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I: THE COMPOSITION AND ORIGINS OF THE MANOR

Introduction

In 1383 at Newton Aycliffe (Co. Durham) William Colson, John de Redworth and five other men were singled out in the manor court to explain why they had not provided the authorities with the names of those who had continued to stage football games, in direct contravention of a recent warning that any participation in this activity would incur a fine of 20 shillings. At first they refused, and during the tense stand off Alicia de Redworth, John's wife, repeatedly disrupted the proceedings by heckling the steward of the court. Reluctantly, Colson and de Redworth then named eighteen footballers: although too old to play themselves, some of the players were members of their households. On being identified as a participant, Thomas Tailor offered the court his blunt opinion of the whole business, and refused to shut up when so ordered by the steward.¹

An official of another manor in County Durham, responsible for the tenants of Ricknall, was threatened with dismissal in 1355 if he failed to distrain those who had simply left their holdings in the wake of the Black Death to occupy other lands elsewhere in the county. The troubled official had reported earlier in the year that many tenants of Ricknall were leaving because a local troublemaker named William Standupryght was so argumentative and malicious that no one would live near him: a medieval neighbour-from-hell. The landlord obviously regarded this as a feeble excuse from his official, although by 1356 William had left Ricknall, perhaps because there was no one left with whom to quarrel.²

At the risk of depicting County Durham as an unruly place, these two examples provide some sense of the potential of manorial sources to the medieval historian. They illustrate that the manor touched and influenced the lives of common people in the Middle Ages, probably

¹ W. H. Longstaffe, ed., *Halmota prioratus Dunelmensis: containing extracts from the halmote court of the prior and convent of Durham 1296-1384*, Surtees Society, 82 (1889), p. 180.

² R. H. Britnell, 'Feudal reaction after the Black Death in the Palatinate of Durham', *Past and Present*, 128 (1990), 40.

more than any other secular institution. Thus an understanding of the structure and workings of the manor is essential to studying the economic, social and cultural history of late-medieval England. As an institution, it was central to the organisation of agrarian life in the Middle Ages and beyond. Through the manor, land tenures, rents and many land transactions were administered and recorded, and a wide range of agricultural resources was controlled and exploited. As the medium through which lordship was exercised on the ground, it was also central to the organisation of social relations in the Middle Ages. Through the manor, the personal ties, services and obligations which bound a medieval peasant to a lord were defined and enforced, communal by-laws were agreed and implemented, and many economic and social dealings with neighbours and family were regulated and formalised.

The importance of the manor in English local administration explains its significance to medieval historians, and is further enhanced by the survival of a vast corpus of manorial documents. Only a few manorial sources date from the eleventh and twelfth centuries, but thousands have survived from the period *c.* 1250 to *c.* 1500. The richness, detail and uniformity of late-medieval English manorial documents are extraordinary, and are unparalleled for this period anywhere in the world. Their quality was regarded with awe by one seventeenth-century commentator, who remarked that the material contained therein 'is so exact ... that it cannot but give us cause almost of wonder'.³ Thousands of these local documents have survived, and most are readily accessible in record offices and university libraries throughout the country.⁴

The characteristics of the medieval manor

Providing a watertight definition of 'the manor' between *c.* 1200 and *c.* 1500 is almost impossible, because its form was fluid and its characteristics were varied: in the words of Barbara Harvey, the manor is a genus with many species.⁵ The word derives from the Latin *manerium*,

³ Quoted from C. Dyer, 'Documentary evidence', in G. Astill and A. Grant, eds, *The countryside of medieval England* (Oxford, 1988), p. 13. Z. Razi and R. M. Smith, eds, *Medieval society and the manor court* (Oxford, 1996), p. 38.

⁴ The Historical Manuscripts Commission holds a register of all known manorial documents at its office in Quality Court, Chancery Lane, London, WC2A 1HP. Web site: <http://www.hmc.gov.uk>

⁵ B. F. Harvey, 'The life of the manor', in A. Williams and R. Erskine, eds, *Domesday Book Studies* (1987), p. 39.

meaning a residence, but the medieval manor was more than just a seigneurial dwelling.⁶ The manor was essentially a territorial unit of lordship which also served as the basic unit of seigneurial estate administration. Some of the land on the manor, known as the demesne, was allocated for the lord's own use, which could either be leased by the lord to a willing tenant for an annual rent or directly exploited as a 'home farm' to provision the lord's household or to produce crops for sale. Other land was allocated to a dependent peasantry, who rendered various rents and services to the lord for the privilege. The manor also comprised other economic resources, which might include fisheries, mills and mineral rights.

It would be wrong, however, to assume that the manor was simply a territorial unit comprised of manor house, land and other economic resources. A lord also enjoyed a 'package' of customary and legal rights over the manorial land and resources. Hence the manorial peasantry was bound to the manor and its lord by a range of personal ties and obligations, and not merely by the basic rent rendered for its land. Similarly, an economic resource such as the manorial mill was also linked to a seigneurial privilege that compelled certain peasants to grind their corn there. These manorial rights could ultimately be defended in the central law courts of medieval England, but were most commonly articulated and exercised in the lord's own, private, 'manor' court.

A summary of the possible range of economic and legal components of the manor between c. 1200 and 1500 is depicted schematically in Figure 1 (p. xiv), whose purpose is to convey the internal structures of the manor clearly and effectively. Inevitably, this can only be achieved by over-simplification: it hardly needs emphasising that not every manor contained all the rights and resources identified here, and that the extent of, and balance between, the individual components varied enormously from manor to manor.

As indicated in Figure 1, the capital messuage comprised an enclosed area containing the seigneurial residential complex, gardens, stables and the various agricultural outbuildings necessary to run the demesne as a working farm. It was unlikely to be larger than a few acres. In the 1330s the capital messuage of Glastonbury abbey's manor of Shapwick

6 F. W. Maitland, *Domesday Book and beyond: three essays in the early history of England* (Cambridge, 1897), pp. 107–10. For other introductions to the manor, see F. Pollock and F. W. Maitland, *The history of English law before the time of Edward I*, 2nd edn (Cambridge, 1911), pp. 594–633; P. Vinogradoff, *The growth of the manor* (1911).

(Somerset) covered 7½ acres of land, and included a hall, pantry, buttery, larder, abbot's room, monks' room, clerk's room, wine and ale cellars, a large garden, a small garden, two dovecotes, a byre, barn and granary, and was designed to serve as the abbey's administrative centre for a small group of proximate manors. The capital messuage at High Ercall (Shropshire) in 1424 was moated and contained a three-storey gatehouse, a defensive stone tower, and various residential and agricultural buildings.⁷

The appearance and layout of the manor house itself varied, depending on the status of the lord to whom it belonged and whether the lord was resident. Many manor houses were rebuilt in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, with greater emphasis placed on display. The majority served as primary residences to lords of relatively humble status, and thus many were rather modest buildings constructed to uniform plans. On the estate of a great lord, the manor house might have been a substantial fortified residence, regularly used by the seigneurial household. Yet many of the manors held by wealthier lords were non-residential, and so the manor house was often a functional building used as temporary accommodation by the lord's administrators, as at Shapwick.

Most of the other manorial components identified in Figure 1 are considered in greater detail elsewhere in this book. Only three features merit particular comment at this stage. First, the physical layout of the demesne and peasant arable lands varied according to the layout of local field systems. For example, both demesne and peasant lands were scattered in small, unenclosed, parcels throughout an open, commonfield, system in many parts of midland England, whereas the demesne arable often lay in contiguous, consolidated and enclosed parcels in central areas of East Anglia, where enclosures were not uncommonly interspersed with open fields. Similarly, large areas of demesne land in parts of northern England lay in detached blocks called *bewericks*.⁸

Second, the point that the medieval manor comprised both physical and jurisdictional elements is nicely illustrated by the example of the 'warren', which was both an agricultural resource and a legal right. A

7 M. G. Thompson, 'The Polden hill manors of Glastonbury abbey: land and people c. 1260–1351' (Ph.D. thesis, University of Leicester, 1997), p. 42; *Victoria County History* [hereafter *VCH*] of *Shropshire*, vol. 4 (London, 1989), p. 85.

8 Maitland, *Domesday Book*, p. 115.

rabbit warren was a place for breeding and exploiting rabbits for profit, but 'warren' also refers to the right of free warren, a legal franchise granted by the Crown which bestowed upon the holder the monopolistic right to kill small game within a defined local territory. Medieval peasants did not own or exploit rabbit warrens, except illegally, and the warren was therefore a status symbol and privilege as well as an economic resource.

Third, many parish churches had originated as the private churches of local lords, so that 'church and manor kept company from the start'.⁹ Elements of this early association are still discernible on some late-medieval manors where the right to appoint the rector of the parish church (known as the patronage or advowson) was still enjoyed by some manorial lords, and the exercise of this right could carry important consequences for the running of both the parish church and manor. Where an ecclesiastical institution was lord of the manor, it might appoint itself as the rector of the church and then hire a vicar to perform the necessary pastoral duties within the parish on its behalf. This process of 'appropriation' enabled the ecclesiastical body to acquire the rectorial income of the parish church for its own use, which included the potentially lucrative glebe lands and tithes. Hence Bury St Edmunds abbey appointed itself rector after it had been granted the former royal manor of Mildenhall, which carried the patronage of the parish church. The abbey's manorial records for Mildenhall (Suffolk) subsequently include income from the lease of the glebe land and receipts from tithes. In contrast, Westminster abbey often removed the distinction between Church and manorial lands by absorbing the glebe of impropriated rectories into its demesne lands.¹⁰ Some parish churches were so handsomely endowed with land, including numerous tenants, that their rectories were effectively run as small manors [23].

The size and composition of medieval manors

It is popularly assumed that the 'classic' medieval manor was largely conterminous with the village, possessed a large demesne (say, in excess of 400 arable acres), and contained a high proportion of unfree

⁹ R. Morris, *Churches in the landscape* (1989), p. 249.

¹⁰ British Museum, Add. Rolls 53116, 53134; B. F. Harvey, *Westminster abbey and its estates in the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1977), p. 127 n. 2.

peasants rendering heavy labour-services. For example, the abbot of Bury St Edmunds possessed a classic manor at Coney Weston (Suffolk), comprising in 1279 a capital messuage, 340 acres of demesne arable, 58 acres of demesne pasture, 1 acre of demesne meadow, 8 acres of demesne woodland, 2 acres of turbary (marsh with rights to cut peat), a windmill, the advowson of the church and various other rights. His unfree peasants held 430 acres of arable land, 40 acres of heath, 5 acres of marsh, and greatly outnumbered the freemen who held 69 acres of arable and 2 roods of marsh.¹¹

Classic manors such as Coney Weston are identifiable across late-medieval England, but they were nowhere near as commonplace as popularly believed. In reality, there was much variation in the form, size and composition of manors. Compare Coney Weston with the manor of Hillhall in Holkham (Norfolk), which comprised a capital messuage and 14 acres of demesne arable, a windmill, 3 foldcourses (the right to keep sheep over designated land), a market, a fair, and 143 acres held by unfree tenants and 179 acres held by free tenants; or the manor of Hacun, in the same vill, which had simply a messuage and 30 acres of demesne, a foldcourse, 20 acres held by unfree peasants and 115 acres by free.¹² Some manorial holdings in northern England possessed satellite territories, which were physically detached from the manorial core, held by free peasants who were linked to the manor by relatively weak jurisdictional ties.¹³

The large, classic, manor is decidedly atypical of late-medieval manorial forms, and the majority of manors were small to medium-sized properties covering less than six square miles. E. A. Kosminsky's analysis of the Hundred Rolls (compiled in the late 1270s) reveals that 65 per cent of documented manors possessed less than a combined total of 500 acres of demesne and tenant arable land.¹⁴ It follows from this revelation that most villages embraced a number of manors, so that few medieval villages, parishes or vills were conterminous with

11 F. W. Hervey, ed., *The Pinchbeck Register*, 2 vols (Brighton, 1925), II, pp. 211–3.

12 W. Hassall and J. Beaurroy, eds, *Lordship and landscape in Norfolk 1250–1350: the early records of Holkham* (Oxford, 1993), pp. 31, 36.

13 See E. Miller and J. Hatcher, *Medieval England: rural society and economic change 1086–1348* (1978), pp. 21, 187.

14 E. A. Kosminsky, *Studies in the agrarian history of England in the thirteenth century* (Oxford, 1956), pp. 68–151, for a comprehensive discussion of manorial variations in late thirteenth-century England. See also Miller and Hatcher, *Medieval England*, pp. 9–22 and 184–8.

one manor of the same name.¹⁵ Of course, it is possible to find some villis which were almost entirely dominated by one large manor, particularly in the central midlands, but they were uncommon. In many parts of England each village contained more than one manor, and Kosminsky reckoned that at least 90 per cent of the Cambridgeshire villages covered by extant Hundred Rolls fell into this category.¹⁶ The situation was different again in many areas of northern England, where it was common for a number of sizeable and separate settlements to lie within one vast manor. The manor of Wakefield (Yorkshire) covered 150 square miles and contained settlements such as Sandal, Osset, Holne, Stanley and Sourby, while the manor of Chester (Co. Durham) contained Chester (le-Street) itself, Ryton, Whickham, Whitburn, Cleadon, Newton, Plawsworth, Bolden, Urpeth, Gateshead and Framwellgate.¹⁷

Further variations were found in the composition of the three core manorial components of demesne land, free land and unfree land. Many Shropshire manors contained demesnes with little or no arable land, but considerable quantities of pasture and highly valued meadow. No unfree land was attached to Nicholas de Gedding's manor in Brockley (Suffolk) in the 1270s, which comprised merely a messuage, 20 acres of demesne arable and seven freemen.¹⁸ In sum, it is possible to find manors with little or no demesne land, with few or no unfree peasants, with exclusively freemen, and so on.¹⁹ Such variations had significant implications for the social relations between lord and peasants on the manor: a powerful lord with a large number of unfree peasants

¹⁵ The broad differences between the manor, vill, village and parish are worth sketching at this point. The parish is the basic unit of ecclesiastical administration, the vill is the basic unit of civil administration, the manor the basic unit of estate administration, and 'village' refers to a particular form of settlement (as opposed to, say, 'hamlet'). For example, the name Rushden (Hertfordshire) was given to a medieval parish, a medieval vill, a medieval settlement and a medieval manor. It is convenient to use the terms 'village', 'vill', 'manor' and 'parish' interchangeably under such circumstances, but strictly speaking this is incorrect: as we have seen, these labels relate to different areas of jurisdiction, and their physical boundaries were often different. Thus, although the boundaries of the medieval parish and vill of Rushden were exactly coterminous, a number of other manors and settlements, with different names, lay within them.

¹⁶ Kosminsky, *Studies in agrarian history*, p. 73.

¹⁷ Longstaffe, *Halmota*, p. viii.

¹⁸ *VCH Shropshire*, 4, p. 86.

¹⁹ Maitland, *Domesday Book*, pp. 111–19; S. R. Rigby, *English society in the later Middle Ages: class, status and gender* (1995), pp. 34–44.

generally meant a more onerous manorial regime than a lower-status lord with a high proportion of free peasants.

Although the manor was infinitely varied in medieval England, it is possible for historians to identify broad regional and sub-regional distinctions in manorial characteristics. A key element in determining the local character of manorial organisation is the type of lordship, and the demands it made upon the peasantry. The king possessed many large manors but was a relatively undemanding lord, whereas the older ecclesiastical institutions held large manors and maintained a firm grip over a predominantly servile peasantry. Lay lords, especially the gentry, tended to hold smaller manors and made fewer demands on their peasants.²⁰ Hence historians dub those areas where large, classic, manors predominated as 'heavily manorialised': for example, many regions of southern-central and midland England, where estates held by the greater and more conservative landlords, such as Benedictine monasteries, predominated. In contrast, 'lightly manorialised' areas are those where smaller manors, associated with gentry lordship and a mainly free peasantry, prevailed: for example, in many areas of south-western and eastern England, and in the north where many manors covered vast territory, but whose tenantry was relatively free of servile burdens.

The explanations for these variations in manorialism remain elusive. However, it is apparent that regional differences in demographic pressure, patterns of colonisation, the nature of local lordship and commercial opportunities were strong influences. Manorial structure tended to be highly complex and fluid in places where colonisation occurred later, population pressure was high or rising rapidly, commercial pressures were greatest, and lordship was relatively weak or low-status.²¹ In contrast, areas that had been long settled by c. 1100, and dominated by powerful and conservative lordship, tended to be characterised by a less fluid and fragmented manorial structure. Of particular interest to historians are the implications of these varied manorial structures for the economic and social characteristics of such places. In heavily manorialised areas, settlement patterns tended to be nucleated, farming arrangements were strongly dictated by communal

20 C. Lewis, C. C. Dyer and P. Mitchell-Fox, *Village, hamlet and field: changing medieval settlements in central England* (Manchester, 1997), pp. 185–90.

21 See B. M. S. Campbell, 'The complexity of manorial structure in medieval Norfolk: a case study', *Norfolk Archaeology*, 39 (1986), 225–52.

regulations, and social relations were, perhaps, more controlled, deferential and community-centred. In areas of weak lordship and manorialism, communal controls over agriculture were minimal, settlement patterns dispersed, and social relations perhaps more egalitarian and individualistic. Identifying and explaining such trends represents a formidable challenge.

The marked variety in manorial size and composition in the later Middle Ages, and the importance of location and lordship in influencing such variations, means that manors should not be regarded as static and immutable entities. They could change in size and composition over time, and it is common to discover large manors being broken up into smaller, but still discrete, manorial units, and not uncommon to find other manors being consolidated or enlarged. For example, the Domesday Book (1086) records three manors in the vill of Hanbury (Worcestershire), one of which was a classic manor held by the bishop of Worcester. Yet by 1300 nine manors existed there, carved out of previously under-exploited areas of woodland within the original manor by colonising freemen and enterprising lesser gentry.²² The royal manor of Havering (Essex), which covered 16,000 acres, also suffered gradual fragmentation. In the mid-twelfth century a new manor was carved out with royal permission for Hornchurch priory, but around twenty more manors were created without formal approval. In the absence of direct and firm control by the Crown, the relatively free and autonomous peasantry of Havering enjoyed the freedom to participate in an active land market, which enabled a few individuals to construct holdings well in excess of 100 acres and to run them as separate manors.²³

The fusion of manorial units can also be readily illustrated, and, indeed, F. W. Maitland reminds us that the Normans tried to simplify and consolidate manorial holdings in the period between the Conquest and the compilation of the Domesday Book.²⁴ The greater medieval landlords had always been prepared to make piecemeal additions to

²² C. C. Dyer, *Hanbury. Settlement and society in a wooded landscape*, Leicester Occasional Papers in English Local History, 4th series, 4 (1991), pp. 6–8 and 28–9.

²³ M. K. McIntosh, *Autonomy and community: the royal manor of Havering 1200–1550* (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 145–6. See also Miller and Hatcher, *Medieval England*, p. 209.

²⁴ Maitland, *Domesday Book*, p. 149; Lewis *et al.*, *Village, hamlet and field*, pp. 108–11. R. Faith, *The English peasantry and the growth of lordship* (Leicester, 1997), pp. 199–200, considers the reorganisation of demesnes around the time of the Norman Conquest.

their main manors if it suited them, such as when the bishop of Worcester enlarged his manor at Alveston (Warwickshire) by the absorption of tenant land.²⁵ Elsewhere, opportunist landlords sometimes sought to purchase contiguous manors and then run them as a single unit. The Lestrange family had acquired three of the four manors in Hunstanton (Norfolk) by the end of the fifteenth century and absorbed them into one unit, and in 1539 the lay lord of Easthall manor in Culford (Suffolk) bought the main manor upon the dissolution of Bury St Edmunds abbey.²⁶

The example of Havering demonstrates graphically that the pressure to fragment manorial units came from below as well as above. This pressure was often so sustained that it seems large manors only remained intact if their landlord was sufficiently committed and powerful to ensure their survival. On occasion, major landlords carved out smaller manors from bigger units as a deliberate act of estate policy, but for the most part fragmentation occurred as a consequence of piecemeal fission. Of course, sufficient land had to be available in order to achieve this, either through a highly active land market or reserves of colonisable land, and – crucially – the established lord had to ‘sanction’ such activities in the sense of not preventing them. Havering had all the necessary ingredients: land for colonisation, an active land market, a free tenantry and a non-resident lord with a light touch. Under such circumstances, a few enterprising freemen could nibble away at pieces of demesne land and acquire other tenant land to create, *de facto*, a new manorial holding. Richard Neel acquired a smallholding in Holkham (Norfolk) and then extended it between 1314 and 1345 by the aggressive purchase of 112 pieces of land to create a new manor in the vill.²⁷ Some of the many isolated ‘halls’ occupying moated sites in Essex, Norfolk and Suffolk originated as the capital messuages of small medieval manors, and are monuments to the acquisitive efforts of dozens of Richard Neels.

25 C. C. Dyer, *Lords and peasants in a changing society: the estates of the bishopric of Worcester 680–1500* (Cambridge, 1980), p. 45.

26 C. Oestman, *Lordship and community: the Lestrange family and the village of Hunstanton, Norfolk, in the first half of the sixteenth century* (Woodbridge, 1994), p. 29; M. Bailey, *A marginal economy? East Anglian Breckland in the later Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 52.

27 Hassell and Beauroy, *Holkham*, pp. 12, 44–6.

Origins and development of the manor

So far, our concern has been to sketch the main features of the medieval manor between *c.* 1200 and *c.* 1500, but in this section we consider briefly its origins before 1200 and its evolution thereafter. The word *manerium* first appears in common usage during the eleventh century, although units of lordship which we would recognise as manors are evident at least two centuries earlier.²⁸ The origins of the manor are obscure, because they date from the mid- to late Anglo-Saxon period when documentary evidence is slight. This obscurity fanned the flames of a famous debate on the subject at the end of the nineteenth century between Maitland and Vinogradoff.²⁹ Modern scholarship, however, is much closer to a consensus on the general processes behind the emergence of the manor than those pioneering historical heavyweights.

Prior to the eighth century, land was essentially held as a series of large unbroken territories in 'chiefdoms' or by tribal leaders.³⁰ At this time no proper concept of the private ownership of land existed. However, during the eighth and ninth centuries these substantial territories were either handed over intact to major churches or gradually broken up into small blocks as grants to nobles. This process had the dual benefit of cementing allegiances and loyalty, and enabling the emerging military and ecclesiastical aristocracy to sustain itself in an appropriate lifestyle. Land was thus increasingly 'used in the negotiation and maintenance of the relationships whereby men achieved or sustained eminence'.³¹ In effect, a new landholding group of superior lords was being created which enjoyed increasingly secure rights over its land. However, the kings of the various Anglo-Saxon kingdoms still retained some important rights over the alienated land, such as the right to charge certain dues when the lands passed to heirs and the right to demand certain military and public services.

²⁸ Harvey, 'Life of the manor', p. 39.

²⁹ Usefully summarised in H. R. Loyn, *Anglo-Saxon England and the Norman Conquest* (1962), pp. 163–7; and T. H. Aston, 'The origins of the manor in England', and 'A Postscript', in Aston, P. R. Coss, C. Dyer, and J. Thirsk, eds, *Social relations and ideas: essays in honour of R. H. Hilton* (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 1–43.

³⁰ P. Stafford, *The East Midlands* (Leicester, 1985), pp. 29–39; Faith, *English peasantry*, pp. 11–4.

³¹ J. Hudson, *The formation of the English common law* (Harlow, 1996), p. 87.

The fragmentation of larger territories and estates into smaller landholding units accelerated after the ninth century. One reason for this continuing process of fission was the changing nature of both political power and notions of land ownership. Because the emerging aristocratic elite owed military allegiance to the king, its members required the support of a group of lesser warriors (effectively thegns or knights) in order to serve that allegiance and assert their own status. One option was to maintain a large, permanent and itinerant household of dependent thegns, but the preferred option for aristocrats was to take chunks of their own lands and grant them to these lesser lords: once again, this process cemented the bond of dependency and loyalty between the aristocrat and the lesser lord, and provided the latter with independent means.³² Hence in the ninth and tenth centuries successive bishops of Worcester systematically broke down parts of their compact estates in the west Midlands to create smaller units of between one to six hides for the use of the bishopric's thegns. Initially these landed grants were intended as long-term leases, but the thegns and their families soon acquired permanent rights to inherit and alienate the land.³³ Similarly, an estate at Fawsley (Northamptonshire) was split into four smaller units between 944 and 1023, of which two became further fragmented by 1086.³⁴

Other influences in the tenth and eleventh centuries further accelerated the breakup of the old 'multiple' estates and the creation of an expanding group of landholding lords below the level of the aristocracy. Population growth swelled the number of peasants, who in turn were able to support more units of lordship; the development of the cash nexus and commodity exchange encouraged the sale, purchase and transfer of land; and the forces of inheritance divided and split estates. The outcome of these processes was known as *subinfeudation*, and was accompanied by the development of clearer notions of the private ownership of land. The old territories 'seem often to have fragmented along natural fault lines, giving each of their component parts a rough balance of resources', and as the process intensified so boundaries were defined with increasing precision. The emergence of land charters in the late Anglo-Saxon period reflects the desire both to record bounds more carefully and to protect the private

32 Loyn, *Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 195–9; Faith, *English peasantry*, pp. 155–9.

33 Dyer, *Lords and peasants*, pp. 12–21.

34 Stafford, *East Midlands*, pp. 34–9.

ownership of acquired (as opposed to inherited) land.³⁵ By the early twelfth century such land had acquired security of tenure, heritability and alienability.³⁶

Between the eighth and the twelfth centuries, therefore, the forces of fission produced both a more complex seigneurial landholding structure and a preponderance of localised lordships. The process of fragmentation was especially evident in the east of England, where a lively land market existed based on cash exchange: 'vills were divided between several lords in dizzying confusion ... in this fluid and fissiparous society'.³⁷ These lesser lords – the 'gentry' of Anglo-Saxon England – resided on their local lordships as early as the ninth century, building a defensive site and church as a mark of their status. Indeed, 'without his defensible seigneurial centre, with its hall large enough to house under its roof his household and his followers, we could not recognise the medieval seigneur, and he certainly would not have been able to recognise himself'.³⁸ Thus the old 'estates' structure of the mid-Anglo-Saxon period was gradually broken into many small pieces, and these pieces came to be known as manors. Historians now recognise this move to local lordship between the ninth and thirteenth centuries as a profound development in the social and economic history of England because it is strongly associated with the emergence of fundamental elements in religious and agrarian life: parish churches, nucleated villages and common-field systems.

The Domesday Book photographs in 1086 the emergence of manifold localised lordships, and reveals a large number of manorial holdings of different sizes grouped into scattered estates under different ownership. For example, the archbishop of Canterbury held in excess of twenty large demesne manors spread across five counties, which were held and exploited directly, and many other smaller holdings and manors across south-east England held from him by subinfeudated lords and sub-tenants on a variety of terms and tenures.³⁹ At the other end of the seigneurial landholding scale, a humble lord named Berard

³⁵ Faith, *English peasantry*, pp. 154, 159–61.

³⁶ Hudson, *Common law*, p. 91.

³⁷ Quoted from Faith, *English peasantry*, p. 155; T. Williamson, *The origins of Norfolk* (Manchester, 1995), pp. 121–5.

³⁸ Faith, *English peasantry*, pp. 163–4.

³⁹ F. R. H. Du Boulay, *The lordship of Canterbury: an essay on medieval society* (1966), map 3.

held and resided on one small manor in Whatfield (Suffolk).⁴⁰ The seigneurial landholding structure had now acquired a kaleidoscopic complexity, in which the outlines of the original pattern of large estate territories are difficult to discern.

One consequence of the Norman Conquest of England was a more rigorous classification of landholding, and a changing perception of the way in which land was held.⁴¹ It was established more formally that most lands were held heritably in return for secular, often military, service, and such lands are said to be held *in fee*. In contrast, ecclesiastical institutions held some land *in alms*, i.e. for religious service. An example of this toughening of landholding terms is the manner in which William the Conqueror required his tenants-in-chief (those holding land directly from the king) to supply specified quotas of equipped fighting knights for military service as required.⁴² The quota fixed upon the archbishopric of Canterbury in 1070 was sixty knights, whereupon archbishop Lanfranc immediately subinfeudated more land from his estate to create a sufficient number of dependent knights to meet this military obligation. By 1086 nearly 17 per cent of the Canterbury estates (both monastic and episcopal) were held by dependent knights.⁴³ This general principle underpins the concept of a 'knight's fee', whereby a man held land in trust ('enfeoffed') from his superior lord on the understanding that he should produce one knight for military service when required.

The legal concept of a knight's fee, which defined the feudal terms on which manorial land was held, remained highly resilient throughout the Middle Ages, so that fourteenth- and fifteenth-century documents regularly contain references to a manor held by 'lord y' for 'a knight's fee' or a 'moiety (fraction) of a knight's fee'. However, the continued use of the language of fiefs, fees and vassals to describe the terms on which manors were held was essentially a convenient legal construct, and the reality on the ground was rather different. For example, a knight's fee did not equate to a fixed or consistent area of land. By the

40 Little Domesday Book, fol. 369a.

41 Hudson, *Common law*, pp. 89-90.

42 A. Williams, 'How land was held before and after the Conquest', in Williams, ed., *Domesday Book studies*, pp. 37-8. The description of feudal relationships in this section follows orthodox opinion, which has been substantially challenged by S. Reynolds, *Fiefs and vassals: the medieval evidence reinterpreted* (Oxford, 1994). This debate carries few direct implications for the daily administration of the manor after 1200, or its sources, and so is not explored here in any detail.

43 Du Boulay, *Lordship of Canterbury*, pp. 52, 57.

late twelfth century it was envisaged that a manor of five hides was sufficient to constitute a knight's fee, but in practice many were held for much less than this (the 'hide' notionally comprised 120 acres, but represents a fiscal rather than a statute measure). The notion of the knight's fee tells us little about the reality of the late-medieval manor. The military significance of this system diminished in the twelfth century, so that few of the manors held for 'a knight's fee' were actually held by professional warriors: some knights were undoubtedly fighting men, but many manorial lords were not honed fighters but simply local lords of knightly class.⁴⁴ This reflects the growing tendency for subinfeudation to occur as a consequence of economic pressures rather than military or feudal necessity. As Richard Britnell has observed, 'the idea of creating new fiefs as a condition of personal service had become anachronistic by 1180. Subinfeudation continued for over a century after this date, but this was a response to the growth of the land market and the reasons for it were financial'.⁴⁵

When manorial documentation becomes abundant in the thirteenth century, it reveals local and regional differences in the extent to which the old estates and territories had become subdivided. Areas of good soil and high population density could support smaller units of lordship than those of poor soil and low population density. Manors on the fertile soils of eastern Norfolk were small and numerous in the early fourteenth century, in direct contrast to the less numerous and significantly larger manors on the infertile sands of south-west and north-west Norfolk.⁴⁶ Similarly, aristocratic families and large ecclesiastical institutions tended to resist the forces of fission with reasonable success on lands they continued to hold directly, partly because of their political power and partly because of the internal organisation of their estates.

The discussion so far has focused upon the seigneurial landholding pattern, and its gradual emergence from an earlier system of extensive territories in pre-Conquest England. Unfortunately, historians know little about the ways in which the lord's relationship with his dependent peasants changed during this process of fragmentation, and the

⁴⁴ S. P. J. Harvey, 'The knight and the knight's fee in England', in R. H. Hilton, ed., *Peasants, knights and heretics: studies in medieval English social history* (Cambridge, 1976), pp. 135-46, 160-73; Du Boulay, *Lordship of Canterbury*, p. 14.

⁴⁵ R. H. Britnell, *The commercialisation of English society 1000-1500* (Manchester, 1996), p. 129.

⁴⁶ Campbell, 'Manorial structure', map 1.

extent to which the move to local units of landholding involved the 'manorialisation' of those lordships. In other words, we should not assume that the seigneurial and jurisdictional rights which a lord possessed over his manorial peasantry in the later Middle Ages (sketched briefly in Figure 1, and discussed in more detail in Chapter II) were the same as those which, say, a tenth-century lord possessed over his peasantry. Certainly, peasants throughout the Anglo-Saxon period had owed various dues and obligations to their superior lord, and, for example, the old multiple estates had received ploughing, harvest works and food farms from their peasantry.⁴⁷ The Domesday Book records the existence of large numbers of dependent peasants attached to the manor, but we simply cannot be certain what obligations bound them to their lords at this time. Faith suggests that the English peasantry were subjected to greater and more onerous burdens during the twelfth century, and therefore implies that some of the defining jurisdictional characteristics of the late-medieval manor were, in fact, a post-Conquest innovation. In contrast, other historians imply that seigneurial rights over the peasantry did not change significantly in the twelfth century, although the clarification and codification of those rights after c. 1160 creates an illusion of change.⁴⁸

It is less contentious to assert that the English manorial system peaked in the thirteenth century. This marked the final phase in a long period of demographic and economic expansion, when new lands were colonised, land values rose, and the population rose to its medieval peak. These conditions – more land and more peasants – were most propitious for the multiplication of manorial units, and encouraged the predominance of the processes of fission over those of fusion. Consequently, it is likely that the total number of manors reached its peak in c. 1300. In addition, the emergence of the common law in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries clarified the rights of landlords in relation to their lands, and encouraged the codification of the relationship between lord and peasant. Seigneurial estate management became increasingly professional and systematic around the same time, which ensured that manorial resources were more carefully and robustly exploited. As an economic resource, and as a source of income to its lord, the medieval manor was at its peak in the later thirteenth century.

⁴⁷ Faith, *English peasantry*, pp. 11–14.

⁴⁸ Contrast, for example, Faith, *English peasantry*, pp. 175–7 with Britnell, *Commercialisation of English society*, pp. 70, 74, 134–47.

The process of manorial fragmentation slowed significantly after the thirteenth century until it virtually ceased, as demographic, economic and social conditions changed, and the formal legal definition of manor was tightened.⁴⁹ Thereafter, the fusion of manorial units became the dominant process and the manor as an institution underwent a long period of slow decline. The fall in demographic pressure after the arrival of plague in the mid-fourteenth century, the growing confidence and assertiveness of the lower orders of medieval society, and the gradual dissolution of serfdom and its trappings all eased the seigneurial grip upon the manorial regime. Serfdom and villeinage effectively dissolved during the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, to be replaced by a more contractual – as opposed to personal – relationship between lord and tenant. By the fifteenth century many manorial records become less detailed and informative, and seigneurial powers of coercion over the manorial tenantry were clearly waning.

The manor's value as an economic resource declined in the later Middle Ages and seigneurial incomes from land diminished significantly. The separate components of individual manors, and especially the mill, the dairy herd, the dovecote, fisheries and parcels of demesne land, were often leased out piecemeal either to other lords or local tenants, and consequently the manor lost some of its coherence as an operational agrarian unit. This decline coincided with the manor's diminishing importance as a medium for controlling serfdom, and the result, to some extent, was a process of 'de-manorialisation'. As a unit of agricultural management and social control, the manor's day had passed by 1500. Of course, land remained the major source of wealth and income in English society, but the prevailing economic conditions encouraged the creation of larger landed holdings. Consequently, the engrossment of manorial units became an increasingly common practice and the functional independence and integrity of individual manors declined. During the sixteenth century, land values, agricultural profits and population levels rose once again, but the manor was not central to estate management in the way it had been in the thirteenth century. In part, this reflected broad changes in estate management, but also the changing landholding structure of English society as more land fell into fewer hands. The process of engrossment is particularly evident between c. 1650 and 1750, when the rate of fusion of manorial units increased.

⁴⁹ Harvey, *Manorial records* (1st edn, 1995), pp. 2, 55.

Although manorial courts could still be active after *c.* 1500, their importance in regulating local life was substantially undermined by the rise of parochial government. Successive reforms of local government by the Tudor monarchy bestowed wider powers upon the parish for the issuing of local by-laws, the regulation of agriculture, social control, poor relief, and so on. Consequently, many of the activities that might once have fallen within the jurisdiction of the manor were now assumed by the parish, which itself was accountable to an increasingly centralised system of government.

The pace at, and extent to which, the local influence of the manor declined from the sixteenth century varied considerably from place to place, depending upon local differences in the customary powers and profile of each manor and the attitude of the lord. The manor's function as a unit of agrarian administration diminished most quickly, although its court could remain active in recording transfers of copyhold land, regulating trade and a few other activities until the early nineteenth century. Indeed, the obsession of antiquarian historians of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with manorial descents reminds us that the institution still retained some relevance until relatively recent times, and copyhold (a manorial tenure) survived until the 1920s.

Manorial documents

Manorial documents fall into two broad categories. In the first are those which present a 'snapshot' of the various resources of the manor at a given moment, such as a written description of its demesne land or a list of its tenants' obligations. These served as an important source of reference for estate and manorial administrators by providing both detailed and centralised information about manorial assets and a benchmark for assessing the actual and potential yields of the manor. In this category are found surveys, customals, rentals, extents, terriers and inventories. The second category comprises those documents which record the active management of manorial resources and rights, and their financial returns, over a short period of time, normally a year. These documents were drawn up with the aid of surveys, customals and so on, and cross-referred to them, but in essence they are concerned with either the day-to-day regulation of manorial jurisdiction or the actual performance and financial yield of resources each