, over 100 immigrants from the Low Countries settled in Colchester, twenty-seven of whom were Flemish textile manufacturers exiled from Flanders and welcomed by Edward III in 1351. Attracted by excellent natural conditions for clothmaking, a shortage of manpower following the Black Death and an open economic environment, they made a vital contribution to the town's development as an internationally renowned centre of textile production that was able to withstand the pattern of urban decay so prevalent in other parts of late medieval England.

I

Soon after the start of his personal rule, in 1330, the English king Edward III reinvigorated his father's campaign for the promotion of a native textile industry. Every man or woman in the realm was allowed to produce cloth, no foreign textiles were to be imported except for the royal family, the nobility or the rich, and suitable franchises would be conceded to all alien cloth-workers wishing to establish themselves in England.¹ Putting the third spearhead of his policy into practice, Edward granted letters of protection to the Flemish weaver John Kempe and his men to exercise and teach their trade in the kingdom in 1331.² Collective grants to all textile workers from Flanders and Brabant moving

¹ Embraced by parliament in 1333, this programme was first enacted in the Statute of 11 Edward III. Chris Given-Wilson et al. (eds), *The Parliament Rolls of Medieval England* (16 vols; Woodbridge, 2005) [hereafter *PROME*], IV, 191; *Statutes of the Realm* (London, 1810), I, 280–1; W. Mark Ormrod, 'Agenda for legislation, 1322–c. 1340', *English Historical Review*, 105 (1990), pp. 10–11. For Edward's domestic policy in this period, see W. Mark Ormrod, *Edward III* (London, 2011), pp. 90–119.

² *Calendar of Patent Rolls* [hereafter *CPR*], 1330–4, p. 161.

2 DRAPERY IN EXILE

to England followed in 1333 and more isolated protections were issued to immigrants in York, Winchester, Huntingdonshire and Berkshire between 1336 and 1343.³ From the 1350s onwards, amidst royal attempts to attract weavers exiled for their roles in the political upheaval that struck the Low Countries, Edward's programme met with more resistance from local corporations. Especially in London, the royal letters exempting all foreign cloth-workers from the obligation to join a guild and to contribute to the annual farm to the crown in 1352 found little appreciation. Instructions to the capital's authorities to receive the alien weavers amicably and not to molest them were necessary in 1355.⁴ Only in 1380 was a compromise about the responsibilities of both communities of textile workers reached.⁵

Whereas commentators idealized many other aspects of Edward III's economic policy as the appreciation for the monarch's reign increased throughout the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries,⁶ they paid no particular attention to the encouragement of Flemish textile workers. Possibly as a result of a more rigorous investigation of the archives from the seventeenth century onwards,⁷ Thomas Fuller provided the first substantive account of the newcomers' arrival in his 1655 *Church History of Britain*. 'Happy the yeoman's house', the clergyman concluded, 'into which one of these Dutchmen [sic] did enter, bringing industry and wealth along with them'.⁸ Passing a far more favourable judgment than on most of his other achievements,⁹ scholars of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century saw in Edward's programme the forerunner of later schemes, intent on developing local manufacture and fostering export. Adopting the phraseology of Friedrich List, the influential political economist William Ashley credited his government with being the first of many European regimes to prefer the creation of 'productive powers', or the causes of wealth, over that of 'values of exchange', or wealth

³ Weavers William and Hanekin de Brabant in York in 1336: *CPR, 1334–8*, p. 341; fifteen Zeelanders with no specified place of residence in 1337: *CPR, 1334–8*, p. 431; dyer Nicholas Appelman and his men in Winchester in 1337: *CPR, 1334–8*, p. 500; three weavers from Diest in Brabant, exercising their trade in St Ives (Huntingdonshire), in 1338: *CPR, 1338–40*, p. 13; John de Bruyn from Ghent, making woolen cloth in Abingdon (Berkshire), in 1343: *CPR, 1343–5*, p. 115.

⁴ *CPR, 1350–4*, p. 232; Reginald R. Sharpe (ed.), *Calendar of Letter-Books of the City of London: G-1352–1374* (London, 1905), p. 42.

⁵ *CPR, 1377–81*, p. 452; Reginald R. Sharpe (ed.), *Calendar of Letter-Books of the City of London: H-1375–1399* (London, 1907), pp. 94, 113, 151. For the details of this rivalry, see Jonathan Good, 'The alien clothworkers of London, 1337–1381', in Linda E. Mitchell, Katherine L. French and Douglas L. Biggs (eds), *The Ties that Bind: Essays in Medieval British History in Honor of Barbara Hanawalt* (Farnham, 2011), pp. 7–20.

⁶ George Warner (ed.), *The Libelle of Englyshe Polycye: A Poem on the Use of Sea Power, 1436* (Oxford, 1926), pp. 10, 13, 50–1; *PROME*, X, 430. When drawing up the first attempt at a balance of trade, in 1563–4, Edward's reign served as a point of reference. Paul Slack, 'Government and information in seventeenth-century England', *Past and Present*, 184 (2004), pp. 33–68, at pp. 40–1.

⁷ Ormrod, *Edward III*, p. 592.

⁸ Thomas Fuller, *The Church History of Britain: From the Birth of Jesus Christ until the Year M.DC.XLVIII* (6 vols, Oxford, 1845), II, 286.

⁹ May McKisack, 'Edward III and the historians', *History*, 45 (1960), pp. 1–15; Ormrod, *Edward III*, pp. 593–4.

itself.¹⁰ William Cunningham, too, was struck how closely later efforts to boost new industries followed on the lines laid down by the fourteenth-century monarch.¹¹ Even George Unwin, one of Edward's fiercest critics, questioned the motivations behind the move, which he thought were of a diplomatic rather than an economic nature, but not its outcome.¹² Across the Channel, historians were equally impressed by the effectiveness of Edward III's measures. 'The English king gave them [the Flemings] asylum', the eminent Henri Pirenne wrote in his *Histoire de Belgique*, 'and the counties of Kent and Suffolk . . . became the cradle of an industry that would compete with Flanders half a century later'.¹³

Later observers were more sceptical in their appraisal of the effects the influx of workers from the Low Countries may have had on the development of the English textile industry. An authority on the late medieval Flemish drapery, Pirenne's student Henri De Sagher, devoted an article to the subject in 1926 and concluded that 'traditional historiography has attached an importance to immigration out of all proportion with its real role'. 'Nowhere in England', did he go on, 'can we discern a decisive influence on the future of the trade.'¹⁴ In her 1959 overview of the fourteenth century, May McKisack considered the arrival of foreigners as a symptom, rather than a primary cause of expansion.¹⁵ Writing on Yorkshire's woollen and worsted industries in 1965, Herbert Heaton stated that the Flemish presence in the county's medieval cloth manufacture was small and, with its chronology not matching that of the development of textile production, its influence negligible.¹⁶ Lawrence Poos came to the same conclusions for Essex in 2004.¹⁷ Looking at the matter from the perspective of immigrants' contributions to the English economy during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries in 2005, Nigel Goose called the importance of foreign immigration for the establishment of the English textile industry in the fourteenth century

¹⁰ William Ashley, *An Introduction to English Economic History and Theory. Part II: the End of the Middle Ages* (10th edn; London, 1925), p. 195.

¹¹ William Cunningham, 'The commercial policy of Edward III', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, n.s., 4 (1889), pp. 197–220, at pp. 202–3; William Cunningham, *The Growth of English Industry and Commerce during the Early and Middle Ages* (5th edn; Cambridge, 1922), pp. 308–9.

¹² George Unwin, 'Introduction', in George Unwin (ed.), *Finance and Trade under Edward III* (London, 1962), pp. xiii–xxviii, at pp. xviii–ix.

¹³ Henri Pirenne, *Histoire de Belgique des Origines à Nos Jours* (5th edn, 4 vols, Brussels, 1928), IV, 325.

¹⁴ Henri E. De Sagher, 'L'immigration des tisserands flamands et brabançons en Angleterre sous Edouard III', in *Mélanges d'Histoire Offerts à Henri Pirenne* (Brussels, 1926), pp. 109–26, at pp. 123, 125.

¹⁵ May McKisack, *The Fourteenth Century, 1307–1399* (Oxford, 1959), p. 368.

¹⁶ Herbert Heaton, *The Yorkshire Woollen and Worsted Industries from the Earliest Times up to the Industrial Revolution* (2nd edn; Oxford, 1965), p. 17.

¹⁷ Lawrence R. Poos, *A Rural Society after the Black Death: Essex 1350–1525* (Cambridge, 2004), p. 70.

wildly exaggerated and not to be compared with that of the low price of wool and the general availability of labour.¹⁸

One of the main obstacles that has stood in the way of every attempt at a critical assessment of the impact of Flemish immigration on the late medieval English cloth industry is our complete ignorance of the numbers of textile workers who responded to the crown's invitation.¹⁹ This study sheds new light on the age-old debate by presenting unmistakable quantitative evidence of a significant amount of exiled cloth manufacturers from the Low Countries, living and plying their trade in fourteenth-century England. They did not settle in Pirenne's Kent and Suffolk, nor in London, but in Essex. The article then goes on by linking the chronology of their arrival to that of the development of the local drapery. What had brought them to England was a combination of internal Flemish struggles, European politics and economic interests.

II

On the eve of what was to become the Hundred Years War, in 1336, the Flemish count Louis of Nevers honoured his feudal obligations towards his suzerain, King Philip VI, and sided with the French. His decision caused unrest among the county's politically powerful cities, whose textile industries depended heavily on the supply of English wool. In Ghent, the region's most prominent urban centre, well-to-do citizen James of Artevelde seized power from the pro-comital party and restored the weavers, barred from office by the patricians since 1319,²⁰ to the magistracy. After the rest of Flanders had accepted his authority, he developed a political regime in which the great cities, rather than the prince, ruled over the surrounding countryside. In 1339, Louis of Nevers fled to France and in 1340, Edward III was recognized as suzerain and king of France at the Friday Market in Ghent. The English support failed to materialize, however, and in 1345 Artevelde was murdered by rival factions. Still, the urban groups that had governed the county during the previous seven years stayed in power, also after Louis of Nevers, who fell at Crécy, had been succeeded by his son Louis of Male. Only when the new count invaded Flanders in 1348 did Bruges and most other towns and castellanies give up their resistance. In Ghent, the fullers defected to the comital side while the weavers persevered. On 13 January 1349, also known as Good Tuesday, Louis's troops, together with a coalition

¹⁸ Nigel Goose, 'Immigrants and English economic development in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries', in Nigel Goose and Lien Luu (eds), *Immigrants in Tudor and Early Stuart England* (Brighton, 2005), pp. 136–60, at pp. 153–4.

¹⁹ De Sagher, 'Immigration des tisserands', p. 115; McKisack, *Fourteenth Century*, p. 367.

²⁰ Victor Fris, 'Les origines de la réforme constitutionnelle de Gand de 1360–1369', in *Annales du XXe Congrès de la Fédération Archéologique et Historique de la Belgique* (3 vols; Ghent, 1907), III, 427–59, at pp. 428–9.

of fullers, the bourgeoisie and the smaller crafts, stormed the city and bloodily crushed the last rebellious strongholds.²¹

On 5 August 1349 Count Louis of Male ordered an inquiry in all towns of Flanders to punish the rebel leaders who had withstood his and his father's authority. The investigation was finished two years later and numerous participants of the revolt were sentenced to exile on 5 October 1351.²² Lists of banished rebels only survive for Bruges, numbering 464 people, and for the rural district of the Franc de Bruges, containing 128 names. For other parts of the county, we have to rely on the lists of exiles eligible for pardon by the count, drawn up by the city councils of Ghent and Bruges in 1359. Together they leave us with a total of 1,364 banished Flemings. For 1,048 of them no occupation was given; 137 were weavers and twenty-one belonged to the smaller textile guilds. Of the fifty-nine fullers, fifty-six were registered in Bruges, while none made it to the Ghent list. Occupations were recorded more faithfully in Bruges, but it is tempting to consider the Ghent fullers' absence as a reward for their eleventh-hour turnabout, siding with the count before the invasion of their city in 1349. Sixty-six people were active in a variety of other crafts, nineteen practised a *poortersnering*, a trade not controlled by the craft guilds, and fourteen were part of the politically prominent brokers class in Bruges.²³ On 25 September 1351 Edward III issued letters of protection welcoming all Flemish exiles who had adhered to his party to England.²⁴ The fact that the matter was entered on the patent rolls ten days before the promulgation of the Flemish sentence either implies that the English chancery predated the documents²⁵ or that the English crown must have anticipated the outcome of the investigation across the Channel. Anglo-Flemish diplomatic contacts during the two-year period of the inquiry had been intense and earlier Ghent exiles with privileged access to the court, including the sons of James of Artevelde, must have been informed on the course of events in their home county.²⁶

²¹ Marc Boone, 'Le comté de Flandre dans le long XIVe siècle: une société urbanisée face aux crises du bas Moyen Âge', in Monique Bourin, Giovanni Cherubini and Giuliano Pinto (eds), *Rivolte Urbane e Rivolte Contadine nell'Europa del Trecento: un Confronto* (Florence, 2008), pp. 17–47, at pp. 37–9; Marc Boone and Hanno Brand, 'Vollersoproeren en collectieve actie in Gent en Leiden in de 14^e en 15^e eeuw', *Tijdschrift voor Sociale Geschiedenis*, 19 (1993), pp. 168–93; Julius Vuylsteke, 'Goede Disendach, 13 januari 1349', *Handelingen van de Maatschappij voor Geschiedenis en Oudheidkunde te Gent*, 1 (1894), pp. 9–47.

²² Thierry de Limburg Stirum (ed.), *Cartulaire de Louis de Male, Comte de Flandre: Decreten van den Grave Lodewyck van Vlaenderen, 1348 à 1358* (2 vols; Bruges, 1898), I, 78–9; Louis Gilliodts-Van Severen (ed.), *Inventaire des archives de la ville de Bruges, Section I* (9 vols; Bruges, 1871–85), II, 8–9.

²³ Napoleon De Pauw (ed.), *Cartulaire Historique et Généalogique des Artevelde* (Brussels, 1920) [hereafter De Pauw, *Cartulaire des Artevelde*], pp. 711–32.

²⁴ *CPR, 1350–1354*, p. 147; Thomas Rymmer (ed.), *Foedera, Conventiones, Literae et Cujuscunqve Generis Acta Publica* (4 vols; London, 1816–69), III, 232.

²⁵ Under the 1348 treaties of Dunkirk, Louis of Male had allowed his subjects to accept the lordship of Edward III as king of France. In this context, dating the protection by the suzerain before the condemnation by the vassal could have had legal implications, facilitating a future restoration in Flanders. Rymmer, *Foedera*, III, 177–9.

²⁶ David Nicholas, *The Van Artevelde of Ghent: The Varieties of Vendetta and the Hero in History* (Ithaca, 1988), pp. 77–8.

6 DRAPERY IN EXILE

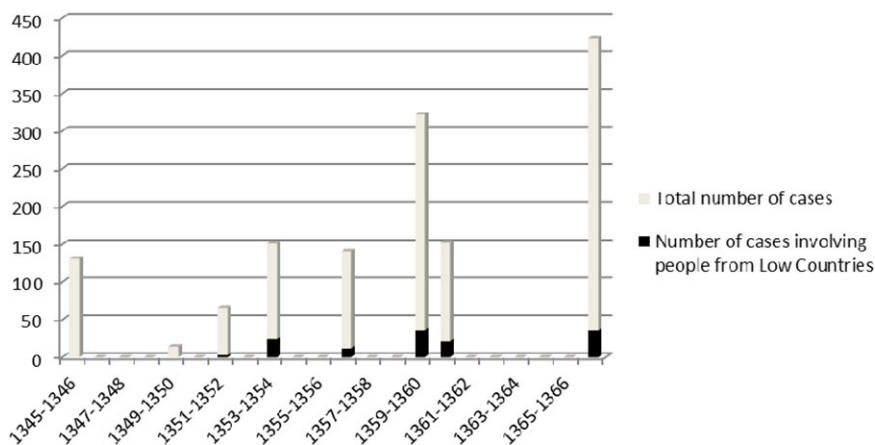


Figure 1 Number of cases involving people from the Low Countries compared to the total number of cases before the Colchester borough courts between 1345 and 1367.

Shortly after the Flemish sentence was issued, the rolls of the hundred court and the court of pleas of the Essex town of Colchester reveal a significant increase in the number of people from the Low Countries that entered private litigation. Records have been preserved for only eight of the twenty-one years between 1345–6 and 1366–7, but they still show an obvious trend.²⁷ In August and September 1352, the first three visitors from across the North Sea since the start of the rolls' survival in 1310 made their appearance (3.2 per cent of the total cases that year). During the year 1353–4, already twenty-four out of 127 cases (18.9 per cent) involved litigants from the Low Countries. In 1356–7, the number drops to twelve out of 129 (9.3 per cent). In 1359–60 the courts dealt with them in thirty-six of the 286 cases (12.6 per cent). The roll for 1360–1 is only preserved fragmentarily but still contains 131 cases, 21 of which refer to people from the Low Countries (16 per cent). In 1366–7, they appear in thirty-six of the 387 cases (or 7.5 per cent) (see Fig. 1).

In some of these cases, such as those of Walter le Baker and John Barat, the Colchester town clerks unambiguously added that the litigant was Flemish.²⁸ In other cases, the plaintiff or the defendant was given the family name 'Flemyng'. A third group consisted of those whose surname referred to a place within the Low Countries, such as Everard van Deste, or Diest, or Heyne van Cortrike, better known as Courtrai.²⁹ A fourth category, including John van Loo, John van Neke and John

²⁷ Essex Record Office [hereafter ERO], D/B 5, CR 9, mm 7, 8, 8d, calendared in W. G. Benham (ed.), *The Court Rolls of the Borough of Colchester* (2 vols; Colchester, 1921–38) [I, 230–7. For the preservation of the borough court rolls, see Richard H. Britnell, 'Colchester courts and court records, 1310–1525', *Essex Archaeology and History*, 17 (1986), pp. 133–40.

²⁸ ERO, D/B 5, CR 11, m. 3 and CR 14, m. 6, calendared in Benham, *Court Rolls*, II, 68, 155.

²⁹ ERO, D/B 5, CR 12, mm 8, 18, calendared in Benham, *Court Rolls*, II, 78, 121.

van Wynd, had family names preceded by the typically Middle Dutch prefix 'van'.³⁰ Finally, some litigants, such as Clays Seger, Copin Stuk or Lieven Cornelis,³¹ went by forenames characteristic for the fourteenth-century Low Countries.³² The number of cases in each of these categories went up drastically after August 1352. They provide us with the names of 126 individuals originating from the Low Countries during the period 1351–67. The immigrants' occupations are given only occasionally in the court rolls, but whenever they are, they are invariably related to either the production of or the trade in cloth.³³

Of those 126, at least twenty-seven can be identified with absolute certainty as Flemings exiled in 1351 or pardoned in 1359 (see Table 1). Most of them, thirteen, came from Ghent, the county's most populous city, which played a leading part in the rebellion of the 1330s and 1340s and was most severely hit during the repression in its aftermath. The abbey village of St Bavo, in its immediate vicinity, furnished another three litigants. Four exiles originated from Bruges, the second largest city of Flanders, while the secondary towns of Oudenaarde, Diksmuide, Nieuwpoort and Bailleul were responsible for the remaining seven.³⁴ It should be borne in mind that these data only refer to those immigrants who made use of the town's borough courts during the years in which the records have survived. Some immigrants might also have been recorded under another name than they were in the lists of banishments and therefore have escaped identification. The real number of Flemish exiles in 1350s Colchester must therefore have been significantly higher.

The sentence of 1351 made no distinction between master weavers supporting a household, single journeymen and young apprentices. On the lists, however, forty-four exiles are explicitly said to be the wives, sixty-eight to be the children of other people banished. Seven were accompanied by their brother, one by his sister, one by his mother and one by his girlfriend. In St Bavo, eight of the twenty-one leaving were sons of others sent across the Channel, including the van der Heides, who made it to Essex.³⁵ Many of the Flemings who appeared in the Colchester court rolls, Gilles van Molle, John Pouchemaker and Arnald Wyllemsonne to name but three,³⁶ also did so together with their wives. Knowing that an average

³⁰ ERO, D/B 5, CR 10, m. 2, calendared in Benham, *Court Rolls*, II, 7.

³¹ ERO, D/B 5, CR 10, m. 10, calendared in Benham, *Court Rolls*, II, 22.

³² Frans Debrabandere, *Verklarend Woordenboek van de Familienamen in België en Noord-Frankrijk* (2 vols; Brussels, 1992) [hereafter De Brabandere, *Woordenboek van de Familienamen*], I, 274, 296, II, 883; Marc Boone, 'Jan, Johan en alleman: voornaamgeving bij de Gentse ambachtslieden (14de–15de eeuw), symptoom van een groepsbewustzijn?', in Joris De Zutter, Leen Charles and André Capiteyn (eds), *Qui Valet Ingenio: Liber amicorum Johan Decavele* (Ghent, 1996), pp. 39–62.

³³ See, for example, ERO, D/B 5, CR 12, m. 18, calendared in Benham, *Court Rolls*, II, 123 or ERO, D/B, CR 15, m. 3, calendared in Benham, *Court Rolls*, II, 193.

³⁴ For these towns' position in the Flemish urban network, see Peter Stabel, *Dwarfs among Giants: the Flemish Urban Network in the Late Middle Ages* (Louvain, 1997), *passim*.

³⁵ De Pauw, *Cartulaire des Artevelde*, pp. 718, 725.

³⁶ ERO, D/B 5, CR 12, mm 7d, 18, CR 15, m. 2, calendared in Benham, *Court Rolls*, II, 77, 121, 189.

Table 1 Names of Flemings appearing both in the Colchester borough court rolls between 1351 and 1367 and on the lists of exiles of 1351 and those pardoned in 1359

Court Rolls	Lists of Exiles and Pardons
Leuin Backener	Lievin Backere, from Ghent
Walter le Baker, 'outré Fleming'	Wouter le Backere, from Ghent
William de Breggis, 'Fleming'	Willem de Brugghe, from Ghent
Lievin Cornelis	Lievin Cornelis, from Ghent
Hanyng Derex	Hannin Diederix, from Ghent
John van Neke	Jan van Eke, weaver, from Ghent
Henry Everard	Heinric Everard's wife, from Ghent
Lewyn Hadican	Lievin Haenkin, from Ghent
Lievin Hortowe	Lievin Hertoghe, from Ghent
John Raven	Jan de Raven, from Ghent
Simon Sporeman	Moenin Sporeman, ^a from Ghent
John Synay	Jan van Synay, from Ghent
John fan loo	Jan van Loo, weaver, from Ghent
John Ballyng	Jan Balling, fuller, from Bruges
Heyne van Cortrik	Hanin van Courtrike, weaver, from Bruges
John van Wynd	Jan van Vinct, <i>poorter</i> , from Bruges
Simon de Vos	Moenin de Vos, from Bruges
John Barat, Fleming	Jan Baraet, from Oudenaarde
John Hodmaker	Jan Hoedmakere, from Oudenaarde
Arnald Roufot	Arnout Roevoet, from Oudenaarde
Lievin van the Hede	Wouter van der Heide, from St Bavo
	Lievin, his son
John van the Hede	Jan, his son
Gerard van the Hede	Gherard, his son
John Camber	Jan de Cammere, from Diksmuide
Copin Stuk	Copin Stucke, from Diksmuide
William Bollard	Willem Bollaert, from Bailleul
John Clerc, Fleming	Jan de Clerc, from Nieuwpoort

^a In Middle Dutch, Moenin is a diminutive for Simon: Debrabandere, *Woordenboek van de Familienamen*, II, p. 992.

Flemish household in this period consisted of four to five people,³⁷ and taking into account that the 126 identified were only those who pleaded in the borough courts, the total number of immigrants from Flanders could have been as high as 300. They might not have matched the Dutch refugees of the 1580s, who were responsible for more than 20 per cent of the inhabitants of the Essex town, but Flemish textile workers and their families might have made up to a considerable 10 per cent of the population of 1350s Colchester, which never exceeded 3,000 people.³⁸

³⁷ Prevenier, 'La démographie des villes du comté de Flandres', *Revue du Nord*, 45 (1983), pp. 255–75, at p. 256; Roger Mols, *Introduction à la Démographie Historique des Villes d'Europe du XIV^e au XVII^e Siècle* (3 vols; Louvain, 1954–6), II, 100–30.

³⁸ Richard H. Britnell, *Growth and Decline in Colchester, 1300–1525* (Cambridge, 2008), p. 49; Nigel Goose, 'The Dutch in Colchester in the 16th and 17th centuries: opposition and integration', in Randolph Vigne and Charles Littleton (eds), *From Strangers to Citizens: the Integration of Immigrant Communities in Britain, Ireland and Colonial America, 1550–1750* (Brighton, 2001), pp. 88–98, at pp.

Private litigation before the Colchester borough courts included cases of violence and theft that fell short of felony, debts, breach of contract and detention of chattels. The courts also dealt with day-to-day police work, such as the sanctioning of nightwalking and the carrying of arms.³⁹ During the first years after their arrival, the newcomers from the Low Countries most frequently appeared in disputes concerning assault or trespass: of the fifty-five cases involving Flemings heard before 1360, thirty-seven (or 67.3 per cent) were related to private property or physical aggression. Only five of the disputes (or 9.1 per cent) had arisen from debts or breach of contract and in thirteen instances (23.6 per cent) the cause is unknown.

The often violent nature of the pleas had little to do with manifestations of anti-alien hostility or xenophobia: Flemish litigants opposed the members of their own community in court (49.1 per cent of the cases) just as much as they did Englishmen (50.9 per cent), who were still far more numerous in Colchester. Walter le Baker, one of the Ghentenaars pardoned in 1359,⁴⁰ was recorded in the borough court rolls three times between 1357 and 1361. In all of the cases he had fallen out with fellow Flemish exiles. In 1357, he proceeded against Simon Sporeman, also from Ghent, who had violently attacked his wife Margery with a knife.⁴¹ In 1360, Walter himself was accused of assaulting Daniel Flemyng. A year later, he was summoned by John Camber, a seller of clogs and coverlets from Diksmuide, for unspecified debts.⁴² The case of the Flemings in pre-1360 Colchester is remarkably similar to that observed by Alwyn Ruddock in late medieval Southampton, where the number of violent confrontations between foreigners alone far exceeded that between aliens and Englishmen.⁴³ At the same time, the Flemish newcomers were reprimanded significantly more often for leaving the town after curfew than natives and were the only ones to be accused of carrying knives. They thus emerge from the records as a close-knit community with strong pre-existing links, enmities and traditions, which, after being banished from an environment where violent confrontations had been the order of the day for years, was slowly finding its place in a new and foreign society.

Their integration seems to have met with some success. As economic activity in the town increased towards the end of the 1350s, pleas for debt or breach of contract involving Flemings (twenty-one of the fifty-eight cases or 36.2 per cent between 1361 and 1367) caught up with

88–9. The only reliable estimates of the relative size of the immigrant population in late medieval England are based on the 1440 Alien Subsidy returns and suggest a figure of 1 per cent for the country as a whole and 6 per cent for cosmopolitan London. James L. Bolton (ed.), *The Alien Communities of London in the Fifteenth Century: the Subsidy Rolls of 1440 and 1483–4* (Stamford, 1998), pp. 8–9; Sylvia L. Thrupp, 'A survey of the alien population of England in 1440', *Speculum*, 32 (1957), p. 266.

³⁹ Britnell, 'Colchester courts', p. 133.

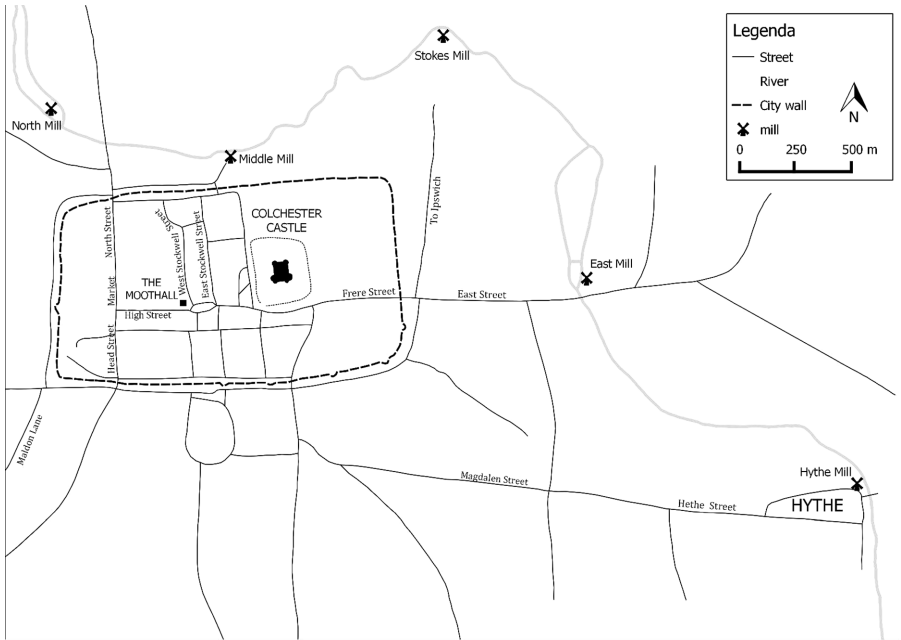
⁴⁰ De Pauw, *Cartulaire des Artevelde*, p. 714.

⁴¹ ERO, D/B 5, CR 11, m. 1, calendared in Benham, *Court Rolls*, II, 68.

⁴² ERO, D/B 5, CR 13, m. 14, calendared in Benham, *Court Rolls*, II, 132, 178.

⁴³ Alwyn A. Ruddock, 'Alien merchants in Southampton in the later Middle Ages', *English Historical Review*, 61 (1946), pp. 1–17, at p. 12.

10 DRAPERY IN EXILE



Map 1 Colchester during the 1350s.

those for trespass and assault (which dropped to thirty-three cases or 56.9 per cent). The growth of business also reinforced the relationship with the local population: disputes with Englishmen (responsible for thirty-eight pleas or 65.5 per cent) now outstripped those between fellow Flemings (twenty or 34.5 per cent). Among the Anglo-Flemish cases, the proportion of proceedings for assault and theft (56 per cent of pleas with known cause) was lower than among the litigation between exclusively Flemish parties (73.3 per cent), that of proceedings for debt and breach of contract higher (36 per cent against 26.3 per cent), suggesting a pattern of economic collaboration rather than violent confrontation between the native population and the alien newcomers. Flemish litigants did resort to English pledges and, exceptionally, attorneys more often than to other immigrants both before and after 1360. No Fleming is known to have stood surety for an Englishman.

In which part of town the Flemish newcomers settled is more difficult to reconstruct. None of them figures in the leases and deeds of the town.⁴⁴ One Fleming, Henry Everard, presented a charter to the bailiffs which stated that a certain William Clerk granted him a tenement in Hethe Street. Leading outside the town walls, this street gave access to Hythe,

⁴⁴ ERO, D/B 5 R1, fos 42–56, edited in W. G. Benham (ed.), *The Oath Book or Red Parchment Book of Colchester* (Colchester, 1907) [hereafter Benham, *Oath Book*], pp. 59–74.

Colchester's detached port settlement.⁴⁵ Most of the Flemish exiles acted no differently from the other townsmen and shared premises.⁴⁶ In his confrontation with Daniel Flemyng, Walter le Baker was pursued up to his shared house, where he defended himself with a knife.⁴⁷ Other Flemings lodged with natives, such as John Quarham, 'Flemish malefactor', living with John Busch, or a Flemish woman, living with Alice Hall.⁴⁸ With Busch, too, having business in Hethe Street,⁴⁹ the little evidence there is suggests a concentration of Flemish presence near Hythe, also a centre of the textile trade since the 1330s.⁵⁰ A hundred years later, in the 1450s, it was still the main port of call for immigrants from the Low Countries, now engaged in beer-brewing.⁵¹

III

Little is known about the presence of those banished in 1351 in other places. Judging from earlier comments by the Ghent authorities, some might never have left the Low Countries.⁵² In London, the names of twenty-six Flemish textile workers mentioned in the city's letter books and plea and memoranda rolls during the 1350s match those of people exiled in 1351.⁵³ York, the leading centre in the North, saw the number of new freemen enrolling in its cloth-making crafts doubling from forty-nine between 1341 and 1351 to 100 between 1351 and 1361. Twenty of them were Flemings, including Lawrence Conync, an exiled weaver from Deinze, south of Ghent, who acquired the freedom in 1354.⁵⁴ Winchester, too, witnessed a dramatic rise in the number of Flemish cloth-workers in its borough court records in the years immediately following the

⁴⁵ Benham, *Court Rolls*, II, 161; Britnell, *Growth and Decline*, pp. 23, 36–7; Janet Cooper, 'Medieval Colchester: growth of the town', in *Victoria County History of the County of Essex* (11 vols; London and Oxford, 1903–2012) [hereafter *VCH Essex*], IX, 47.

⁴⁶ Britnell, *Growth and Decline*, pp. 10–11.

⁴⁷ ERO, D/B 5, CR 12, m. 18, calendared in Benham, *Court Rolls*, II, 115.

⁴⁸ ERO, D/B 5, CR 12, m. 7 d; CR 13, m. 14, calendared in Benham, *Court Rolls*, II, 76, 136.

⁴⁹ Benham, *Court Rolls*, II, 58–9.

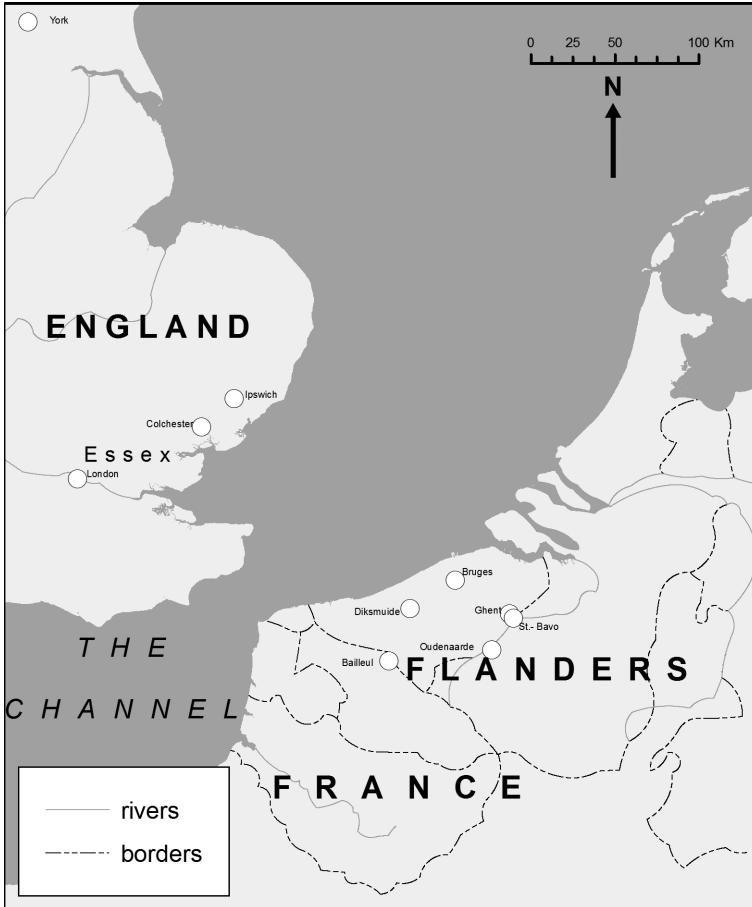
⁵⁰ Britnell, *Growth and Decline*, pp. 72–3.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 196–7.

⁵² In 1349, Ghent complained that exiles, probably the ones banished straight after the revolt, were allowed to remain in the Four Offices, the castellany north of the city. The duke of Brabant was asked to remove those who had fled to his territories. Napoleon De Pauw and Julius Vuylsteke (eds), *De Rekeningen der Stad Gent: Tijdvak van Jacob Van Artevelde 1336–1349* (3 vols; Ghent, 1874–85), III, 371.

⁵³ Sharpe, *Calendar of Letter-Books: G-1352–1374*, pp. 48, 115–9, 130, 237, 250; A. H. Thomas and Philip E. Jones (eds), *Calendar of the Plea and Memoranda Rolls Preserved among the Archives of the Corporation of the City of London at the Guildhall* (6 vols; Cambridge, 1926–61), I, 248, II, 65–6; Frances Consitt (ed.), *The London Weavers' Company* (Oxford, 1933), pp. 188–91; Henry Thomas Riley (ed.), *Memorials of London and London Life, in the XIIIth, XIVth, and XVth Centuries* (London, 1868), p. 332; De Pauw, *Cartulaire des Artevelde*, pp. 711–32. The fortunes of these Flemish exiles in London will be the subject of a separate study by the present authors.

⁵⁴ J. N. Bartlett, 'The expansion and decline of York in the Later Middle Ages', *Economic History Review*, n.s., 12 (1959), pp. 17–33, at pp. 22–3; Francis Collins (ed.), *Register of the Freemen of the City of York: Vol. I. 1272–1558*, Surtees Society, 96 (Durham, 1897), p. 48.



Map 2 Eastern England and Flanders in the fourteenth century.

banishments.⁵⁵ Unfortunately, the generic toponymic and occupational names most litigants were given allow no further identification. Jan van Oostborch, an exile from Ghent, was pardoned for the death of a Brabanter in Norwich in 1355.⁵⁶

What could have driven Walter le Baker, Henry Everard and at least 124 other immigrants from the Low Countries, most of them leaving a metropolis with a population of about 64,000 people,⁵⁷ to Colchester, an English provincial town with less than 3,000 inhabitants? Even though the crown’s invitation to Flemish exiles might have been more considered

⁵⁵ Derek Keene, *Survey of Medieval Winchester* (Oxford, 1985), p. 380.

⁵⁶ *CPR, 1354–8*, p. 284; De Pauw, *Cartulaire des Artevelde*, p. 717.

⁵⁷ Prevenier, ‘La démographie’, p. 255.

and effective than previously assumed, there is no evidence to suggest that the government played a role in directing the new arrivals from the Low Countries to specific places as it did in the case of the sixteenth-century Protestant refugees.⁵⁸ Nothing confirms Fuller's assertion that Edward III 'bestowed them through all the parts of the land, that clothing thereby might be the better dispersed'.⁵⁹ Neither do we have indications of attempts to attract the highly skilled visitors on a local level. The town's position on the east coast, close to Ipswich, a major sea port with strong trade links with Flanders,⁶⁰ had been a reason for both Flemish merchants and residents to call at Colchester ever since the twelfth century, be it in much smaller numbers than in the 1350s.⁶¹ Eighty years later, most immigrants from the Low Countries were still living in those counties closest by, East Anglia in particular, and, within these regions, in those places with existing connections, mostly port towns.⁶²

With no discernible concentrations of Flemish exiles detected elsewhere in 1350s Essex, Norfolk and Suffolk, however, there must have been more to the story. Colchester during the first half of the fourteenth century met many of the basic requirements for the development of a sustainable export-oriented cloth industry. Along the Essex coastline, extensive and thinly populated marshlands combined with terrace sands and gravels were ideal for the production of cheaper wool varieties,⁶³ and fleeces were traded in the town. Cheap water power for mechanical fulling and redundant grain mills suitable for redeployment to fulling mills were available before 1350. There was sufficient demand and an ability to compete internationally for cheaper cloths dyed and manufactured to recognized standards. Colchester had market facilities, was situated at the centre of an intricate road network, including direct connections to London, and, close to the sea, provided easy access to the Continent.

Yet, at the dawn of the fourteenth century, the number of textile workers in the town was negligible. With any increase of litigation in its court rolls for debt or breach of contract completely absent during the period 1310–45, it then missed the growth of English cloth-making during the 1330s and 1340s. While Colchester functioned as an export market for the smaller towns of northern Essex and southern Suffolk, it had no textile industry of its own worthy of the name before the Black Death.⁶⁴ For expelled cloth-workers, used to a mammoth-scale industry which, in Ghent alone, employed over 13,000 people in 1357,⁶⁵ this lack

⁵⁸ Lien Luu, *Immigrants and Industries in London 1500–1700* (Aldershot, 2005), pp. 53–87, esp. pp. 70–6.

⁵⁹ Fuller, *Church History*, II, 286–7.

⁶⁰ Nicholas R. Amor, *Late Medieval Ipswich: Trade and Industry* (Woodbridge, 2011), pp. 47–8.

⁶¹ Janet Cooper, 'Medieval Colchester: townspeople', in *VCH Essex*, IX, 61.

⁶² Thrupp, 'A survey of the alien population', p. 266; Nelly J. M. Kerling, 'Aliens in the county of Norfolk, 1436–1485', *Norfolk Archaeology*, 33 (1963), pp. 200–14, at p. 209.

⁶³ Poos, *Rural Society*, p. 44.

⁶⁴ Britnell, *Growth and Decline*, pp. 12, 18–21, 57–63, 67, 76.

⁶⁵ David Nicholas, *Metamorphosis of a Medieval City: Ghent in the Age of the Artevelde, 1302–1390* (Leiden, 1987), p. 19.

of competition must have been most welcome. Unlike London, where native interests were anxiously safeguarded by the weavers' guild,⁶⁶ or, in fact, Flanders,⁶⁷ 1350s Colchester knew no occupational corporations or economic regulation that could exclude outsiders. The town's cloth industry was characterized by small units of production and independence of action and only took its first steps towards a more formal organization in 1407. With no clearly formulated apprenticeship rules in place, men could switch between occupations and learn new skills from whoever was willing to teach them.⁶⁸ Textile workers immigrating from Flanders, primarily trained in the production of high-quality cloth and manual fulling, can only have appreciated such flexibility.⁶⁹ Colchester's economic climate during the 1350s and 1360s was, thus, relatively open, which goes a long way toward explaining the lack of hostility between natives and aliens recorded in its borough court rolls. The time of the Flemings' arrival also followed soon after the first outbreak of the Black Death in 1348. The plague struck particularly hard in Essex, with mortality rates of over 40 per cent, and caused a shortage of workers in Colchester.⁷⁰ In this context the Flemish newcomers were more likely to be accepted by town officials and their labour became more expensive. In 1349 the Ordinance of Labourers was issued, followed by the Statute of Labourers in 1351. Designed to guarantee labour supply and prevent workers from leaving to take advantage of the improved conditions for employees in the wake of the pestilence, one of the key aims of this legislation was to maintain wages on the same level as before 1348.⁷¹ In 1352, the fines assessed for offences against the Statute in Colchester, involving employees receiving payments over the fixed odds, amounted to no less than £84 7s. 7d., or more than three times the town's lay subsidy contributions to the crown. With about one quarter of the labouring population in Essex finding it worthwhile to break the law and to risk incurring a fine, the gains to be made in the county after 1348 must have been high.⁷² As late as 1389, six

⁶⁶ Good, 'Alien clothworkers', pp. 7–20.

⁶⁷ Peter Stabel, 'Guilds in late medieval Flanders: myths and realities of guild life in an export-oriented environment', *Journal of Medieval History*, 30 (2004), pp. 187–212.

⁶⁸ Britnell, *Growth and Decline*, pp. 77–8, 139.

⁶⁹ Still offering a wide variety of cloth in the thirteenth century, the larger Flemish cities, main suppliers of exiles in 1351, avoided competition from the smaller communities by concentrating on heavy luxury woollens during the fourteenth century. See John H. Munro, 'Industrial transformations in the North-West European textile trades, c. 1290–c. 1340: economic progress or economic crisis?', in Bruce M. S. Campbell (ed.), *Before the Black Death: Studies in the 'Crisis' of the Early Fourteenth Century* (Manchester, 1991), pp. 110–48, at pp. 111–14. Fulling mills had been introduced in several towns in Flanders and Brabant during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries but were no longer used in the fourteenth on grounds that it produced an inferior textile. Raymond Van Uytven, 'The fulling mill: dynamic of the revolution of industrial attitudes', *Acta Historiae Neerlandica*, 5 (1971), pp. 1–14.

⁷⁰ Britnell, *Growth and Decline*, pp. 22, 72, 96; Janet Cooper, 'Medieval Colchester: introduction', *VCH Essex*, IX [hereafter Cooper, 'Introduction'], pp. 19–26, at p. 24; Poos, *Rural Society*, p. 90.

⁷¹ Chris Given-Wilson, 'The problem of labour in the context of English government, c. 1350–1450', in James Bothwell, P. J. P. Goldberg and W. Mark Ormrod (eds), *The Problem of Labour in Fourteenth-Century England* (York, 2000), pp. 85–100, at pp. 85–90.

⁷² Lawrence R. Poos, 'The social context of the Statute of Labourers enforcement', *Law and History Review*, 1 (1983), pp. 27–52, at pp. 43–5, 48; Given-Wilson, 'The problem of labour', p. 186.

weavers from five different communities were indicted for taking excessive sums of money.⁷³

The 126 people from the Low Countries who appeared before the borough courts between 1351 and 1367 must have included Flemings who had left voluntarily as well. For them, too, Colchester made an attractive destination. The town was provided with a cheap and secure supply of wool that was unhindered by the periodical embargoes and excessive export duties that burdened trade with Flanders.⁷⁴ While in England, and certainly in Essex, the shortage of workers due to the Black Death caused a competition between employers and an increase in real wages of both urban and rural workers, in Flanders it did not.⁷⁵ In Ghent, the export-oriented textile industries set in a period of sharp decline from the 1360s onwards, causing massive unemployment. The artisans who managed to maintain did receive wage raises, but these struggled to keep pace with the severe inflation provoked by the continuous monetary debasements by the Flemish count between 1348 and 1360. Not surprisingly, poverty became an increasing concern for contemporaries in Flanders after 1360.⁷⁶

To make things worse, the city's weavers had to deal with the humiliating conditions imposed by the fuller-dominated aldermen after the revolt. By the statute of 29 November 1349 they were forbidden to carry weapons and change occupations. They could no longer assemble in groups of more than three people and whoever saw them gathered had the right to take off and keep their upper clothes. If any of the remaining weavers breached the law, he still risked banishment of three to fifty years. Weavers were ousted from political office again and until 1375 they were made to pay an indemnity which was so high that it caused a new rebellion in 1353.⁷⁷ Adding to the crisis that reigned over the city's cloth industry, the forced exile of over a thousand highly skilled craftsmen and the voluntary departure of others soon resulted in a sharply

⁷³ Poos, *Rural Society*, pp. 67–8.

⁷⁴ For an overview of standoffs in the Anglo-Flemish wool trade during the first half of the fourteenth century, see Terence H. Lloyd, *The English Wool Trade in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1977), pp. 7–37, 75, 107–8, 112–14.

⁷⁵ Caroline M. Barron, 'Introduction', in Caroline M. Barron and Nigel Saul (eds), *England and the Low Countries in the Late Middle Ages* (Stroud, 1995), pp. 1–28, at p. 11; John H. Munro, 'Before and after the Black Death: money, prices and wages in fourteenth-century England', in Troels Dahlerup and Per Ingesman (eds), *New Approaches to the History of Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe: Selected Proceedings of Two International Conferences at the Royal Danish Academy of Sciences in Copenhagen in 1997 and 1999* (Copenhagen, 2009), pp. 335–64, at pp. 348–9.

⁷⁶ Marc Boone, 'L'industrie textile à Gand au Bas Moyen Âge ou les résurrections successives d'une activité réputée moribonde', in Marc Boone and Walter Prevenier (eds), *Draperies Production in the Late Medieval Low Countries: Markets and Strategies for Survival, 14th–16th Centuries* (Louvain, 1993), p. 17; Nicholas, *Metamorphosis of a Medieval City*, pp. 120, 176; John H. Munro, 'Bullion flows and monetary contraction in late-medieval England and the Low Countries', in John F. Richards (ed.), *Precious Metals in the Later Medieval and Early Modern Worlds* (Durham, NC, 1983), pp. 97–158, at p. 113.

⁷⁷ George Espinas and Henri Pirenne (eds), *Recueil de documents relatifs à l'histoire de l'industrie drapière en Flandre* (7 vols; Brussels, 1906–66), I, 434–71; Fris, 'Réforme constitutionnelle', p. 440.

felt shortage of expertise.⁷⁸ Already on 6 December 1349, the aldermen of Ghent recalled some of the banished weavers. In 1359, Count Louis of Male offered a general pardon to all the 1349 rebels. However, the conditions for pardon were so exorbitant that few of the exiles could have met them. An indemnity of 300 *livres parisis* was demanded, or the equivalent of 7,200 day salaries of a master-building craftsman in 1360 Ghent.⁷⁹

One of those allowed to return to Flanders in 1359, Walter le Baker, chose to stay in Colchester, proceeding against fellow exiles Daniel Flemyng and John Camber before the borough courts in 1360 and 1361. He was not alone. The last identified exile to appear in the town's courts was a Bruges fuller, appropriately named John Ballyng, in 1366.⁸⁰ Whereas no Fleming is known to have become a freeman of the town during the 1350s, three appear to have done so during the 1360s,⁸¹ possibly after the conditions set in 1359 had shattered all hopes of an easy return. During the same years, there are reasons to assume that a second generation of those banished in 1351 found its way to Colchester's tribunals. The case opposing Ballyng and his fellow Fleming John Pouchemaker also involved a Michael and a Nicholas Ballyng.⁸² In 1367, a Flemish immigrant sued John Lightfoot for debts for the sale of cloth. One of those eligible for pardon in Ghent in 1359 was Luppyn Lightfoot.⁸³ In 1375 and 1377, John Backere, 'Flemyng', and Walter Camber appeared in court, potential relatives of exiles Walter le Baker and John Camber in 1361.⁸⁴ From 1359 onwards, the Flemings in Colchester were joined by an increasing number of people whose surname referred to the duchy of Brabant or to one of its towns and cities. They must have left after the Flemish count Louis of Male had invaded his neighbouring principality and imposed an economic stranglehold in 1356.⁸⁵ Both Flemings and Brabanters would continue to plead their causes in the Colchester borough courts for the rest of the fourteenth century.

⁷⁸ Nicholas, *Metamorphosis of a Medieval City*, p. 155.

⁷⁹ A master craftsman in the building industries in Ghent earned 10 d. a day during the summer of 1360. John H. Munro, 'Urban wage structures in late-medieval England and the Low Countries: work-time and seasonal wage', in Ian Blanchard (ed.), *Labour and Leisure in Historical Perspective: Thirteenth to Twentieth Centuries* (Stuttgart, 1994), pp. 65–78, at p. 72.

⁸⁰ 'Balling' means 'exile' in Middle Dutch. ERO, D/B 5, CR 15, m. 2, calendared in Benham, *Court Rolls*, II, 186–7.

⁸¹ William de Gaunt, John Ducheman and John Danel, referred to in other cases as a Fleming, all in 1366. ERO, D/B 5 R1, fo. 47d.

⁸² ERO, D/B 5, CR 15, m. 2, calendared in Benham, *Court Rolls*, II, 186–7.

⁸³ ERO, D/B 5, CR 15, m. 9, calendared in Benham, *Court Rolls*, II, 234; De Pauw, *Cartulaire des Artevelde*, p. 712.

⁸⁴ For John Backer, see ERO, D/B 5, CR 17, m. 10 d, calendared in Benham, *Court Rolls*, III, 81. For Walter Camber, see ERO, D/B 5, CR 18, m. 19, calendared in Benham, *Court Rolls*, III, 144.

⁸⁵ Sergio Boffa, *Warfare in Medieval Brabant* (Woodbridge, 2004), pp. 3–10; Fritz Quicke, *Les Pays-Bas à la veille de la Période Bourguignonne, 1356–1384: Contribution à l'Histoire et Diplomatique de l'Europe Occidentale dans la Seconde Moitié du XIV^e siècle* (Brussels, 1947), pp. 41–54.

IV

Apart from the lack of quantifiable data, the most decisive argument to question the impact of Flemish immigration on the English cloth industry is its chronology. If textile workers from Flanders did settle in England, they did so at times when the native textile manufacture underwent no significant changes.⁸⁶ It has been stated earlier that Colchester had no large-scale cloth industry on the eve of the arrivals from the Low Countries. Many indications suggest that the production of the Colchester russet, the town's trademark grey and brown shaded cloth, took off immediately after 1350. The number of textile workers, still very low at the beginning of the fourteenth century, went up. Between 1375, the first year in which occupations were registered, and 1400, nineteen men engaged in the cloth industry were admitted to the freedom.⁸⁷ By 1373 the wool trade had already increased to the extent that the council found it worthwhile to provide it with a permanent location in the cellar of the moot hall, which was fitted out at the community's expense. The rent of the cellar rose significantly in subsequent years. More evidence related to the conversion of milling facilities for fulling purposes has survived for the period directly after 1350 than for any time before. From the third quarter of the fourteenth century onwards, Colchester rusesets are increasingly attested in foreign markets, Gascony, Prussia and the Mediterranean in particular.⁸⁸

The criticisms of the use of aulnagers' accounts, recording the payment of the king's subsidy on sold cloth, as a reliable source for the fortunes of the textile industry are well known:⁸⁹ they recorded the marketing of fabrics rather than industrial output and they did so imperfectly. Still, the accounts allow us to reconstruct the relative importance of individual markets in specified periods. Whereas 587 cloths were traded a year in all the ports of Norfolk, Suffolk and Essex, including Colchester, in 1354–8, the town alone was responsible for the sale of more than 849 pieces in seventeen months in 1394–5.⁹⁰ The growth of business in the textile trade is equally clear from the borough court records. The number of pleas brought to the tribunals more than doubled, from sixty-two in 1351–2 to 127 in 1353–4, twenty-four of which involved people from the Low Countries. By the end of the decade the number of lawsuits reached 286; in 1378–9 it exceeded 500. While the number of pleas for trespass, still responsible for about half of the courts' activities in the mid-1350s, remained on a par with the growth of the population, the number of pleas

⁸⁶ Goose, 'Immigrants', p. 153; Heaton, *Yorkshire Woollen and Worsted Industries*, p. 16.

⁸⁷ Cooper, 'Medieval Colchester: the economy', *VCH Essex*, IX, 32.

⁸⁸ Britnell, *Growth and Decline*, pp. 63–7, 72–6.

⁸⁹ The aulnagers' accounts for Colchester during the 1350s and 1390s are in The National Archives, E 356/7, mm 1–5d; E 101/342/9. For their shortcomings and an analysis of the data for the whole county of Essex, see A. R. Bridbury, *Medieval English Clothmaking: An Economic Survey* (London, 1982), pp. 58–9, 114; Poos, *Rural Society*, pp. 69–70.

⁹⁰ Britnell, *Growth and Decline*, pp. 79–81.

for debt, remarkably stable during the first half of the fourteenth century, and those for breach of contract both increased tenfold by the end of the 1370s. As has been explained before, part of this shift can be attributed to Flemings. The rising indebtedness resulted from a growth of transactions and a greater willingness to allow credit, inspired by the profitability of the textile trade.⁹¹ By the 1390s, Colchester had become the single most important cloth market in Essex and Suffolk.

Which factors, other than the influx of high numbers of skilled Flemish textile workers, could account for the expansion of Colchester's cloth production from the 1350s onwards? It is difficult to assess the impact of changes in the demand for cheaper standard quality cloth, such as the Colchester russet, on the development of the town's textile industry. On the supply side, both the raw materials and the infrastructure were available before 1350. Even though northern Essex underwent a shift toward pastoral production in the 150 years following the Black Death, most of it only happened after 1400, when Colchester's textile manufacture was already firmly established.⁹² The taxation of that produce's export did change in the years leading up to 1350. The custom duties on wool rose sharply in 1336 and remained on a level of 25 per cent of the commodities' market value for denizens and 33 per cent for aliens for the rest of the late medieval period. Applying the same tariffs on all qualities of wool, the tax increase swallowed up a higher proportion of the value of the cheaper varieties, the raw material of the Colchester russet, than that of the finer ones. In comparison, the levies on the finished product were equivalent to an *ad valorem* duty of about 2–3 per cent for English merchants and some 4.5–6 per cent for foreigners.⁹³ Introduced in 1347, the specific cloth custom primarily exploited the top range of English cloth exports and not the kind of fabrics produced in Colchester. Only in 1388–90 were the taxes extended to incorporate medium- and lower-quality cloth.⁹⁴ Under these circumstances, it became more cost-effective to work on cheaper home-grown wool varieties in England compared to abroad. At the same time, producers on the Continent could find substitutes for lower-quality wools more easily, making it doubtful whether the rise in English wool customs has influenced the costs of making cheaper cloth abroad in the same way as it has done for luxury textiles. More significant, in a period in which political instability drastically raised transport costs, might have been Colchester's proximity

⁹¹ Britnell, 'Colchester courts', p. 134; Britnell, *Growth and Decline*, pp. 98–103.

⁹² Poos, *Rural Society*, p. 63. Wool prices still rose during the 1350 and 1360s, the period of initial industrial expansion. Britnell, *Growth and Decline*, p. 150.

⁹³ E. M. Carus-Wilson and Olive Coleman, *England's Export Trade 1275–1547* (Oxford, 1963), pp. 22–3, 194–6.

⁹⁴ W. Mark Ormrod, 'Finance and Trade under Richard II', in Anthony Goodman and James L. Gillespie (eds), *Richard II: The Art of Kingship* (Oxford, 1999), pp. 168–72.

to the sea and to the port of Ipswich, which already attracted most of the town's output for the international market.⁹⁵

What changed most visibly in post-plague Colchester was the availability of skilled labour. The town suffered just as much, if not more, from the first outbreak of the Black Death in 1348 as the rest of the country and was hit hard again by plague in 1361. During several more years of the second half of the fourteenth century an exceptionally high mortality rate was recorded. Yet, whereas in England as a whole this prevented a recovery to the levels of the early fourteenth century, Colchester's population grew. If the number of inhabitants had fallen under 3,000 by 1350, estimates suggest a figure of over 5,500 at the time of the poll tax of 1377 and of more than 8,000, or twice the size of the town before the plague years, in 1414. All evidence implies that the bulk of this growth resulted from immigration.⁹⁶ This is not to say that all newcomers were exiled Flemish cloth-workers. From the 1340s to the 1350s the average annual number of new enrolled burgesses grew from fifteen to twenty-two, most of whom came from the surrounding villages.⁹⁷ Only in the 1360s would the first two Flemings acquire the freedom of the town. The enrolment of freemen does not tell the whole story, however. The borough court rolls make clear that, between 1351 and 1367, at least 126 people from the Low Countries settled with their households in Colchester, adding about 10 per cent to the town's 1350 population. Most of them had proven experience in the industry, which, during exactly the same years, expanded spectacularly. Only a few years later, their expertise was dearly missed in one of western Europe's leading cloth cities, despite its rising unemployment. The Flemish immigrants might have brought more to Colchester than skills too. At least one of the newly arrived exiles, John van Wynd, belonged to the Bruges *poorters*, a corporation of wealthy citizens working outside the craft guild system and including many merchants. Numerous others appear in the Colchester borough records as sellers of cloth or related goods,⁹⁸ suggesting activities as independent clothiers owning the product of their work rather than powerless wage labourers.

By providing manpower, expertise and financial resources, the Flemings made a vital contribution to the development of an industry that made Colchester's future look distinctively different from that of many other English towns. Even though we should be careful not to apply this pattern to all towns and all decades, the contraction of urban economies was a widely observable phenomenon in England between 1300 and 1550, contrasting with the urban growth so characteristic for previous

⁹⁵ Britnell, *Growth and Decline*, pp. 67–8; John H. Munro, 'Monetary contraction and industrial change in the late-medieval Low Countries, 1335–1500', in Nicholas J. Mayhew (ed.), *Coinage in the Low Countries (880–1500)* (Oxford, 1979), pp. 95–162, at p. 110.

⁹⁶ Britnell, *Growth and Decline*, pp. 95–7.

⁹⁷ Cooper, 'Introduction', p. 24.

⁹⁸ See, for example, ERO, D/B 5, CR 15, mm 2, 4, calendared in Benham, *Court Rolls*, II, 187, 193.

centuries.⁹⁹ Colchester was one of the more remarkable exceptions to this rule. The main cause for its resilience was the expansion of its cloth industry. Whereas textile centres such as Clare and Sudbury, thriving during the first half of the fourteenth century, never recovered from the Black Death, Colchester cloth prospered on European markets until at least 1450, attracting new immigrants and bringing prosperity. According to the scarce evidence there is, the town's industry and trade experienced more difficulties after 1450. Its population shrunk, too, but was still larger than before the Black Death and its accumulated riches remained very high. Occupying a poor fifty-third place in the ranking of English towns by taxable wealth in 1334, it had overtaken some of England's most important ports and several major cities by 1524–5, with only twelve urban centres doing better.¹⁰⁰ That success story also had a Flemish chapter.

V

In his seminal 1926 article, Henri De Sagher estimated that, throughout the whole fourteenth century, about 200 Flemish textile workers could have moved to England, London included, as a result of the English crown's policy to import foreign skills.¹⁰¹ Yet, capitalizing on the forced departure of nearly 1,500 rebels, most of whom were involved in the cloth industry, from the county of Flanders in 1351, Edward III issued letters of protection to all those who wished to establish themselves in his realm. During the fifteen years that followed his invitation, 126 people from the Low Countries migrated to Colchester, a town with under 3,000 inhabitants whose borough courts had not seen a single Fleming in the preceding forty years. An absolute minimum of twenty-seven of them belonged to the craftsmen exiled from Flanders and welcomed to England in 1351. They left a county whose woollens had been highly sought after in all parts of Europe for over two centuries. The newcomers brought indispensable skills and, in some cases, capital to a place whose drapery, all but thriving during the previous fifty years, grew explosively in the years coinciding with their arrival. Exiled Flemings might not have initiated the industry, but they certainly contributed to its development and set the tone for new generations of immigrants who left on a voluntary basis, not only from the county of Flanders but also from the neighbouring duchy of Brabant. The case of Flemish migration to Colchester demonstrates that, despite the scepticism in recent historiography, the crown's policy to attract foreign workers in order to stimulate key sectors of the English economy did make a difference. Boosted by the Flemish influx, its

⁹⁹ For a survey of the debate on urban decline in late medieval England, see Alan Dyer, *Decline and Growth in English Towns 1400–1640* (Basingstoke, 1991).

¹⁰⁰ Richard H. Britnell, 'The economy of British towns 1300–1540', in David M. Palliser (ed.), *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain. Volume I: 600–1540* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 328–9; Britnell, *Growth and Decline*, pp. 265–8; Dyer, *Decline and Growth*, pp. 23–4, 56.

¹⁰¹ De Sagher, 'Immigration des tisserands', p. 117.

internationally successful cloth industry allowed the Essex town to ward off the pattern of urban decline which many of its counterparts struggled with for most of the late medieval period. Further research has to point out to which extent the experiences of post-plague Colchester were an isolated case. It seems clear that the idea of a systematic government campaign that reinvigorated English cloth production on a nationwide scale, cherished by the likes of Thomas Fuller, William Ashley and Henri Pirenne, should be dismissed and that the effects of Edward III's policy have been more local and limited in time. That it had an effect, however, can no longer be denied.