

The Content and Sources of English Agrarian History before 1500

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THE PRESENT STATE OF KNOWLEDGE

THE picture we have now of medieval English agriculture and rural social conditions is the product of many investigations conducted from varying standpoints, using different sources and ranging in scope from the detailed monograph to the general treatise. This great variety may be illustrated on the one hand by James Thorold Rogers's monumental work of collection and synthesis, *A History of Agriculture and Prices* (volumes I-IV covering the medieval period) and on the other by close analytical studies of particular estates, of which an early example was Miss N. Neilson's work on the estates of Ramsey Abbey, and the latest, Mr Finberg's study of the estates of Tavistock Abbey.¹ In addition, in the form of article or larger monograph, all sorts of special aspects of medieval rural life have been explored—field systems, organization of labour, accounting systems, estate management, special products, variations in manorial structure, marketing. It might seem, from the bulk and variety of the work of historians, that our picture, if not quite finished, is at any rate firm both in outline and in the principal details; and that all we need to do now is to add a touch here and there to give extra depth and variety to an almost complete representation of the reality of the past.

It is to be hoped, however, that historians do not accept our present picture as anywhere near final, or even necessarily correct in broad outline. Without being mere image-breakers, we must still always be prepared for radical upsets to old ideas. But it is also important that historians should convey to the general reader some sense of the lack of finality about our investigations, and consequently the conception that there is always something new and exciting to find out. That is the purpose of this article.

If we consider carefully the sources on which the greater number of medieval agrarian studies are based, it will soon be apparent that for the most part they derive from the second half of the thirteenth century and the first three-quarters of the fourteenth. I say "for the most part," and hasten to add that this statement excludes Domesday Book, some very important twelfth-century estate surveys, and the charters of the Anglo-Saxon and Norman

¹ N. Neilson, *Economic Conditions on the manors of Ramsey Abbey*, Philadelphia, 1899; H. P. R. Finberg, *Tavistock Abbey*, Cambridge, 1951.

periods, all of which have been used a good deal by agrarian historians. Even so, it would be difficult to deny that the centre of gravity of our medieval agrarian documentation lies very definitely somewhere between 1250 and 1350, and that the pattern of rural life which we assume to have been characteristically medieval is only certainly characteristic of the period to which I refer.

Furthermore, to this chronological limitation of our picture of medieval England we should add that the greater number of the documents of this period derive from the estates for the most part of the ecclesiastical nobility and to a lesser extent of the lay nobility. This is also the case with the estate surveys of the twelfth century. The writings of such pioneers in agrarian history as Frederic Seebohm and P. Vinogradoff,¹ in spite of their interest in and skill in interpreting Domesday Book, were much influenced by the vivid insight into the social and economic conditions of peasants which was given by the great monastic cartularies in the Public Record Office and the British Museum, some of which were in their day being published for the first time.

The earlier historians were interested in establishing sound generalizations about medieval agrarian conditions, a very necessary stage in the development of the subject. They tended therefore to give a composite picture of the village, the manor, and the estate, which, while not ignoring regional differences, tended to minimize them. In addition, their model of rural life tended to leave out factors making for change, although it would be untrue to say that they had a static conception of medieval rural life. However they did tend to present a picture of the state of affairs on the medieval manor at two or three points in time without examining at all closely the intermediate processes which made the successive pictures different. This was due to their concentration on the evidence of surveys such as Domesday Book, and the twelfth- and thirteenth-century estate surveys such as those contained in the cartularies of Ramsey or Gloucester Abbey.

An important step forward was made when in addition to the careful analysis of estate surveys and similar material, such as Vinogradoff had used for his work on villeinage, historians began to use a body of material which had already been extensively (rather than intensively) exploited by Thorold Rogers. I refer to the annual accounts submitted by manorial reeves and bailiffs to the estate auditors and to the records of manorial and other private courts which supplemented the accounts in many ways, for example in recording land transactions. This sort of evidence could be used to show the economic organization in movement, and it was very necessary if the history

¹ For example, F. Seebohm, *The English Village Community*, London, 1883; P. Vinogradoff, *Villainage in England*, Oxford, 1892, and *The Growth of the Manor*, London, 1905.

of demesne farming and of the rise and fall of the labour service system was to be written. But this new evidence suffered the same chronological and social limitations as the evidence of surveys. Most of the ministers' accounts and court rolls were derived from large church and secular estates and they are most abundant and informative between about 1250 and 1350.

Consequently there are still considerable gaps in our knowledge. It has been said that we know much about peasants and not enough about landlords. This however is to put the problem too crudely. We certainly know a lot about the labour services and other customary dues owed by peasants on big estates to their lords, and we certainly know too little about lesser landlords whose estate documents (if any) have not survived. But we know much less about the way in which the peasant on the big estate farmed his holding than we do about the way the demesne was organized, and we know practically nothing about the peasants whose landlords were mere knights of the shire or franklins of the village. As for the peasant who had little or no land and whose main resource was the sale of his power to work, our knowledge again is distorted. There is quite a lot of information about the estate labourer whose wages are recorded in the manorial accounts or whose duties are outlined in manorial surveys. But there is practically no obvious evidence for the condition and numbers of the men who worked for wages on the demesnes of lesser lords or on the holdings of wealthier peasants.

Hence, while we may take for granted that the big estates, their owners, and their administrative bureaucracy, would be very influential in determining the tone of rural life wherever they were established, we still need to know more about the geographical extent, social and economic structure, farming practice, and customs of areas where the big estate was not predominant. This knowledge would in turn probably lead to greater emphasis on regional variations of farming practice. For the big estates tended to create homogeneous conditions. The remarkable similarities between surveys and accounts of big estates in different parts of the country are not due only to the use of similar forms by professional surveyors and administrators but to a real similarity of conditions, often the product of a similar historical evolution dating back (in the case of monastic estates) to the tenth century and beyond.

It is only to be expected, in view of comparatively primitive conditions, that the agriculturalists of Anglo-Saxon and early Norman times should not leave many documents behind them. The machinery of the estates, like the machinery of state, together with their documentary by-products, took time to elaborate. But difficult though the reconstruction of early agrarian conditions has been, worthy attempts have been made. On the other hand, the

agrarian history of England between the rising of 1381 and the Dissolution of the Monasteries is much more obscure than it ought to be. The fact seems to be that historians have been nurtured in the manorial documentation of the great estates, and when these sources fail, as a result of the almost universal leasing of manors to farmers, they have found nothing to replace them. Consequently bibliographies of English history of the fifteenth century¹ contain little more than a sprinkling of inadequate and out-of-date material on agrarian conditions. Here, then, is one of the most formidable gaps in our knowledge of English rural life in the past.

The practical farming activities of small landowners and peasants; their relations with the market; the agricultural techniques at their disposal; their employment of labour; and the internal structure of their properties from the tenurial point of view: these are some of the problems that need to be solved in order to add to our much greater knowledge of these features on the big estates. There are other matters as well. We need to know more about crop rotations and the varying relationships between the arable and pastoral sides of medieval farming. A more theoretical analysis than is usually attempted by medievalists of profit and investment on estates of all sizes is needed. This would link up with a much needed assessment of the validity of modern concepts of economic fluctuation in the medieval economy. How profoundly did changes in the market conditions, in the price of commodities and of land, affect agricultural production? To what extent was the level of rent determined by market factors? Answers to these questions would need to be based on a study of economic conditions at national and international levels. And yet the fact that there was undoubtedly a great element of natural economy in even late medieval agriculture should make us realize the great importance of local or regional factors. Probably the most fruitful step beyond the present stage of reliance on the estate as the area of study would be to attempt to define the regional economies of the country, and on this basis to study the distribution of large, medium-sized, and small estates, the variations of social status, the growth of local markets and specialization of production, the changing relationships of social classes. These aspects of rural life are difficult to study in their inter-relationships on a national scale, at any rate until regional studies have laid the basis.²

¹ For example those in the final volume (VIII) of the *Cambridge Medieval History*, Cambridge, 1936.

² Apart from such works as H. J. Hewitt's *Medieval Cheshire*, Manchester, 1929, and G. H. Tupling's *Economic History of Rossendale*, Manchester, 1927 (only in part medieval), published studies of medieval agrarian life on a regional basis are rare. The excellent works of F. M. Stenton and D. C. Douglas mentioned below (p. 11 n. 1) are more concerned with the legal and social than with the economic aspects of rural life in the regions to which they are devoted.

SOURCES FOR THE ANGLO-SAXON PERIOD

The study of the early agrarian history of this country depends to a considerable extent on archaeological evidence, which the present writer is not competent to discuss. It might however be mentioned that this lack of competence is perhaps a reflection of the inadequate use of archaeological methods in medieval historical research in this country. It is true that there is a solid tradition of archaeology for the period of the Anglo-Saxon settlements, and that the excavation of burial sites and to a lesser extent inhabited sites has elucidated the complex chronology of the Anglo-Saxon settlement.¹ However, apart from the study of castles, archaeology has not contributed greatly to our knowledge of later than Saxon times. Yet the agrarian historian cannot afford to ignore what the archaeologists have done. For in addition to the chronology and distribution of prehistoric, Roman, and Saxon settlements, archaeologists have something to say about agrarian technique and field systems. The examination of the material remains of the earliest inhabitants of this country shows what crops were sown, shows the development of tools such as the digging stick, the plough, the sickle, and the quern, as well as what were the principal domesticated animals living with, or eaten by, early man.

Particularly interesting to the medievalist is the investigation of field systems with the aid of air photography. Was the intermixed open-field strip agriculture of medieval England known in Roman times and before? Some pre-historians have led us to believe that there is a correlation between the square "Celtic" fields of the downs and the light plough or *aratrum* of the ancient world; and between the heavy plough or *caruca* and the supposedly Teutonic open fields. But this apparently logical connection has been disturbed by discoveries of plough remains that would by no means fit in with their associated field pattern—according to this theory. And if air photography has made us familiar with the pattern of square plots of Celtic or Romano-British date, it has also revealed the possibility of a pre-Roman strip cultivation.²

¹ The pioneer work on this subject is E. T. Leeds, *Archaeology of the Anglo-Saxon Settlements*, Oxford, 1913. Amongst later contributions may be mentioned Professor S. W. Wooldridge's chapter in *An Historical Geography of England before 1800*, ed. H. C. Darby, Cambridge, 1936.

² A popular summary of the older view is by E. C. Curwen, *Plough and Pasture*, London, 1946. Compare O. G. S. Crawford, *Air Survey and Archaeology*, London, 1928; E. Barger, 'The Present Position of Studies in English Field Systems', *English Historical Review*, LIII, 1938, pp. 385-411; F. G. Payne, 'The Plough in Ancient Britain', *Archaeological Journal*, CIV, 1948, pp. 82-111. For later field systems, see H. L. Gray, *English Field Systems*, Cambridge (U.S.), 1915, and C. S. and C. S. Orwin, *The Open Fields*, Oxford, 1938.

But the first indisputable written evidence of common open fields with intermixed holding appears in the laws of Ine. In general the laws of the Anglo-Saxon kings are very important as evidence in agrarian history, for the simple reason that any legal system governing the conduct of an almost exclusively agrarian society is bound to deal with agricultural matters, however indirectly.¹ Amongst the most important of these laws are those of the sixth century which show the spread of the area of cultivation as a result of the efforts of colonizing nobles, and at the same time the growth already of a dependent peasantry. The evidence of place names supplements this legal evidence. Perhaps the work of linguists on place names, their period of origin, and their significance, has contributed even more than the work of archaeologists to our knowledge of the growth of early occupation.²

The later agrarian history of Anglo-Saxon England is mainly known from the land-books and other documents which testified to grants of land or of rights over land made by kings or other landowners. These are not easy to interpret and vary a good deal in amount of detail. Many of them are important rather from the point of view of constitutional history in that they show the extent to which public rights were granted to private persons. But they also often show in detail what food tributes were payable from peasant holdings to their lords; how land was distributed (references to intermixed strips are frequent in midland documents); what prices and rents were paid for land; and sometimes what labour services were owed by tenants.³ The investigation of land-books also shows the process by which the big estates were built up. The accumulation of land by Benedictine monks, for example, in the Severn valley and in eastern England, in the tenth century, was to give such regions a special imprint which lasted throughout the middle ages.

The other major source for the agrarian history of the Anglo-Saxons is the Domesday survey.⁴ Although this survey was made twenty years after the Norman Conquest, the royal commissioners had to collect information

¹ The Anglo-Saxon Laws are translated into English by F. L. Attenborough, *The Laws of the Earliest English Kings*, Cambridge, 1922, and by A. J. Robertson, *The Laws of the Kings of England from Edmund to Henry I*, Cambridge, 1925.

² See the Introductory and County volumes of the English Place-Name Society.

³ A useful collection of translated landbooks, leases, and other documents is that of A. J. Robertson, *Anglo-Saxon Charters*, Cambridge, 1939.

⁴ Printed in 'record type' and published in four vols., London, 1783-1816. The best texts for the general reader are the translations for each county in appropriate volumes of the *Victoria History of the Counties of England*. A. Ballard's *The Domesday Inquest*, London, 1906, is a good popular survey, but the most outstanding, though more difficult, work on it is by F. W. Maitland, *Domesday Book and Beyond*, Cambridge, 1897.

going back to the period of conquest itself. Furthermore much of the social structure of late Anglo-Saxon England must have survived even the political upheavals of William I's reign, so that, as F. W. Maitland pointed out so effectively, Domesday Book is as much a point from which to look backward as one from which to scan the future. The outstanding feature of the survey is that it covers most of England, using a uniform principle of inquiry, and records indifferently facts about both large and small estates, and about great and humble landlords. William I was interested mainly in two things: the taxable capacity of the country he had taken; and the distribution of landed power. Consequently a lot of questions which an agrarian historian would have liked to put to the local jurors of 1086 were not put by the king's commissioners. Even so, to know the estimated net value of manors in 1066 and 1086; their assessment for taxation; the numbers of persons of various social grades; the number of demesne and tenant plough-teams; the number and value of mills, woods, meadows, and fisheries, is to be in possession of basic information for an understanding of the social and economic life of eleventh-century England.

Even if we admit that the Norman clerks who compiled the survey sprinkled the country with "manors" that did not exist (and we should not exaggerate either their ignorance or their lack of understanding of England), we nevertheless cannot but recognize that by now this was a highly feudalized land with a peasantry well on the way to serfdom. The land-books already suggested this, and the customs of an English estate round about A.D. 1000, known as the *Rectitudines Singularum Personarum*,¹ make it clear that the majority of Domesday Book villeins and smallholders (about 70 per cent of the recorded population) owed labour services and produce rents to the landlords. On the other hand Domesday Book also shows that one manor was not necessarily like another. An analysis of the data shows that while there were manors coincident with the village, containing both lord's demesne and peasant holdings of varying size, there were also little manors, several to a village, consisting of demesne without tenants or tenants without demesne; as well as huge manorial federations enveloping several village and hamlet settlements.

THE TWELFTH CENTURY

Domesday Book looks forward as well as backwards. It is the stepping stone from which we pass to the twelfth-century estate surveys. These careful and detailed documents reflect in general the elaboration and stabilization

¹ Translated in Bland, Brown, and Tawney's *English Economic History, Select Documents*, London, 1937.

of the big estates (for the most part ecclesiastical). The detailed statement of the demesne resources and peasant rents and services which they contain, suggests that already some system of estate accounting was in existence, for a reliable survey in the hands of the administrator is the natural means of checking returns from the local possessions described in the survey. In particular each survey was occasioned by a special situation, such as the taking of the Peterborough Abbey lands into the king's hands in 1125. A number of other surveys may have been made in an attempt to take stock of the situation after the feudal anarchy of Stephen's reign, when many of them suffered serious depredations. On some estates more than one survey was taken during the century, and in these cases slight but significant changes, in the direction of the leasing out of portions of demesne and an increase in the amount of money rent, are to be observed. This tendency is but a faint reflection in England of what had been happening at a catastrophic rate on French, German, and Italian estates since as early as the tenth century.¹

Although there are no private estate accounts before the thirteenth century, the sheriff's accounts enrolled on the Pipe Rolls contain information about the crown estates in the various counties as well as about some estates temporarily in the king's hands. The earliest which survives is that of 1130, the only one for Henry I's reign. In addition to the information they contain (e.g. about the stocking of royal manors), they suggest that such a system of accounts may well have existed on private estates, some of which had exchequers, institutions which presuppose a system of account.²

But the agrarian history of this period would be much less well known than it is, were it not for the existence of large numbers of royal and private charters which attested the transfer of land. Some of these have survived in the original, the majority as copies in estate registers or cartularies. Most of these were compiled by religious landowners, although there are a few lay cartularies. The charter is, of course, useful for many different purposes connected with political and administrative rather than agrarian history. The interpretation of these documents for agrarian history is not easy, but they are nevertheless a very important source. A charter attesting, shall we say, a grant or sale of a dozen acres of land in a village, is a minute fragment

¹ Besides the Peterborough Survey, there are surveys of the Burton, Worcester, Evesham, Ramsey, Durham, Glastonbury, and Templar estates. There is an interesting discussion of this twelfth-century evidence by M. M. Postan, 'The Chronology of Labour Services', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 4th Series, xx, 1937, pp. 169-93. The continental developments are summarized in an article by F. L. Ganshof, *Cambridge Economic History*, I, Cambridge, 1941.

² The Pipe Rolls are being published by the Pipe Roll Society. See A. L. Poole, *From Domesday Book to Magna Carta*, Oxford, 1951, Chapter II, for evidence from this source.

of the total reality of English agricultural life at the time the land was granted. But there are hundreds of these fragments, and if they are read together they often tell us much about the process of disintegration or growth of estates, as well as about agricultural practice. The land itself is often described in detail, each strip of land allotted to a named furlong in the village fields. And so it may be possible to reconstruct the village field system. Sometimes a complete holding is granted, and, in being granted, is described—not only its arable lands, but its meadow and its common rights, including the stinted right of pasture on the commons.

Professor Stenton and Professor Douglas have both shown how it is possible to reconstruct much of the agrarian structure of English regions from charter evidence, even though the practical details of farming practice still remain obscure.¹ But charter evidence is important not only when, as in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, it is the most abundant type of evidence available. It is also a type of evidence which reflects the agrarian economy of peasants and lesser landowners whose activities are otherwise undocumented. For although most charters are known to us from the cartularies of the great landowners, they are often evidences of title going back to times when the owner was not the powerful grantee or purchaser but the humble donor or seller.

THE THIRTEENTH AND FOURTEENTH CENTURIES

The materials for agrarian history become very abundant in the thirteenth century, and if hitherto we have been obliged to omit minor sources, we shall be obliged to do so to an even greater extent from now onwards. It has been emphasized above that the outstanding feature of our evidence in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries is that it is to a great extent the by-product of the activity of the baronial estate. Unlike their continental opposite numbers, the English bishops, abbots, and barons in this period had maintained more or less intact the traditional structure of their estates and still cultivated, in many of their manors, an extensive demesne farm, part of whose product they may have consumed directly, but much of which they sold on the market. Their need for a money income also expressed itself in a general increase of money rents and labour rents alike. The general tightening up of the organization of the estate brought about an elaboration of the system of financial checks and controls. This is shown in the careful auditing

¹ See F. M. Stenton, *Documents Illustrative of the Social and Economic History of the Danelaw*, London, 1920, Introduction, for a demonstration of the use of charter evidence. Also the same author's *Types of Manorial Structure in the Northern Danelaw*, Oxford, 1910, and D. C. Douglas, *The Social Structure of Medieval East Anglia*, Oxford, 1927.

of the accounts of all types of officials. It is also shown in the careful keeping of court records, for manorial justice, apart from keeping tenants in order, was a considerable source of financial profit.

The historian of the thirteenth-century estate, therefore, in addition to charters and descriptive surveys which were already available for the twelfth century, has manorial bailiffs' accounts, accounts of other officials (from General Receivers to shepherds and dairymaids), and records of manorial and central estate courts. The accounts show money income and expenditure: rents, sales of produce, money from commuted labour services, wage payments, purchase of seed, stock, and equipment, building expenses. They also often show in detail the receipts and outgoings of grain and live-stock, usually accounted for on the back of the parchment roll containing the money account. Some bailiffs even tell us in detail how much and what kind of seed was sown on each named portion of demesne, and this enables us to calculate yields when we have the next year's accounts to tell us what the harvest was. Another consequence of this more stringent estate organization was not only that a class of professional bailiffs began to appear, but that bailiffs and landlords generalized their experience and wrote treatises on estate management, the most famous being that of Walter of Henley, not superseded until Fitzherbert wrote his *Boke of Husbandry* in the sixteenth century.¹

We are often told that the records of disputes in law courts only reflect the exceptional and the pathological aspects of society. This view can hardly be accepted, especially for the middle ages, when private courts combined administrative, arbitrational, and punitive functions, and when all men were likely to be suitors by compulsion at some court or other. Hence the manor court records tell us more than most other records about the day-to-day life of the village: local breaches of the peace, peasant resistance to the performance of labour services, and the like. In addition all surrenders and re-issues of land were recorded. This tells us about official changes in the occupancy of peasant land. Since peasants usually also ran an unofficial land market among themselves and often got fined for it, the court rolls also con-

¹ The outstanding work on estate administration is N. Denholm-Young, *Seignorial Administration in England*, Oxford, 1937. Walter of Henley's *Husbandry* and analogous treatises are edited by E. Lamond, London, 1890. There are many good histories of individual estates, of which only a few need be mentioned: F. M. Page, *The Estates of Crowland Abbey*, Cambridge, 1934; R. A. L. Smith, *Canterbury Cathedral Priory*, Cambridge, 1943; M. Morgan, *The English Lands of the Abbey of Bec*, Oxford, 1946. A useful study of the documentary evidence for the big estate is by H. W. Saunders, *An Introduction to the Rolls of Norwich Cathedral Priory*, Norwich, 1930.

tain a reflection of this unofficial activity.¹ But other court records besides those of the manor and estate contain evidence of importance for agrarian history. The royal courts, especially those held by the justices of King's Bench and Common Pleas, contain innumerable cases of significance. Disputes about ownership and tenure are abundant, but usually not very informative as far as agricultural practice is concerned. Disputes between freemen and manorial lords about common rights, and between peasants and lords about increased rents and villein status are often much more revealing. Here again, the records of the public courts, though containing less intimate detail than those of private estates, record indifferently the litigation of social groups whose affairs would otherwise be unrecorded.²

Similarly the elaborate royal survey known as the *Rotuli Hundredorum* tells us about landowners and occupiers who otherwise would leave behind no record. The Hundred Rolls of 1274 give answers by local juries about local encroachments on royal rights and contain only scanty references to agrarian matters. But the returns of 1279 for the counties of Cambridge, Bedford, Huntingdon, Buckingham, Oxford, Warwick, and Leicester are in fact a fragment of what must have been intended as an elaborate survey of all landholders great and small, from bishops and earls to petty smallholding sub-tenants. Such as they are, these fragmentary returns give a very different picture of midland England from that which would be assumed from the study of the great estates alone. Not only does it show the estates of the smaller landowners, consisting often of demesne worked by wage labour with few, if any, dependent tenants. It also shows what a great development of sub-leases there was amongst the peasants. It suggests to us that the regular and comparatively equal holdings described in the estate surveys could not have reflected agricultural reality. Some tenants of a yardland of say twenty-five acres might have been sub-letting more than half of their official holding to other tenants, and at the same time taking on lease land which from the point of view of the manorial officials should have been occupied by some one else. In this way scattered holdings could be consolidated, poor peasants could get rid of land in order to earn their living

¹ G. C. Homans, *English Villagers of the Thirteenth Century*, Cambridge, (U.S.), 1942; and A. E. Levett, *Studies in Manorial History*, Oxford, 1938, especially those sections devoted to the St Albans estates, are based to a considerable extent on manor court records. See also F. W. Maitland, *Select Pleas in Manorial Courts*, London, 1889.

² Few assize rolls are published, but there are interesting extracts in the *Placitorum Abbreviatio*, London, 1811. Cf. R. H. Hilton, 'Peasant Movements in England before 1381', in *Economic History Review*, 2nd Series II, ii, 1949, pp. 117-36.

mainly by wages, and wealthy peasants could accumulate holdings which would bring them economically to the level of many a small squire.¹

The evidence of charters, royal court records, and royal enquiries is essential in order to redress the balance against the large, and for the most part ecclesiastical, estates, which have left such an abundance of private records. Here another public source should be mentioned, the *inquisitiones post mortem*. These enquiries were made into the estates of all persons holding land in chief from the crown, as questions of escheat, wardship, or marriage might arise. When detailed surveys were made, they were on the same model as private surveys: descriptions of demesne resources and peasant rents and tenures. In many cases the local juries gave information and the escheators sent in returns to Chancery and Exchequer which minimized the income and resources of the estate. Hence they are not as reliable as private surveys. But they often include surveys of the lands of quite humble tenants in chief, and thus supplement our knowledge of the holdings of smaller landlords.² As they cover all counties we may also, through them, get to know a good deal about areas where there is a dearth of estate material. They have been used, sometimes too uncritically, in order to estimate the relative progress of the commutation of labour services in different parts of the country in the fourteenth century. More reliable, however, for this purpose are the manorial accounts, which show not only the progress of permanent commutation of peasant labour services for money rent, but the fluctuating annual releases of service for money payment according to the varying labour requirements of the demesne.

THE LATE FOURTEENTH AND FIFTEENTH CENTURIES

The commutation of peasant labour services has for a long time been the outstanding subject of discussion among agrarian historians of the later middle ages.³ It must remain one of the central issues of the agrarian history of the period. For it involved more than a change in the character of peasant

¹ For the 1274 Hundred Rolls see H. M. Cam, *Studies in the Hundred Rolls*, Oxford, 1921; and for the 1279 Hundred Rolls see E. A. Kosminsky, 'The Hundred Rolls of 1279-80 as a source for English Agrarian History', *Economic History Review*, III, 1931, pp. 16-44. E. A. Kosminsky's *Studies in English Agrarian History in the Thirteenth Century*, which contains a fuller analysis of the Hundred Rolls, will appear in an English edition this year.

² The Worcestershire Historical Society has published thirteenth- and fourteenth-century inquisitions post mortem which include surveys of the possessions of small landowners: *Worcestershire Inquisitions Post Mortem*, Oxford, 1894 and 1909.

³ See E. Lipson, *The Economic History of England*, I, London, 1937, Chapter III. This work also includes a very full bibliography. See also M. M. Postan, *art. cit.*, and A. E. Levett, *The Black Death on the Estates of the See of Winchester*, Oxford, 1916.

obligations to the landlord. It was part of the process of withdrawal by the bigger landlords from agricultural practice. It involved the relaxation of disciplinary pressure by the lords and their bailiffs over the village community. This freed forces which were already making themselves felt. Most important was the social stratification of the peasants under conditions of competitive production for the market. England, from the point of view of agricultural practice, was becoming a land of peasant occupiers of varying economic status, many of whom, whatever the legal character of their tenure, enjoyed for a time the security of proprietors. What was the consequence of this release of peasant energy, once devoted directly or indirectly to the lord and his demesne, and now, through commutation and comparatively low rents, applicable to the peasant holding? Can we now discover as much about the agricultural practice of the peasant and the demesne lessee as we know about the practice of the estate in its palmy days? Did these developments mean that large-scale planned management gave way to backward peasant methods in agriculture? Or is the conception of the progressive character of large-scale estate management in the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries an illusion based on modern assumptions that the big unit is necessarily the most efficient? Did improvements in peasant farming more than make up for any loss of efficiency when the central direction of demesne farming was abandoned? Was there in fact any appreciable decline in the size of the unit of production when rich peasants and lessees assumed responsibility for the supply of the market? Finally, what were the available supplies of labour for peasant farming? If (and this is disputed by some historians)¹ there was a relative increase in the employment of wage labour, was not the productivity of this labour likely to be greater than the semi-free and servile labour used on the baronial estate?

It is because the active producers (that is, the peasants, and particularly the demesne lessees), did not for the most part keep records that we are so ignorant of agriculture in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Estate records are of course by no means useless. Bailiffs by this time are often very little more than rent-collectors and in many cases they account for a fixed rent charge which changes very little over a century. However, this is not invariably the case. Some accounts give details of rents received as well as of "Decay of Rents" (that is amounts of rent which either cannot be collected or whose loss has been accepted by the estate administration). These details may include something about the forms of tenure. Accounts also sometimes give the terms on which the lessee or lessees hold various portions of the

¹ M. M. Postan, 'Some Economic Evidence of Declining Population in the Later Middle Ages', *Economic History Review*, 2nd Series, II, iii, 1950, pp. 221-46.

demesne.¹ Other estate materials also give information about holdings, rents, and tenures. Rentals and surveys often reflect more accurately the actual agricultural holdings of fifteenth-century tenants than they did in the thirteenth century, for the simple reason that the peasant land market becomes legalized and lords of manors no longer need to insist on the integrity of the traditional holding as they did when it was responsible for a given quota of services. Such surveys show the fragmentation and reconstitution of holdings and the accumulation in fewer hands of considerable quantities of land, one rich peasant often holding by a variety of tenures, free, customary, and leasehold.² Other estate records which are still valuable for fifteenth-century agrarian history include the records of manorial courts, important especially for the registration of land transfers, and cartularies or registers which often contain details of the leases by which lessees held demesne arable, meadow, woodland, and livestock.

But if estate records continue to be important, it is in so far as one can draw inferences about the activities of the producers. They contain practically no direct evidence about agricultural practice as they did when the lord had the demesne in hand. Even the middling-sized landlords seem to have been dependent on rent rather than production for their income. The Pastons, the Stonors, and the Plumpton who have left such a lively record of their activities in their private correspondence, only very occasionally refer to farming practice.³ It is clear from the Paston correspondence that they and other East Anglian gentlemen (like Sir John Fastolf) were supplying the London and perhaps even the continental market with barley, malt, and other grains. They are constantly preoccupied with fluctuations in grain prices, just as they are equally preoccupied with the difficulties of keeping rents up. But there is little indication that they actually grew the bulk of the grain which they sold. References to "farm barley" suggest that much of it must have been produce rent from lessees. Nor was Fastolf any more active as an agriculturalist in Wiltshire on the Scrope manor of Castle Combe which he was managing.⁴ He had let out all the demesne resources and probably got most of his profits from acting as a middleman between the Castle Combe clothiers (some of whom were also servile tenants of agricultural holdings) and the London and foreign market.

¹ The value of fifteenth-century estate accounts is discussed in the introduction to *Ministers' Accounts of the Warwickshire Estates of the Duke of Clarence* by R. H. Hilton, Oxford, 1952.

² An example of a fifteenth-century survey will be found in the publications of the Thoresby Society for 1915-18 (Leeds and Rothwell). It is translated into English.

³ *The Paston Letters*, ed. J. Gairdner, London, 1895; *The Stonor Letters and Papers*, ed. C. L. Kingsford, London, 1919; *The Plumpton Correspondence*, London, 1839.

⁴ G. Poulett Scrope, *Manor and Barony of Castle Combe*, London, 1852.

Legal records contain some of the best evidence about trends in agricultural production in the later middle ages. The records of courts of equitable jurisdiction, including petitions and counter-petitions of plaintiffs and defendants, have long been known as sources for fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century social history. Chancery, Star Chamber, and the Court of Requests all dealt with disputes which had an agrarian basis.¹ It is from these that we derive a lot of our knowledge about the enclosure for sheep pasture which was not only a cause of social discontent but also an important technical development in the period. Most of the evidence known relates to the later part of the fifteenth century and afterwards, but the assize rolls which record pleas in the principal courts of common law should not be ignored. These are such voluminous records that they might well daunt the investigator, but such county records as have been published suggest that enclosure disputes may have been a major feature of rural conflict at the beginning of the fifteenth century if not earlier.² It is from the Star Chamber and Court of Requests records, however, that we get most of our evidence about what we may regard as the landlords' counter-attack on the peasants, after the brief period of peasant gain in the century after 1381. I refer to the attempts to undermine the security of copyhold, that is, customary tenure.³

Of course, not all sections of the peasants fared equally well during the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. We know something about the rich peasant lessees but we know less about those with smaller holdings, or with none. The figures suggest that those for whom wages constituted the principal source of income lost little of the improvement they had gained after the plagues and the social discontent which culminated in the rising of 1381. Subsistence farmers working fifteen to twenty acres may have gained less than the well-off lessees, or than the workers these bigger men employed. The difficulty is that we are not sure of the relative numbers of these groups.

¹ Chancery, Star Chamber, and Court of Requests evidence has most recently been discussed by Maurice Beresford, *The Lost Villages of England*, London, 1954. See also I. S. Leadam, 'The Inquisitions of 1517', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, n.s., vi., 1892, pp. 167-314. The Selden Society has published Select Cases from Chancery, Star Chamber, and Court of Requests proceedings, and a number of local record societies have also published Star Chamber proceedings relevant to their county.

² Cases are printed by G. Farnham, *Leicestershire Medieval Village Notes* I-VI, Leicester, 1929-33, and by G. Wrottesley in *Historical Collections for Staffordshire*, vol. xvii, 1896, pp. 1-153, and New Series, vols. III, 1900, pp. 121-299; IV, 1901, pp. 93-212; VI (i), 1903, pp. 89-164.

³ Cf. I. S. Leadam, 'Security of Copyholders', *English Historical Review*, viii, 1893, pp. 684-96, and A. Savine 'Copyhold Cases in the Early Chancery Proceedings', *ibid.* xvii, 1902, pp. 296-313, and 'English Customary Tenure,' *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, xix, 1905, pp. 33-80.

There would be little room for wage labour when peasants farmed comparatively equal holdings for subsistence; but with big farms producing for the market, and great inequality of holdings, the need for such labour would be considerable. The fact is that there were probably great variations from region to region and even from village to village. The Suffolk Poll Tax returns of 1381, which give the occupations of those taxed, suggest a very large number of wage workers both in agriculture and in rural industry over the whole region. Other returns, such as those from Staffordshire and Leicestershire, show considerable variation in social structure within comparatively small regions. These are the most interesting tax returns, because they designate occupations. Other returns, of which there are a fair number from the thirteenth to the sixteenth centuries, are useful mainly because they record comparative populations of villages and the relative taxable capacity of individuals. Conclusions on both these topics have to be made with considerable reservations.¹

OTHER SOURCES

This survey of the principal sources of English medieval agrarian history has omitted many which readers may reckon to be of more importance than those considered. For instance, one could undoubtedly lay great stress, for the whole period, on literary evidence. Anglo-Saxon literature contains references to agrarian practices, social relations, food-grains, and so on. The monastic chronicles at all dates show a greater or lesser concern with the history of the monastic estate, and in some cases this far outweighs the chronicler's concern with ecclesiastical or political affairs. Middle English poetry and prose, whether touching directly on social or political matters or not, reveals, by many a direct description and many an image, facets of rural life which would not reach us through the unimaginative administrative records. One has only to think of the social criticism of the great fourteenth-century preachers,² of poets like Langland with his sharply satirical remarks about all social classes, including the rural wage labourers, employees, one imagines, of middling peasants like Piers Plowman. Then again, I have not dealt with the body of ecclesiastical evidence in its narrow sense, that which was the by-product of the church in its spiritual functions. There are many matters of agrarian interest scattered throughout the bishops' registers, such

¹ Suffolk Poll Tax returns are printed by E. Powell, *The Rising in East Anglia*, Cambridge, 1896, Leicestershire returns in G. Farnham, *op. cit.*, Staffordshire returns in *Historical Collections for Staffordshire*, xvii, 1896, pp. 155-206. See R. H. Hilton, 'Medieval Agrarian History' in *Victoria County History of Leicestershire*, II, London, 1954, p. 187.

² See G. W. Owst, *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England*, Cambridge, 1933.

as the bishop of Worcester's excommunication of rival shepherds on top of Bredon Hill where he kept his flocks.¹ In the records of the religious houses, settlements between the appropriating house and its vicars with regard to the division of the parochial tithes often yield information about village field systems. And where we have information about total receipts of tithe grain in a parish, there we have information about the proportions of crops sown by peasants as well as by lords.

But the fact is that medieval England was so closely bound to the tilling of the soil and the grazing of flocks that one can hardly read any writing or look at any work of art of the period without coming across some evidence, great or small, of rural life. It is almost impossible to study medieval agriculture without studying the whole of medieval life.

¹ *Register of Walter Reynolds*, Worcestershire Historical Society, London, 1927, p. 40. Many local societies have published bishops' registers.

Notes and Comments

SALE OF THE BEAUMONT COLLECTION

Last November, at an auction sale held in Holborn, twenty-two Lordships of Manors in Essex, Norfolk, and Suffolk were disposed of for just under £10,000. They were part of a collection begun during the last century by Joseph Beaumont, an Essex solicitor, and continued, after his death in 1889, by his son. In addition to those auctioned another twenty-six were offered for sale by private treaty.

The lots sold at an average price of £440, a figure which was to some extent accounted for by the manorial records which went with each lot. The price, indeed, might have been higher if the Master of the Rolls had not made it quite clear that he could not permit any of the records to go out of the country. This announcement, made by the auctioneers, was greeted with restrained applause from the four hundred people present.

It is doubtful if many people in the room had a very clear idea of what was for sale. Many of the titles carried with them rights, rights of common or waste, rights of turbary or minerals, and occasionally the right to let grazing. A few were in fact at the time of the

sale revenue-producing as the result of way-leave agreements with electric companies or water boards. Some of the bidders were quite clearly anxious to obtain the documents, but a high proportion were obviously bent on purchasing a title and, at that, a title which they would never use, at any rate in public. At least one purchaser was prepared to pay a very considerable sum to obtain a lordship because his brother owned one already and he was anxious not to be outdone. Another, from his questions to the auctioneer, was clearly under the impression that he had purchased an area of land.

The archivists of at least two of the counties involved in the sale made public offers to take into custody any of the records purchased and to provide the purchaser with a transcript free of charge. This was a wise step for it is most important that such manorial documents (many of the lots were extremely complete and some dated back to the fourteenth century) should find a safe resting place where they may be consulted by scholars.

It was certainly an interesting occasion and

(continued on page 25)