

Notes from a talk “Margery Kempe’s Lynn: A Hanseatic World” by Dr Paul Richards at King’s Lynn Minster on 26th October 2022

The talk is split into two main parts. The first part deals with Lynn’s character as a port town, while the second part looks at Danzig as a main trading partner of Lynn and the Hanse as well as the city’s connections with Margery Kempe.

Part I.

First, an introduction to the Hanseatic League. Since the 12th century travelling merchants joined forces to better protect themselves against pirates and to jointly pursue their economic interests. At its highest point, more than 200 towns were part of the Hanseatic League. They mainly operated around the Baltic Sea. Apart from member cities, like Lubeck, Hamburg and Cologne, there were also 44 Kontors established in other countries, including England. A Kontor was a trading post or an office abroad for the Hanse merchants. The largest Kontors were London, Bruges, Bergen and Novgorod. The Kontor in Lynn was set up in 1475.

Looking at a map of Europe and the trade around the Baltic Sea, Denmark is clearly visible. Denmark was seen a great enemy of the Hanse. Denmark fought Hanse tooth and nail through the centuries and was only pushed back in 1370 when there were battles in the Baltic and the Treaty of Stralsund ended the conflict with the Danes. But the Danes continued to rival German merchants and the Hanse. Danes often complained about German and English merchants fishing in Iceland, which was under Danish control. For the Icelanders, the 15th century is called the ‘English century’ and the Cod War of 1699-70 is the 15th Cod War for the Icelanders.

Margery Kempe lived during this turbulent and dramatic period of Lynn history. She has always been of interest and her Book is now recognised as a far more reliable source than once thought. The Book is a literary source but it is considered to be a reliable primary source and it is unique in being the first autobiography in English.

So there is a local and international context in which Margery Kempe lived. Her family were actors in the local and international world. And an important thing to remember is that Lynn was in the premier league of English port towns. Its merchant rulers grew rich on overseas trade, especially with the Baltic, but also the wine trade with France. In 1511 the first King’s Lynn Festival of Music and the Arts, the Lady Ruth Fermoy and Queen Elizabeth, later the Queen Mother, decided to invite six special guests to the first King’s Lynn Festival. And one of the six was the Mayor of Bordeaux. Lynn had been trading wine with Bordeaux, with the wine merchants, since the 12th century and the last ship from Bordeaux loaded with wine came in 1778. So there is a big link there and a lot of money was made. But Lynn’s main trading links moved more and more eastwards into the Baltic.

Lynn was not a member of the Hanseatic League. There was no chance that English towns would ever become members of the Hanse. What it was, was a significant trading partner of the Hanse. The Hanse was a German organisation. It’s true that there were a few Dutch towns associated with the Hanse but it was a complicated relationship. And as the western Dutch towns like Amsterdam and their influence became bigger and stronger, they became competitors of the Hanse. And in the 15th century the eastern Dutch towns like Kampen and Deventer had to prove to Lubeck they were real and honest members of the Hanse. And the reason why the Dutch towns in the east on the river IJssel were linked to the Hanse is because of the trade with the Baltic. Kampen Museum in the Netherlands has a charter stuck to the wall which shows how Dutch ships ventured into the Baltic in

the 1250s to catch herring because the sea was so abundant in herring. Lubeck was nicknamed Herringstadt. And the herring created a need for salt because there is not much salt in the Baltic as there is so much freshwater going into the sea. Salt was a major export from Lynn and Boston in the 13th and into the 14th century before the salt ships of the Hanse went south where cheaper salt from France and Portugal was available. So Lynn was not a member of the Hanse but it dealt in goods like wool, salt, cloth, fish, wax, pitch, and furs which filled the wooden sailing ships or coggers. Most of the ships around 1400 were about 24 metres long and about 9 metres in width. Mainly of oak, but not all German ships were built with oak, though if they were the merchants knew they would last. To show you the links between these people, not sure if members of the Kempe family were ship owners in the sense of German merchants, but ship ownership was in 1/64th's. So if you own half of a ship it's recorded as 32/64. And sometimes English and German merchants co-shared ships, they both had shares in a ship. In the 19th century a popular present in Lynn and in England was ship shares for your parish priest, for example. Even today in Hamburg, the top professionals like surgeons or university professors still own shares in ships.

German merchants were resident in Lynn from the 12th to 16th century. In 1280s there is a lot of evidence that Germans settled in Lynn and Boston. They are recorded in local affairs, making deals and using the river systems and the agricultural hinterland. Historians believe that Lynn was a hub for northern German merchants, particularly from cities like Hamburg and Lubeck. In 1271 a man called Simon Staworen represented Lubeck merchants in Lynn and it was through Lynn that the German merchants were managed. Later on the German merchants moved south and many moved to London. While the Germans from the Baltic coast were called Easterlings, the Germans on the North Sea coast were called Westerlings. And as more Germans came to London from the north, the Teutonic Hall there became the Easterling Hall.

Margery Kempe was for some time a business woman and a daughter and wife of Lynn merchants. She was also a religious mystic and a famous pilgrim, travelling across Europe following sea and land trade routes. Her world was interwoven with international commerce and politics and Lynn, with other big east coast ports, was a major player in the making of national history and national economic development. Its merchants were bankers and shipbuilders and ambassadors for English Kings in the mid-14th century.

As we heard last week, Lynn's merchant elites had their political wings clipped by the rebellion of middling classes in the town in the early 15th century, at least for a while. Other European towns had also grown a sizable middling order which resented too much taxation and expenditures from their rulers, and such urban revolt was happening in Hanseatic towns across the North Sea. In Lubeck the tradesmen brought local politics into crisis and the Hanse was "shaken to its foundations". But in 1418 Hanseatic merchant delegates gleefully reported that the rebels had been subdued.

Hanseatic influence in Lynn was evident before Margery Kempe was born and are still tangible today in two masterly Flemish brasses in this church, depicting local merchants with their wives following German fashion. Such brasses were first encountered by Lynn merchants in Bruges. English merchants settled in Bruges from the 1330s and even today there is Engelstraat which is where the English merchants lived.

Margery's own family were merchants of an upcoming English urban bourgeoisie and her father John Brunham had political clout beyond the region. She married John Kempe around 1393. He was a brewer and probably a general merchant but not an overseas trader as was his father, also named John Kempe. This John Kempe was a Baltic venturer who imported fish and beer. Margery herself was for some time a brewer, for around 3 years. Brewing was a major industry in Lynn and there was

a small army of barrel makers or coopers in the town. Barrels were used for storing and transporting fish, pitch, wax, and furs. Hamburg had 500 breweries in 1500, imagine how many barrels were knocking around in Hamburg! By the 1420s Hollarders were principal beer brewers in Lynn and they are credited by historians for bringing over hops to preserve traditional ale and make it taste better.

Danzigers were the most numerous Hanseatic merchants in Lynn from the 1380s, when Margery Kempe was a teenager. They replaced the Lubeckers, showing as Jenks says, that the commercial interests of the Wash port were “pressing inexorably eastwards”. In turn English traders established footholds in Danzig and other Prussian towns and also chartered Hanse vessels to carry all their exports and imports, exchanging cloths for forest products above all. Ships from the Baltic sailed in convoys for protection from pirates. The Baltic Sea in the late 14th century was infested by pirates. There was a man called Klaus Störtebeker who had at his command some 200 ships. There is some dispute about whether he actually existed or not. One of the bars in the Symphony Hall in Hamburg is named “Störtebeker” after him and some people complain that such a place is named after a pirate! So pirates at the time were not small groups roaming the seas, but they had fleets. And when the pirates were pushed out of the Baltic by the Teutonic Knights, they moved on to Bergen and other Hanseatic Kontors in the west.

But it was the intermittent arrests of English ships in Danzig which damaged Lynn’s overseas trade and Lynn merchants accounted for 35% of compensation claims against the Germans. The English had sailed to the Baltic from 1380s with expectations that they would be granted similar economic privileges as Germans enjoyed in Lynn or Boston, which they did not. This is why Danzig was the flashpoint of Anglo-German rivalry.

The language spoken within the Hanse and by many merchants was Plattdeutsch. It was closely related to the English spoken in East Anglia at the time with which Margery Kempe was well acquainted. German artisans had settled in Lynn too and we know this from records like the Court Leet rolls which identified individuals. Margery Kempe’s step-mother had a German tailor living in one of her properties. Historians like Dollinger and more recently Kowaleski talk about many sailors settling in the Wash ports but they do not always leave much of a trace.

My “History of Plattdeutsch” book purchased in Hamburg claims that modern English, a world language, is simply an updated version of Plattdeutsch! There are many interesting parallels between the two, for example the modern word ‘two’ is similar to the Plattdeutsch equivalent ‘twee’, a ‘heart’ was ‘hart’, ‘salt’ was ‘solt’, ‘man’ was ‘mann’, ‘helpen’ was ‘help’. Plattdeutsch is still spoken in pockets in the north German state called Schleswig Holstein where it is an official language.

We know there were trade disputes between the English and the Germans, so why were the English kings so interested in this? Richard II sent an embassy to Prussia from Lynn in June 1388 to negotiate an Anglo-Hanseatic peace treaty. The royal ambassadors sailed from Lynn funded by property and money appropriated in the town from Prussian ships.

Here Margery Kempe’s father looms large. John Brunham (1330-1413) was five times Lynn Mayor, six times MP and also a Norfolk Justice of the Peace. He was requested by King’s Council to transfer this property taken from German merchants to London and he delivered £340 to pay for the expedition. The Grand Master of the Teutonic Order consulted the Prussian towns and a treaty resulted called the Treaty of Marienburg. Marienburg was the capital of Teutonic Knights and today it is in Poland, located just south of Gdansk (Danzig), and it is now called Malbork. In August 1388

the Treaty of Marienburg was signed which confirmed Hanseatic trading rights in England and English rights to trade and live in Prussia were recognised.

Richard II tried to ensure Prussians had property in England returned and that Lynn was compensated for funding this 1388 embassy expedition. Towns like Hull, Ipswich, Boston and Yarmouth each sent an official to Lynn to pay John Brunham.

Lynn merchants also had to pay and John Kempe stands out as a Baltic trader with the biggest claim for compensation for losses in Prussia. He was imprisoned in Straslund in 1393 and died that same year. But it didn't stop the war and all the treaties never brought long-lasting peace. Between 1402 and 1404 there were many raids on German ships along the east coast, some by John Brandon who was described as the greatest English pirate and he was great friends with Henry IV who was in this church in 1492 as Henry Bolingbroke.

Part II.

The final part of the talk is mainly about Danzig. Important nearby Hanseatic towns were Königsberg (today located in Russia) and Thorn (today Toruń in Poland). There are around 10 main Prussian towns in the area of which Danzig is the top one. It has the advantage of being on the River Vistula, with a large hinterland to supply timber and forest products. The large Danzig ships loaded with cargo preferred to travel around Denmark and to London and Bruges.

Danzig was a port town of around 15,000 people in Margery Kempe's time and it attracted migrants from Western Europe. It was also a manufacturing city with many craft guilds. According to its historians "the merchants were the group of people who brought most glory to Gdańsk (Danzig) and made it famous internationally" whilst "acquiring the greatest influence in the city".

The English colony was in the district called "Long Gardens". Danzig's great annual fair took place on 5th August, the feast of St Dominic, when foreign merchants could engage in free trade and organise shipments to the West. Margery Kempe's son, John Kempe, must have known it very well as he had migrated to Danzig.

Prof Sobiecki carried out research in the Gdańsk archives and uncovered evidence of Margery Kempe's son residing and trading in the port town. He writes that it "seems certain that Margery's son in Danzig was John Kempe who had married a German woman". In the summer 1431 both husband and wife travelled overland to England to visit Margery and conduct business at Lynn. He carried a letter from the Danzig council requesting the English authorities assist him in recovering a security of fifteen Prussian marks he had paid to a Danzig merchant on behalf of Robert Prinart of Boston. The latter cannot be identified but John Kempe may have journeyed to Boston to find him for reimbursement. His mother, Margery, was well known in the Lincolnshire port "as a holy and blessed woman".

Sobiecki presents a sound case that Margery dictated part of her story to John who wrote in Low German. This however may have occurred on a previous visit he had apparently made to Lynn in 1430. John had already responded to his mother's scolding for past immoral behaviour by going on pilgrimage and returned a reformed character. Unfortunately, he fell ill in Lynn and died in August 1431. Margery's German daughter-in-law stayed in Norfolk for 18 months before deciding to return to Danzig where her daughter had been left in the care of friends.

Margery's husband had died in 1432. Although she was almost 60 years old with a fear of the sea, she escorted her daughter-in-law to Prussia – much to the astonishment of Lynn citizens. They visited Walsingham and Norwich before going to Ipswich from where they sailed on a German ship.

The voyage was an ordeal and the vessel was blown off course and onto the Norwegian coast where Margery spent some time. Despite the spring storms of 1433, Margery and her companion eventually reached Danzig. Margery remained in the Hanseatic city five or six weeks after saying goodbye to her daughter-in-law who was reunited with her own daughter.

Fortunately, Margery encountered a Lynn merchant who acted as her town guide. She then sailed westwards along the Baltic coast to Stralsund. From this Hanseatic port, Margery travelled south for about 120 miles to visit the pilgrimage site of Wilsnack where there was a famous blood relic.

Margery found herself in a region torn by war between the Teutonic Knights and the Hussites. The Hussites were followers of Jan Hus and they were perhaps in league with the English Lollards. English people were unpopular in Hanse territory because of the Anglo-German disputes over trading rights. Margery travelled slowly by wagon and on foot across north and west Germany in June 1433. She was escorted by a male guide who abandoned her en route. She heard Germans calling her "English Tail" to reflect a European belief that the British had tails.

For some time, Margery walked with a group of poor people. She kept going despite her age. The distance from Wilsnack to Aachen is approximately 540 miles which highlights her extraordinary endurance and determination as a pilgrim. She entered Aachen on 13th July and saw the cathedral's celebrated relic of the Virgin Mary's smock said to have been worn at the Nativity. It attracted at least 100,000 pilgrims every year.

From Aachen Margery heads to Calais, then an English town. Dressed in filthy clothes and bug infested, she journeys to London where she spends several months. And she amazingly bumps into Reginald the Hermit who had previously escorted Margery from Lynn to Ipswich. Margery returned to Norfolk with him in the summer of 1434. Back home, she is admonished by her confessor for disobediently travelling overseas! Margery was almost certainly received into the Holy Trinity Guild in 1435 (we know she paid up her fees by 1436) and around this time is dictating her Book to Robert Springolde – creating the first autobiography in English.

Concluding remarks:

In Margery Kempe's lifetime, Lynn was a top 8 English town largely springing from its prominent role as a trading partner of the German Hanse. It had a mobile population with merchants, apprentices, and servants often on the move and some resident in Danzig, Stralsund, Bergen and Bruges. Likewise German merchants, artisans and former sailors lived and worked in Lynn and Boston. Around 41 German merchants associated with the Hanse were recorded in 1475 at Lynn. There were Anglo-German conflicts about trading rights, but the real enemies were the pirates and the Danes and their attack on merchant ships.

Lynn's merchant class enjoyed considerable economic and political clout in England and, as a member of this group, Margery Kempe had business and travel opportunities as well as access to resources to fund her activities and pilgrimages. Nonetheless she experienced hardships and poverty on three great pilgrimages and her physical and moral courage demands our admiration. Several Spanish towns on the Camino pilgrimage trail to Santiago di Compostella have declared that Margery was the first woman to complete the pilgrimage and they have erected a statue of her near Santiago. Margery Kempe deserves to be better known and the King's Lynn Minster project and the King's Lynn Walsingham Way project are big steps forward in achieving this.

Dr Paul Richards' newest book "King's Lynn and the German Hanse 1250 - 1550" was published in July 2022 and includes references to Margery Kempe and her family.