

Traders and fairs

COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

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Traders and Fairs

The greatest trade of the Middle Ages was in cloth – finely-woven Flemish cloth was a luxury item, and the towns of northern Italy produced silk, velvet and brocade interwoven with threads of gold and silver. Italian merchants developed trade links across the whole of Europe. During the Hundred Years War they stopped travelling by packhorse through France, and went instead by ship through the Strait of Gibraltar direct to the ports of the north, such as London, Ghent and the Hanse towns.

Merchants also traded many other goods throughout Europe and the Middle East. They formed partnerships by signing a *commenda* – an agreement whereby one of them would put up the money, while the other would undertake the dangerous journeys to foreign lands. They would then

share the profits.

Instead of carrying large sums of money, traders used bills of exchange (a type of international cheque). Important banks grew up, especially in Italy, and Italian bankers became as unpopular as the Jewish money lenders.

Most of this international trade was done at the great fairs, which took place only once or twice a year and lasted up to a fortnight. The fairs held in Champagne, a province of eastern France, were famous throughout Europe, and the King of France himself ensured that merchants could cross his country in safety. Rich families sent their stewards to the fairs, to buy provisions for the winter and to obtain articles not available locally – from honey and beeswax to Hanse amber and fine porcelain from the East.

Merchants and some of their wares. Opposite page, below left: the English merchants sell coal, cloth, corn, wool and metalwork. Opposite page, below right: Italian merchants trade in luxury goods such as jewellery, glassware, embroidered brocade, silk, jewelled hats and armour. Above left: from the East come jewels, silk, carpets and 'spices' – everything from flavourings (such as ginger, cinnamon, cloves and nutmeg) to medicinal plants and herbs. Above right: the Hanse merchants trade in Scandinavian tar, furs, rope, salt, goose feathers and amber jewellery.

Opposite page, above: because so few people can read in the fourteenth century, shop signs show what goods or services are available.

