

The rural economy and standards of living

(from J. A. F. Thomson, *The Transformation of Medieval England, 1370–1529* (London, 1983))

The majority of the inhabitants of late medieval England lived close to the soil and were engaged in agriculture. There were, of course, regional variations in the form of agriculture pursued, and in some parts of the country the economy was more diversified. Throughout our period, for example, tin-mining provided alternative employment in parts of Cornwall, and the demand for food by those engaged in this occupation provided a stimulus to local agriculture. The development of textile manufacturing in the fifteenth century was not only one of the most fundamental economic changes of the period, but it also took men away from farming, created a market for the sale of agricultural products and gave an incentive to the producer to grow crops and raise stock beyond the levels required for his own consumption. The development of farming beyond the subsistence level was most marked in areas of urbanization. In South-east England, for example, the demand of London for food supplies affected the neighbouring counties and gave opportunities to enterprising farmers and traders. It also tended to increase the cost of land more markedly in this region than elsewhere.

Besides the varying effects caused by such economic factors as supply and demand, the basic soil conditions of particular areas provided more fundamental reasons for a range of types of farming. Even within a single county there could be marked differences in the capacity of the soil to yield particular crops, and in ease of cultivability. Joan Thirsk's brilliant examination of these variations, region by region, illustrates this for the period from 1500 onwards (103, pp.1–112), and there is no reason to believe that a similar diversity did not exist at the earlier period also, although there were probably changes in detail in particular areas, such as those caused by climatic change to which allusion was made in Chapter 1. Also, during the fifteenth century there was a more considerable transforming influence in the movement for enclosures, which had brought an increasing area under grazing at the expense of arable (Ch.5). Most recent historical work on the rural economy has involved studies in depth of particular regions or even individual manors, and despite the patchiness of the surviving evidence it is clear that one cannot draw hard and fast lines of distinction between regions of arable farming and those of stock-rearing. Certainly, there were broad differences between areas where the plough was dominant and those where grassland was typical, but within these areas there were many deviations from the norm.

If it is hard to generalize about the pattern of farming, it is no easier to summarize the resources or standing of the men who worked on the land. The term 'peasant' is a convenient abstraction, but no more, and there was no such person as a typical peasant. Some were of servile status and others free, although with the passage of time more and more secured their freedom (Ch.4), some might

occupy barely enough land to sustain themselves and their families, while others accumulated substantial farms and became themselves employers of labour. The most important common feature among them was that they did not have absolute rights over the land which they farmed, but that they were in some way dependent on a lord, who had a right to some part of their labour or their profits from the land. One must remember that in different contexts the question, 'Whose land is this?' could be answered, equally correctly, by giving the name of the lord, the peasant or possibly that of some intermediate tenant.

The availability of land played a crucial part in relations between the land-owning class and those immediately concerned with its cultivation. Before the epidemics of the mid fourteenth century a serious land shortage existed, and the landowners had the opportunity to secure high rents for lands which they leased out, and to pay low wages to men lacking other opportunities for livelihood. Because labour was cheap, there were ample advantages in cultivating the demesne, and, because land was scarce, the lord had the whip-hand also if he wished a cash rent in lieu of labour services. Surprisingly, the widespread mortality of the plague of 1349 did not completely upset the balance of power between lord and peasant. It created some problems, which prompted the issue of the Ordinance of Labourers of 1349 and the later statute of 1351, which attempted to limit mobility of labour and to peg wage-rates at the 1346 level. These measures probably had a foundation in genuine agricultural unrest – the court rolls of St Albans Abbey record an increase in the number of fugitive villeins in the 1350s – but in most places the records suggest that survivors of the epidemic took up vacant holdings, at least those on land of reasonable quality, so it appears that the population surplus from the period before the Black Death still sufficed to provide a reservoir of possible tenants. Either through this, or through their exercise of coercive powers, the great landed nobility were able to minimize damage to their incomes in the first twenty years or so after the first onset of the plague.

It was in the 1370s that the balance of the economy was seriously altered; from 1372 there was a fall in basic food prices but no drop in wages, and this continued for some years, putting pressure on the profit margins which the manorial lords could secure from their estates (60). It is not clear whether the immediate cause of this was a fortuitous series of better harvests or a further decline in population following later outbreaks of plague. The results of the changed balance are more certain; there were attempts at repressing wages by law, and this may have contributed to the outbreak of the Great Revolt of 1381 (Ch.3). The lords' position was still fundamentally weak, and the shortage of labour in relation to land was now the main characteristic of the English rural economy. This was to lead to an increase in real wages and to a decline in rents for land, and in so far as these can be used to measure the standard of living of the people, they suggest that the condition of the peasantry improved markedly in the fifteenth century. It also undermined the economic resources of the landowners, although here one must stress considerable regional variations – the land market in South-east England remained buoyant because of its proximity to the London market, which provided an outlet for agricultural produce. The complementary nature of the urban and

rural economies did not, however, prevent tensions between town and country, as in 1471 when discontent in Essex at the low prices paid for food by the Londoners led men from the county to join the attack on London by the Lancastrian leader Fauconberg (40, p.218).

The shortage of labour forced the landowners to change their methods of exploiting their estates, most obviously in the abandonment of direct cultivation of the demesne by the lord's paid men in favour of leasing it out for a cash rent. Precisely when this occurred can seldom be determined on any estates, because there are few series of complete manorial records, but it is safe to say that by the early fifteenth century the change had taken place widely on both lay and ecclesiastical lands, the latter being better documented over different parts of the country. This indeed was one of the most marked steps in the transition from the traditional medieval economy to the modern.

Of the lands in lay hands, the two crown duchies of Cornwall and Lancaster possess some of the fullest records, although they are by no means unique. The Cornish lands, however, do not fit into the normal pattern of tenures, for demesne exploitation there had been abandoned before 1300, if indeed it had ever existed (76, pp.10–11). In the Norfolk manor of Fornsett the policy of leasing the demesne was adopted between 1358 and 1373, but on some of the Percy lands the practice did not appear till later. Although Cockermouth was leased as early as the thirteenth century, the family's five Yorkshire manors were still in demesne in 1352, three of these being leased by 1405 and all by 1416, while their four Sussex manors were all leased between 1405 and 1416.

A similar tendency can be seen on ecclesiastical estates. On those of the archbishop of Canterbury, leasing began in the 1380s and 1390s, and despite occasional returns to direct exploitation, by 1440 all the demesne fields had been leased. The abbey of Leicester came to depend increasingly on rent income from its demesnes, and also from its tithes, and most demesnes were rented by 1477, while Owston Abbey in the same shire had abandoned direct exploitation of demesne lands in all but three villages before 1400. In the North, at Durham Priory, some leasing of demesne began in the late fourteenth century, but the main period at which it was rented out was between 1408 and 1416, perhaps some two decades later than at Christ Church, Canterbury (80, pp.79, 90, 131; 209 p.272).

How far did the abandonment of demesne lands affect the income of the landowners? Certainly when the population was declining, one would expect that tenants might be hard to find and that concessions to them might be necessary, either in the form of a rent reduction or a cut in the entry fine, or in an extension of the period of the lease. Surviving evidence suggests that this was the case, although there were many local fluctuations. On the Talbot estate of Whitchurch in North Shropshire entry fines were lower in the early fifteenth century than in the late fourteenth, and there was a decline in the rents paid for demesne lands after 1400, and little sign of recovery until well into the sixteenth century. Court profits (which included entry fines) fell before 1400 and remained depressed as late as 1507, and the revenues from mills and tolls, already declining in 1400, also showed no recovery by the early sixteenth century. On the Leicester Abbey

estates, of which 75–80 per cent fell within the shire, rent income in 1408 was nearly a fifth lower than in 1341, and by 1477 had fallen by almost a third on the 1341 figure, despite the fact that the proportion of income obtained from rent as opposed to production had risen. At Fornsett, the average rent per acre of lands leased was markedly lower in the fifteenth century than in the late fourteenth, although one cannot tell from the published figures how far the fluctuations may have been due to variations in the quality of the particular pieces of land being leased at the time rather than to a general decline in rent levels. On the Canterbury estates, the initial period of leasing from 1380 to 1440 was followed by a time when it was harder to secure tenants, but after about 1490 there was some recovery in revenues and evidence that there was competition for leases (80, pp. 79, 86).

Further instances could be multiplied, but would add little to the general picture. More important are some of the problems implicit in it. There is little doubt that it was the labour shortage which caused the shift to leasing, but although this provided more revenue than persistence in demesne farming would have done it still left the landowner with reduced resources. Despite this, one still sees lay lords investing in land – there was no possible alternative – and the need to compensate for declining returns to maintain an existing standard of living may indeed explain some of the characteristic features of fifteenth-century society, the pursuit of heiresses, the search for the patronage of a greater man, particularly the King who could grant pensions and offices, and the desire to campaign overseas. If even attempts to improve the standard of estate management did not raise the level of the returns (and the study of the Talbot Whitchurch estates suggests that these were more affected by the underlying economic conditions than by the standard of management), the only prospect for a lord was to seek some supplementary income beyond that of his estates. The one lay lord whose scope was seriously limited in this was of course the greatest, the King, who could seek no patron, and whose fiscal resources from taxation had to be charged on men whose own landed resources were under pressure.

Ecclesiastical landowners were also at a disadvantage compared with laymen. Their own acquisitions of property were severely curtailed by the provisions of the Statute of Mortmain of 1279, and they could not seek heiresses, offices or the profits of war. But they too had expenses, notably the cost of maintaining their buildings, and if voluntary gifts were insufficient to meet requirements, they might well run into difficulties. It is more remarkable that the religious houses survived so well than that they were faced with economic problems, and if they were sometimes regarded as grasping landlords, they had little option to be anything else. Nor was it only their tenants who were resentful, but they also had to face envious glances at their lands from the laity, some of whom at any rate seem to have considered them suitable prey. A scheme of disendowment was voiced in 1395, probably by Lollard sympathizers, though it did not reach Parliament, and in 1404 and 1410 proposals were put forward in Parliament for appropriating the temporalities of the clergy. Although none of these were put into effect, they illustrate the vulnerability of clerical resources in men's minds, and the potential danger to them if the Church did not have powerful support. In practice, how-

ever, the Church lost little – the suppression of the 'alien priories' by Henry V merely saw the conversion of resources to other ecclesiastical establishments, and the disappearance of a small number of decayed religious houses in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries was caused by the transfer of their endowments to other houses or to colleges at universities (218, ii, 163–5, iii, 157–8).

When lands were leased out, a wide range of people took them up. In some cases groups of villagers rented them, in others local landowners and in others again merchants, who took them on a speculative basis (209, p. 282). If the tenant could not exploit the land directly himself, with his own resources and those of his family, he would have to hire labour, but it seems likely that the small farmer was able to make a better profit than the great man, because his lands were not encumbered by a costly and unproductive bureaucracy. At Durham Priory, for example, less than half of the income assigned to each office in the monastery was devoted to the activity for which the office had been created; the rest was absorbed in management costs (209, p. 255).

It is in peasant society that one sees some of the main gainers from the surplus of land. It is clear that there was considerable freedom in the peasant land-market, so that individuals were able to buy parcels of land and increase their own holdings. Such peasant land purchases reflect the recognition of their rights in the land, subject to the fulfilment of obligation to their lords. Again one can see local variations: in Kent, where there was partible inheritance by the local custom called gavelkind, peasant holdings were subject to constant division and could then be reconsolidated, because the holders of land had a free right to alienate it. Even in a single shire one can see adjacent villages where there were differences. In Leicestershire, the communities at Wigston and Ulston were largely free, whereas Foston, only 2 or 3 miles from Wigston, and Galby were occupied largely by servile tenants (83, pp. 53–4). It was presumably where the community was predominantly free that one finds continual buying and selling of land between peasant families and the consequent development of a group of more prosperous men in the community. Of course, differences in wealth between peasant families were not new; the evidence of the poll tax returns shows that by the last quarter of the fourteenth century peasants might employ labour on their own account and even have a servant living in their household, although it is difficult to say how common this was (81, pp. 30–3; 83, p. 31). Such wealthier peasants could easily become dominant figures in a village, because surprisingly few communities had a resident lord. The poll tax returns for some areas in the West Midlands suggest that little more than one village in ten had resident gentry, and in Leicestershire the situation seems to have been similar, and to have remained so into the sixteenth century. By 1525 in the latter shire a quarter of the personal estate in a sample of forty villages was owned by 4 per cent of the rural population, excluding the squires – clearly there were some members of the peasantry who must have had sufficient wealth to dominate their fellows (81, pp. 26–7; 83, pp. 17, 142).

The purchase of land also presupposes that the peasantry involved were able to accumulate cash, which can have been done only by the production of surplus crops and their sale in a market. In some cases the purchasers of land came from

outside the village, as at Leighton Buzzard in Buckinghamshire, where recent arrivals in the manor were able to build up their holdings. Men might also leave the land, members of Wigston families migrated to Leicester into commerce, and it reflects the mobility of the population that only about 10 per cent of the families there survived in the male line from 1377 to the time of Henry VIII. Some died out or moved away, others survived only in the female line and the lands passed to another family by marriage (81, pp.43-7; 83, p.31).

It is when one recognizes the variations in peasant advancement among even individuals in a single community, as well as from one village or one region to another, that one appreciates the need for caution in calling the fifteenth century the golden age of the English labourer. Although wage-rates and rent levels provide one measure of the peasant standard of living, there are dangers in reading too much into this. Firstly, such figures give only an average, and some men would therefore do far less well. Secondly, and far more important, the main factor in most men's standard of living was not what they could earn but what they could produce, and here conditions were dominated not by economic relationships with other men but by something far more basic, the annual and unpredictable variations in the weather and the effects which this would have on the harvest. In some cases this might be literally a matter of life and death. For what this might involve, the historian must rely on literary material, and Langland's dialogue, between Piers and Hunger in the B text of *Piers Plowman* rings painfully true as a description of peasant hardship in the pre-potato age.

Piers did not have meat, but only cheese, loaves of beans and bran and various vegetables, and it was on these that he would have to live until Lammas and the new harvest. He had a cow and a calf, so he presumably would have milk, which together with the cheese could supply some protein in his diet. Indeed, milk probably became more plentiful about May, the notional time of Langland's vision, although the continuation of the passage suggests that in other respects this was a bad time of year. When harvest came, the people could put Hunger to sleep. Langland is critical of some of their actions; Waster and the beggars scorned poor food and demanded better, fine bread instead of that with beans in it and well-cooked meat. Despite the element of social criticism in the poem, Langland takes a conservative attitude to popular discontent, criticizing demands for high wages and murmurs against the Statute of Labourers. The passage concludes with a prophecy of renewed famine and deaths from hunger.

One cannot say how accurate this picture is in detail, nor if Langland is describing a famine or normal peasant conditions. However, it certainly shows the importance of seasonal variations on the normal diet of the people, and particularly of the poor. The 'poor widow' of Chaucer's *Nun's Priest's Tale* had a diet consisting mainly of milk and brown bread, with broiled bacon and the occasional egg, and this may represent a fairly normal diet. Chaucer, writing for an aristocratic audience, would be less inclined to dwell on such incidental details or to consider seasonal variations than Langland, whose central theme at this point in the work was that of hunger. A chronicle source confirms Langland's remark about bread being made from materials other than grain, namely beans, peas and vetches, but it should be noted that this year, 1439, saw a great dearth of corn,

and the chronicler's comment probably reflects the unusual nature of the food, at least in his eyes; we do not know how far this view would be general and how far it was that of a man whose conditions were normally more affluent. The year 1439 was in fact one of the worst periods of famine in the fifteenth century; it had followed a harvest failure, brought about by heavy rains over the whole country throughout the summer of 1438. Wheat prices at 13s. 4d. a quarter were more than double the normal (though not as disastrously high as in the notorious famine years of 1315-17), barley at 6s.-7s. was up by over 50 per cent and peas and beans at 6s. had tripled in cost (209, pp.266-7).

These were the main items of agricultural produce, although there were many variations in the quantity of each grown, presumably resulting from local soil conditions. At four dates between 1393 and 1470, peas and beans represented from 28 to 32½ per cent of the crops on the Leicester Abbey estates, barley (presumably mainly used for brewing) from 40 to 45 per cent and wheat from 11½ to 14½ per cent. The rest of the crops consisted of oats and rye. At Wigston (also Leicestershire) in the early sixteenth century peas and beans were even more important at 49½ per cent, barley represented 43½ per cent and wheat only 6 per cent. There was a negligible quantity of rye (80, p.63; 83, p.156). The main problem of studying agricultural production is the lack of clear evidence on yields in relation to seed, although at Battle in Sussex, where this can be documented, wheat and barley yields seem to have declined and those of oats increased during the later Middle Ages. This may reflect developments elsewhere in England, as it seems to be part of a general European pattern of production.

In the mid fifteenth century Sir John Fortescue claimed that the English were richer than the French, that they normally drank ale instead of water and ate all kinds of flesh and fish in abundance (10, pp.86-7). Although his view is probably idealized and unlikely to be particularly informed about peasant conditions, there is some evidence to support his assertions. The accounts of an establishment of chantry priests at Bridport in Dorset show that their diet contained considerable quantities of flesh and fish, and that, although it normally was fairly plain, it could contain luxuries on special occasions. These priests may have been more affluent than the rest of the population, but one has evidence of flesh-eating in the artisan class too. During a heresy trial in 1429, a deposition against Margery Baxter, a wright's wife from Martham in Norfolk, stated that she had been seen boiling *unam peciam de Baken* on the Saturday after Ash Wednesday. She also said that it was better to eat left-over meat in Lent than go to market and incur debt through buying fish (241, p.128). In this remark, perhaps the earliest preserved utterance of an English housewife, she certainly seems to have assumed that such food would be a normal part of the family diet. It is likely, too, that among the peasantry occasional poaching might supplement the meat element in a family's food.

One major factor in causing seasonal variations in food supplies was the difficulty of storage. The wealthier classes might have stone-built barns, which could protect their supplies, but houses built of timber and mud, and with earth floors, would be very damp, so it would be hard to protect grains both from rotting and from the depredations of rats and mice. Building materials for peasant houses

varied between different parts of the country. In the clay land areas, little stone was available for building, and timber remained the main material of houses, even as late as the fifteenth century. Excavations at two sites deserted at this period, Goltho in Lincolnshire and Barton Blount in Derbyshire, have shown this. In the West Midlands, the evidence of the Worcester court rolls suggests a prevalence of timber-framed buildings, most often consisting of three bays, although some were larger, and it is possible that the smaller houses were less well recorded. In some areas there were stone buildings, and the houses were partially paved, as at Barrow Mead in Somerset, deserted around 1400. In the last thirty years archaeological investigation of deserted village sites has added substantially to our knowledge of peasant conditions, and will probably provide more information in future, particularly by enabling fuller comparisons to be made between different parts of the country.

Such evidence, however, has its limitations. Until far more excavation has been completed, it will be hard to distinguish between what is typical of an area and what is unusual. Chronology of building forms can be established only approximately, and archaeology cannot tell us of variations in the prosperity of a community from one year to the next. As this is one of the main characteristics of the late medieval rural economy, one must not expect too much from the evidence of excavations. Documentary material, however sparse it may be, provides a firmer chronological framework for the historian.

CHAPTER 3

The Peasants' Revolt

In view of the hardships endured by many peasants, even at times when they were making some gains at the expense of their lords, it is hardly surprising that there were outbreaks of discontent, some of which took violent forms – indeed it has been said that peasant movements were as much a part of seigneurial society as strikes are of large-scale capitalism. One may pursue this parallel further, and suggest that, just as many strikes in modern industry are prompted by particular local conditions, and reflect immediate discontents rather than any general revolutionary outlook, equally many peasant movements had no wide aims, but merely indicate a grievance against a particular manorial lord.

At first sight the revolt of 1381 is different. It drew support from a wide area in South-east England, and there were associated outbreaks in other parts of the country, ranging from York and Scarborough in the North-east, to the Wirral in the North-west, and to Bridgwater and Ilchester in Somerset. It is the rising which has become known as 'the Peasants' Revolt' without any further qualification and has been seen as the most serious social revolt which occurred in medieval England. Yet despite its geographical spread, it is hard to find common features among the different risings which would justify the idea that the revolt was in any real sense a common movement. Undoubtedly the risings were connected with each other in so far as the news of the initial outbreak in Essex seems to have sparked off further unrest in adjacent counties, and later in more remote parts, and it is certain that the general circumstances of the time created an atmosphere which was ripe for revolt, but the differences of aim among the different groups of rebels suggest that each had its own grievances which it hoped to right by force. The various risings must be seen as spontaneous popular movements, and there is no reason to believe in any central leadership which attempted to control the revolt.

Indeed, the divergence in background among the different groups of rebels may reasonably raise the question whether the rising of 1381 is best described by its traditional name, whether it was in fact a peasants' revolt. The troubles at York and Scarborough, already mentioned, took place in an urban environment, and very conspicuous in the troubles was the city of London. Of the 287 participants in the rising who were excluded by name from the general amnesty, over half, 154, were Londoners (98, p.cxxiii; 109, p.55). It is clear, too, that although most of the Londoners involved were drawn from the poorer classes of society, matters were complicated by factions in the city government. An attempt was made to inculcate a group of five aldermen with participation in the troubles, but it is unlikely that in at least four cases there was any real foundation for the charge.