

# Axminster's Population and Wealth in Context

## Axminster's population compared to neighbouring towns, in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century

At the time of the 1801 census Axminster (the parish, not just the town) had a total resident population of 2,154. This was the sixth highest parish total in a semi-circular region extending from Sidmouth and Ottery St Mary in the west, to Chard in the North, and Bridport in the east. All of those towns are shown on the map below.

The five parishes in this semi-circle which had larger populations than Axminster in 1801 were (in declining size order) Bridport, Chard, Crewkerne, Ottery St Mary and Honiton. This emphasises the fact that looking at Axminster simply in the context of Devon is misleading.



**Map showing Axminster's 'hinterland' and neighbours**

By 1831 there were 20 parishes in the same semi-circular region which had a population of at least 1,000 persons, eight of them at that time in Devon (bearing in mind that county boundaries changed significantly in 1844), ten in Dorset and two in Somerset. The 20 parishes are all identified on the diagram and in the table that follow.

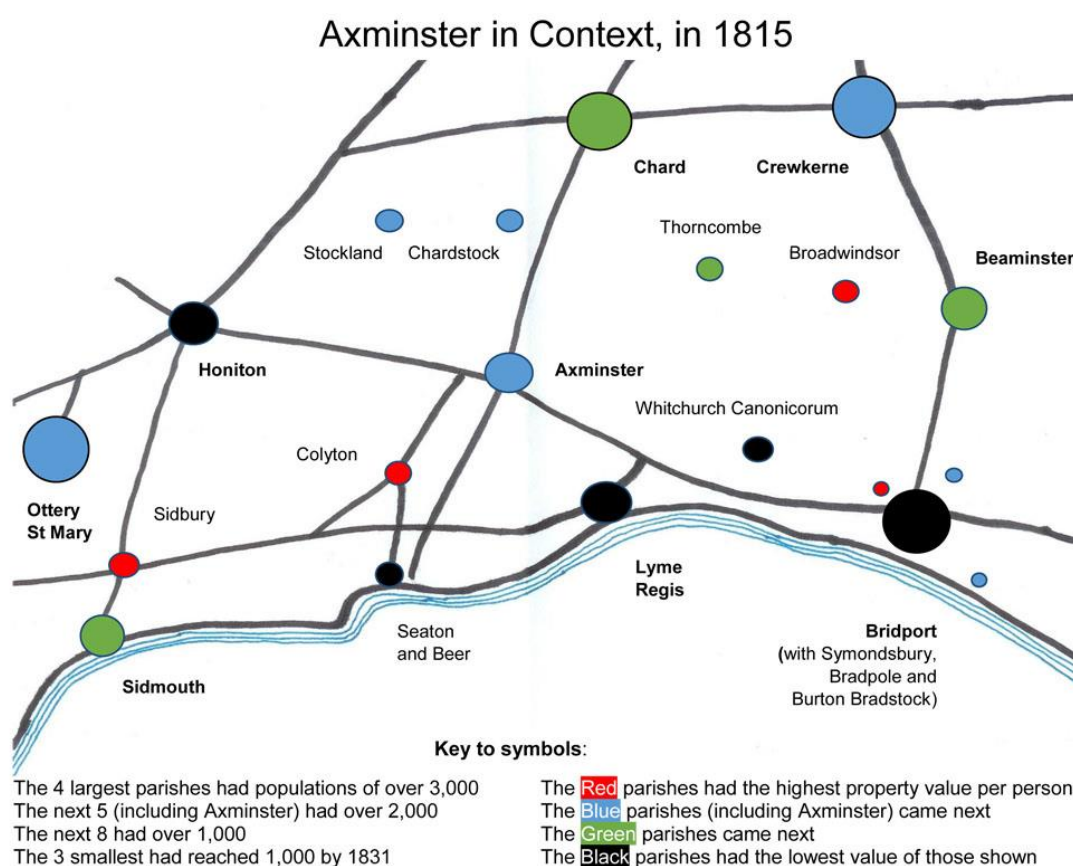
Axminster's population 1831 had grown to 2,719 by 1831 (26% higher than in 1801, having been 2,387 in 1811 and 1,742 in 1821). However, some other nearby parishes had grown

considerably faster, and Axminster's population had dropped to eighth position in this 'regional mini-league', having been overtaken by Sidmouth (the fastest-growing parish of all) and Beaminster.

However, when property values were recorded in 1815, Axminster was shown to be substantially wealthier than either Bridport or Chard (the two largest towns) in terms of total property value, and richer in terms of property value per resident than all but a few much smaller towns (the 1815 population estimates used to make this calculation being based on the official census returns for 1811 and 1821).

In fact, when looked at just in the context of Devon, Axminster was a surprisingly wealthy town in 1801, reflecting the importance of the market, the manufacture of carpets, and the booming market in London for butter, which Axminster was particularly well placed to supply.

The statistics for relative population size and per capita wealth are illustrated by the following diagram (which also shows the main road connections at that time). The underlying data are then given in the table overleaf. The various data sets that have been used all come from the official census and property value returns, which are accessible on the [hathitrust.org](http://hathitrust.org) website.



<i>Parish</i>	<i>County (in 1801)</i>	<i>Census population</i>			<i>Property value (£) in 1815</i>	<i>£/person (1815)</i>
		<i>1801</i>	<i>1831</i>	<i>Growth 1801 to 1831)</i>		
Axminster	Devon	2,154	2,719	26%	13,797	5.46
Beaminster	Dorset	2,140	2,968	39%	11,659	4.67
Bradpole	Dorset	575	1,018	77%	4,299	5.09
Bridport	Dorset	3,117	4,242	36%	7,001	1.92
Broadwindsor	Dorset	1,094	1,570	44%	10,586	8.41
Burton Bradstock	Dorset	654	1,068	63%	4,158	5.71
Chard	Somerset	2,784	5,141	85%	13,238	4.41
Chardstock	Dorset	1,095	1,357	24%	6,287	5.27
Colyton	Devon	1,641	2,182	33%	12,909	7.01
Crewkerne	Somerset	2,576	3,789	47%	16,777	5.27
Honiton	Devon	2,377	3,509	48%	10,698	3.61
Lyme Regis	Dorset	1,451	2,621	81%	5,351	2.59
Ottery St Mary	Devon	2,415	3,849	59%	17,682	5.64
Seaton and Beer	Devon	1,497	1,803	20%	5,684	3.53
Sidbury	Devon	1,233	1,725	40%	10,057	6.89
Sidmouth	Devon	1,252	3,126	150%	9,634	4.56
Stockland	Dorset	988	1,206	22%	5,707	5.26
Symondsburys	Dorset	791	1,147	45%	7,349	7.77
Thorncombe	Devon	1,092	1,368	25%	5,162	4.16
Whitchurch Canonicorum	Dorset	932	1,399	50%	4,472	3.84

### What happened next?

Over the following decade, to 1841, Axminster's population continued to grow strongly, as can be seen from the graph overleaf.

However, the bankruptcy of the original Axminster carpet factory in 1836, and the arrival in Exeter of a railway connection to Bristol and London in 1840, led to a clear stagnation in East Devon from that time, which lasted well beyond the arrival of the railway in Axminster in 1860.

Unlike the data above for 1801 to 1831, the graphic below compares Axminster's population growth to that of Devon as a whole.

As can be seen, since the 1920s Axminster's population has grown faster than that of the rest of Devon (taken as a whole), but our share of the county total is still lower in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century than it was in 1801.

