

Review Article: Fields, Farms, and Families: Agrarian History in Kent¹

By ALAN EVERITT

KENT has been both fortunate and unfortunate in its historians. In Hasted it produced one of the finest of the older county histories. In the nineteenth century it produced more than its fair share of regional and parish histories, a number of them works of real scholarship like John Furley's *History of the Weald of Kent* (1871), and many by no means to be despised, though we should now regard them as antiquarian in tone. In the more modern development of local agrarian history, however, its performance cannot be described as more than average. True, it has produced a few seminal studies, amongst them the work of R. A. L. Smith, F. R. H. Du Boulay, and Alan Baker, the last two of whom are represented in this volume. But considering the importance of its agrarian and settlement history, from both a local and a national standpoint, Kent has not produced much published work of the same kind and class as that of W. G. Hoskins and the Victoria County History for Leicestershire, or that of Margaret Spufford, J. R. Ravensdale, and the V.C.H. for Cambridgeshire, though both these counties are much smaller than Kent and less well endowed archivally. The Records Branch of the Archaeological Society has produced some useful volumes; but it is not in the same street as the Northamptonshire Record Society or some of the North Country societies. The V.C.H. never got as far as the first topographical volume and in its general articles typically devoted three times as much space to sport as to agriculture. The Historical Monuments Commission has never turned its attention to the county—astonishingly, since it has more surviving medieval and sub-medieval buildings, including farm buildings, than any other county in England. (How one envies west Cambridgeshire its wonderful

H.M.C. volume!) Much of the work in vernacular architecture that has been done locally is of first-rate quality, it is true, particularly that of S. E. Rigold, whose important article 'Some Major Kentish Timber Barns' (*Archaeologia Cantiana*, LXXXI, 1966) would have been a welcome addition to the volume under review. But there is no general survey of Kentish vernacular buildings to compare with, say, those of Monmouthshire and Cambridgeshire. Although at the amateur level, moreover, there is a widespread interest in local history in Kent—it has more local history societies than any county but Lancashire, nearly sixty in all—much of this interest is channelled in the direction of archaeology rather than the historical reconstruction of Kentish society. The unfortunate recent demise of the local historical journal *Cantium*, and the overwhelming bias of *Archaeologia Cantiana* itself over the past fifty years, both serve to underline this fact. One does not wish to tilt at archaeology, still less at *Archaeologia Cantiana*, which amongst county journals has maintained unusually high standards of scholarship. But one does hope very much that the volume under review, by ranging over a wide variety of subjects directly or indirectly related to agrarian history, will stimulate further work.

There is any amount to be done, and perhaps we have not much excuse for not doing it. This is not the place for a discourse on archival sources in Kent; but it may be said at once that few areas have better archive offices, and there are not many with larger collections of the basic records of agrarian history. Wills and probate inventories, family archives and estate papers, maps and plans of farms and estates, medieval and early modern ecclesiastical archives, the records of small

¹ Margaret Roake and John Whyman (eds.), *Essays in Kentish History*. Cass, 1973. x + 301 pp. £4.75.

boroughs and market towns, Anglo-Saxon charters, the evidence of place-names, of farm buildings, and of the landscape itself: all of these are exceptionally abundant in Kent, as one quickly discovers in turning to other areas. Something of the wealth of the records of Christ Church, Canterbury, comes to light in three essays in this volume, by Miss Smith, Dr Baker, and Professor Du Boulay. Something of the wealth of local estate material has been shown elsewhere by one of the editors, Miss Roake, in her thesis on the Smith-Masters family of Camer: a family that was highly typical of those many new minor gentry who were rising to local prominence in the eighteenth century, and whose history in most parts of England is almost a complete blank.

For these reasons this volume is a particularly welcome one. The editors have had the useful idea of reprinting a series of twenty-three articles from the pages of *Archaeologia Cantiana*. They have prefaced it with a brief introduction in which they say that "in making their choice [they] have sought to offer a reasonably balanced picture of the social and economic scene from the Middle Ages to the nineteenth century." In this they have succeeded and deserve our gratitude. Ten of the articles relate to the period before about 1735 and twelve to more recent times. A useful article on Kentish historiography by Dr Felix Hull, the county archivist, is also included. *Archaeologia Cantiana* was first published in 1859, and since then it has produced eighty-eight volumes; but none of the articles here reprinted dates from before 1917, a fact that "is explained by the changing nature of historical research and the current interests of economic and social historians." The editors also tell us that they have in mind a further volume of essays, based on current research in the economic and social history of Kent. This will be doubly welcome, and no one is better qualified to produce it than the members of the economic history department at Canterbury, with its vigorous interest in the past of the county.

All the essays are worth reprinting except that by W. K. Jordan. This is not actually an article but an extract from the introductory pages of his volume *Social Institutions in Kent, 1480-1660*. Probably nothing very useful can

be said about such a subject in three and a half pages, and in any case Jordan's account is not based on original research and contains several misleading statements. It is ironical that his description of Kent as one of the most urban of English counties (pp. 87-8) is followed on the very next page by Christopher Chalklin's comment—possibly a little exaggerated but surely nearer the truth—that the atmosphere of these Kentish towns "can hardly have differed from that of the surrounding countryside."

The remaining articles are naturally of varying quality and interest to agricultural historians but they include several seminal studies. Probably the most important is Alan Baker's on 'Some Fields and Farms in Medieval Kent', an article which is of wider significance than its modest title implies, and which is basic to the study of early Kentish settlement as well as medieval agriculture and society. It is a pity that Dr Baker's scattered articles on Kentish fields and field systems, all of them important, have never been brought together within a single book.

Ann Smith's article on 'Regional Differences in Crop Production in Medieval Kent' is also important, particularly for its massive statistical analysis of the Beadles' Rolls of Canterbury Cathedral Priory. It is unfortunate that it is marred in places by confusing statements, and by an obscure and occasionally slovenly style. "Beans was chiefly a garden crop" (p. 44) and "a strata within the major formation" (p. 49) are amongst its grammatical infelicities. Three manors near Ashford are described as on the "western Lower Greensand," whilst four between Maidstone and Tonbridge, twenty miles further west, are said to be on the "eastern Lower Greensand" (p. 41). The author places Appledore in Romney Marsh and is then surprised (p. 41) at the extent of its wheat and barley land in view of the "ill-drained nature of the reclaimed marshland." But was this cornland in fact in the marsh at all? The settlement and much of the parish lie on the upland above the marsh. Some elucidation is surely necessary also of two apparently contradictory statements on page 43. The implication that barley was relatively unimportant on the Lower Greensand is followed in the next paragraph by the

statement that acreages of oats were small on these lighter soils, to which the more profitable grains of wheat and barley were more suited. The author is in fact up against a difficult problem in Kent in endeavouring to relate whole manors to a single soil type, when in fact there are often marked differences in drift geology within a single manor. Nevertheless, her article remains a basic one for the historian of medieval agriculture. So too does Professor Du Boulay's brief essay on 'Late-Continued Domesne Farming in Otford'. Like Miss Smith's, this is based on the records of Canterbury Cathedral Priory, but its scope is more limited and relates to a single manor in the fifteenth century.

Another important study is R. E. Glasscock's 'Distribution of Lay Wealth in Kent, Surrey, and Sussex in the early Fourteenth Century'. This is of course based on the Lay Subsidy of 1334, which also forms the basis of Dr Glasscock's chapter on 'England, circa 1334' in Professor H. C. Darby's *New Historical Geography of England* (1973). The latter study throws up such a number of apparent oddities in the 1334 assessments that in moments of depression one is inclined to doubt the validity of all taxation records as indices of wealth. In Northamptonshire, for example, we find Castor assessed more highly than Northampton, whilst in Norfolk Walpole and Wiggenshall were more highly rated than King's Lynn. But Dr Glasscock's more detailed study of Kent, Surrey, and Sussex suggests that we should not take too gloomy a view of such anomalies. Broadly speaking the distribution pattern of wealth in Kent in 1334 is confirmed by other lines of argument. Its most important characteristic was the relative poverty of the Weald and most of west Kent and the striking concentration of wealth in the east of the county. This characteristic does not come as a surprise to anyone who has worked on the early history of the county: it was simply a continuation of an age-old pattern, in which the east was always the dominant area. It forms a suggestive contrast, however, with the situation in the seventeenth century, when the Weald was one of the most populous rural areas of the county, though west Kent, outside the immediate vicinity of London, was

still poorer than the east. Was the economic rise of the Weald in the late medieval period due entirely to its industrial development as a clothing and iron-working area, as is often suggested, or were there also, perhaps, more general and agrarian factors at work? There is a great field for research by agricultural historians in this region and period.

Of the remaining articles probably the most important for readers of this journal is David Harvey's 'Fruit Growing in Kent in the Nineteenth Century.' In eleven concise pages of text and two of maps Dr Harvey has concentrated a wealth of detailed information without allowing the detail to obscure his general theme. This is not the complete history of fruit farming in Kent, even in the nineteenth century; but as well as providing the outlines of the story it points up many underlying characteristics that call for further investigation. Contrary to popular belief, in most of the 400 rural parishes of Kent fruit-growing has never been important. The maps show that even at the end of the nineteenth century, when it was more extensive than ever before, there were only two or three limited areas, near Faversham and in the middle reaches of the Medway Valley, where orchards covered more than 20 per cent of the land. In at least three-quarters of the county they accounted for less than 3 per cent of the acreage.

Nevertheless, in terms of profitability, the cultivation of fruit has long been a basic feature of the economy of Kent. One of the principal factors in its rapid expansion in the latter half of the nineteenth century was undoubtedly the building of railways after 1840. It is hardly too much to say that two of the five fruit-growing districts of the county were virtually created by this means: the Wealden area around Brenchley and the soft-fruit-growing district of north-west Kent around Swanley. For both these regions the railways not only created a market by linking them with London but also supplied the means of wealth. For Victorian London, with its hundreds of thousands of horses, provided the manure that converted their relatively infertile farmland, which in the Swanley area included thousands of acres of uncolonized heath and scrub, into the fabled garden of England.

It is one of the merits of Dr Harvey's article that it highlights the remarkable regional differences between the various fruit-growing districts of the county. East Kent, mid-Kent, north Kent, north-west Kent, and the Weald all developed their own specialized branches of fruit farming, and possessed a distinct character of their own. The author himself points out the marked tenurial differences between these regions, and reading between the lines one senses that differences of social structure, farming organization, and land-ownership, as well as the more obvious factors of soil-type, climatology, and transport differentials, also underlay these distinctions. In the differing character of these regions, which at first sight seem so similar, there is in fact a splendid field for sociological research of the kind David Jenkins developed in *The Agricultural Community in South-West Wales at the Turn of the Twentieth Century* (1971). The north-west Kent area, for example, with its vast commercial farms of 500-1,000 acres (p. 223) was completely different in character from the traditional land of cherry orchards between Newington and Boughton-under-Blean.

It was in this latter countryside, forty or fifty miles from London, that fruit-growing had first been established in Kent in the sixteenth century, and in the nineteenth it still owed much of its character to these distant origins. Although, after a chequered history, it now turned to the growing of small fruit as well as cherries and hops, most of the farmers were still smallholders and many of them owner-occupiers (p. 224). It was not an area of great capitalist farmers like north-west Kent, where by 1900 the Wood family farmed 2,000 acres of fruit alone. Like the east Kent area, it was pre-eminently the home of the old farming dynasties of the shire, many of whom were intensely localized and inbred, and had farmed in this area for centuries. The great annual fruit auctions at which the crop was still sold "off the tree" went back to the sixteenth or seventeenth century, when the London fruiterers, who were often kinsmen of the farmers themselves, came down in the spring or at "cherryty

time" to purchase the prospective harvest. In the late nineteenth century the area still remained a genuine natural *pays*, limited by Chatham and Rochester at one end and Blean Forest at the other. The re-creation of its farming life and social structure would certainly provide a fascinating field of research.

The publication of this volume prompts a number of general reflections on the state of historical studies in Kent which it would be inappropriate to enlarge on further in this journal. It is pertinent, however, to point out that several of the articles in this volume are unduly compressed. Fourteen cover fewer than twelve pages each, and only four cover more than fifteen. These figures include illustrations and tables, moreover, so that the text itself is in most cases even shorter than the pagination suggests. Dr Glasscock's major article on the wealth of three counties in 1334, for example, a complex subject if ever there was one, extends to just over eight pages and comprises fewer than 3,000 words. For this excessive brevity the editors of this volume are of course in no way responsible, and one suspects that the authors themselves would sometimes have welcomed more space to develop their ideas. Not that all historical articles need be lengthy. There is a place for short accounts like Elizabeth Melling's useful little note (pp. 249-53) on the important *corpus* of business records relating to insolvent debtors, now in the Kent Archives Office. But it is next to impossible to develop any serious historical theme adequately in an article of fewer than 3,000 words, if that article is based, as many of these rightly are, on extensive new research. It is significant that the most thoughtful and far-ranging article in this volume, Alan Baker's, is one of the two longest and extends to twenty-five pages with a text of 6,500 words. The only other article of comparable length was published nearly sixty years ago—in 1917. In recent numbers of *Archaeologia Cantiana* one is glad to note a number of more substantial historical articles, such as Dr Roger Kain's on 'The Tithe Commutation Surveys' in the 1974 volume. It is to be hoped that this is a good sign for the future.