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Image above: detail from Landscape with Plague Suffering Figures, Jan Luyken, 1691

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Our **pestilential** past

John Broad discusses epidemics in the early modern countryside

The plague in London, 17th century. Wellcome Collection.

The current coronavirus pandemic is a once-in-a-lifetime phenomenon. There have been several new virus outbreaks world-wide since the 'Spanish 'flu' of 1919–20, particularly the 'flu pandemics of 1957 and 1968, but none has caused the same disruption as Covid-19, even though mortality may have been as great.

In 1919, the 'flu hit a Europe exhausted by the First World War and occurred in an era of limited nutritional understanding, when wartime food deprivation had seriously undermined civilian health. Governmental reactions to the current pandemic, persuaded by modern medical expertise, have initiated a significantly greater intervention to stem the disease, though its 'natural' case fatality rate is probably lower – somewhere around 0.7 per cent – than that of many earlier pandemics.

Spotting the symptoms

Before 1800, most epidemic outbreaks had insufficiently distinctive symptoms to be categorized. There are three exceptions. Bubonic plague produced distinctive swellings and most outbreaks were quickly recognised as such. The Black Death of 1348–50 swept across Europe, with a mortality rate between 35–50 per cent – far higher than any continent-wide pandemic since. It inaugurated a period of 150 years of recurrent outbreaks that prevented any sustained recovery of population in England until the 1520s. In the early modern period, plague epidemics swept across Europe, but their impact was generally localised. Measles, with its symptoms of fever and rash, had been identified and described in the ninth century; it was growing more lethal through the early modern era to the nineteenth century. Smallpox was recognized and distinctive in its symptoms, with hard round pustules appearing on the skin of sufferers. It tended to be endemic, with localised rather than national epidemics. People feared it for its disfiguring after-effects, at least as much as for its high mortality rates.

Tudor fevers

It was only after 1750 that doctors began to systematically identify and study influenza-type illnesses. Before that they were rarely noted, and the peaks in burials, and associated changes in baptisms

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and marriages – described in Wrigley and Schofield's *The Population History of England 1541-1571* as 'mortality crises' – had multiple possible causes, including food shortages. English famine mortality is now considered to have disappeared after the early seventeenth century, the last example localised to Lancashire in the 1620s. Wrigley and Schofield identified only two major mortality crises between 1541 and 1871 that significantly reduced England's population, and both were caused by 'flu epidemics. One in 1556–59 killed approximately five to ten per cent of the English population. Strype described it from contemporary documents as *'the like whereof had never been known before, both for the lasting and mortality of them: which being hot burning fevers, and other strange diseases, began in the great dearth 1556, and increased more and more the two following years. In the summer 1557, they raged horribly throughout the realm, and killed an exceeding great number of all sorts of men, but especially gentlemen, and men of great wealth. So many husbandmen and labourers also died, and were sick, that in harvest time, in divers places, men would have given one acre of corn to reap and carry in another. In some places corn stood and shed on the ground for lack of workmen. In the latter end of the year, quartan agues were so common among men, women, and young children also, that few houses escaped: … In 1558 …, the same fevers raged again in such manner, as never plague or pestilence, I think, saith my author, killed a greater number. If the people of the realm had been divided into four parts, certainly three parts of those four should have been found sick'*. J. Strype, *Ecclesiastical Memorials*, (Oxford, 1822), I, pp. 616

Outbreaks in Buckinghamshire

The 'flu epidemics of 1727–30 saw a 4 per cent reduction in population but left almost no records in political and social documents so that, until recently, some historians considered the deaths to have arisen from a famine, a 'subsistence crisis'. The eighteenth-century weather observer, John Rutty, was keen to link disease outbreaks to seasonality or weather patterns. For him 1727–30 was not exceptional, but it was 'very mortal in the country places, but less in the cities.' It was severe in London in 1729, where 'more died in that city in such space of time since the year 1665' – the year of the Great Plague. Government took no action equivalent to the prohibitions on movement and enforced home confinement that accompanied plague outbreaks. In Wrigley and Schofield's sample, increased mortality was greatest in the Midlands, but Jon Healey has recently demonstrated its severe effects in Lancashire.[1] The Justices at Buckinghamshire Quarter Sessions undertook no special measures. Considerably more was spent on tending to a smallpox outbreak at the County jail in 1727 than for any health costs in 1728–30. Nationally, poor law payments were 20 per cent higher in the period 1727–30 than in the previous five years. This may reflect help provided for the sick, orphans, and bereaved.

It is only chance survivals of local descriptions of 'flu epidemics that illuminate the nature and effects of outbreaks. The Verney papers vividly describe events in north Buckinghamshire. In December 1727 two 'key workers', the parson and land-steward, who would regularly have visited local houses in a healthcare-poor world, became ill with 'flu. The land steward, Charles Chaloner, diligently struggled to write daily letters to his boss despite severe symptoms:

> 'Last Monday night I was taken extremely ill with a trembling and then with operation of vomiting which I thought would have torn me to pieces, so got to bed and took some Gaskins powder which flung a surfeit all over me like a little Rash and so continues'.

He couldn't eat. Within days he was dead. The 'flu returned late in 1729 when it killed 19 of a population of about 340 in East Claydon – so about 5 per cent – and was (rightly) reckoned the greatest mortality ever in the parish registers. These were the two great early modern 'flu epidemics. Others had brutal local effects. In the same area, one hundred years after the Tudor 'flu pandemic, the same Buckinghamshire villages faced 40 or 50 people at a time sick, and eight or nine

Landscape with Plague Suffering Figures, Jan Luyken, 1691

dead. This time, both the land steward and parson became ill and died, while all but one of the manservants at Claydon house were infected.

'Flu and other viral epidemics did not just affect the human population in the countryside. To a world in which horses were the most valuable livestock, a major 'horse plague' was as likely to be noted as human 'flu. John Rutty looked to link animal, as well as human, epidemics and illnesses to the seasons or the prevailing weather. In 1699 horse distemper was 'universal' while in 1712, local tenants found their horses dying and cows losing their calves. Recovery after the English Civil War was held back by heavy losses among sheep and cattle. The cattle were probably suffering from 'cattle plague' (rinderpest) which returned to sweep almost the whole of England for twelve years around 1750. Then, in a very modern way, government compensated farmers for their losses if they agreed to slaughter infected stock. Far more was paid out for this by central government than went to assist human epidemics in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

[1] The first century of welfare: poverty and poor relief in Lancashire, 1620–1730 (2014) ch. 7

The tangled web of drainage history

England's lowlands are criss-crossed by miles and miles of still, straight watercourses *writes Jane Rowling*

Entirely artificial, these 'linear ponds' represent centuries of piecemeal reclamation of agricultural land from marshes – and correspondingly piecemeal legislation. Together, they form a network which drains 1.2 million hectares and evidences at least five hundred years of major landscape change and legislative wrangling. Yet most people know little of them – or the Internal Drainage Boards which manage them.

Internal Drainage Boards

Internal Drainage Boards (IDBs) are single purpose drainage authorities which manage water levels in low-lying drainage districts. They are responsible for routine maintenance and improvement works on watercourses within their area, and, in the twenty-first century, manage both flood risk and environmental protection. IDBs are unique institutions in that their membership is fifty per cent elected landowners and farmers from within the district, and fifty per cent local councillors – and, despite their localised interest, they report directly to the Minister for Agriculture.

The precursor to IDBs were groups that got together unofficially to drain parcels of fen and marshland around the British coast. Romney Marsh, in Kent, is one of the first recorded examples of this piecemeal drainage under Henry III in 1252. Early modern drainage efforts drew heavily on the expertise of Dutch engineers such as Cornelius Vermuyden, and Philibert Vernatti – who gave his name to the Vernatt's Drain in Lincolnshire. These 'Adventurers' created an artificial landscape that was fantastically fertile, but which required constant management. As the moisture was drawn out of the fen peat soils and pumped out to sea, the land dropped dramatically below the level of the rivers, like the Glen in South Lincolnshire, leaving communities dependent on the maintenance of enormous banks to prevent them from being inundated. One colloquialism often used in South Lincolnshire says, 'Never turn your back on the Glen.'

Acting on confusion

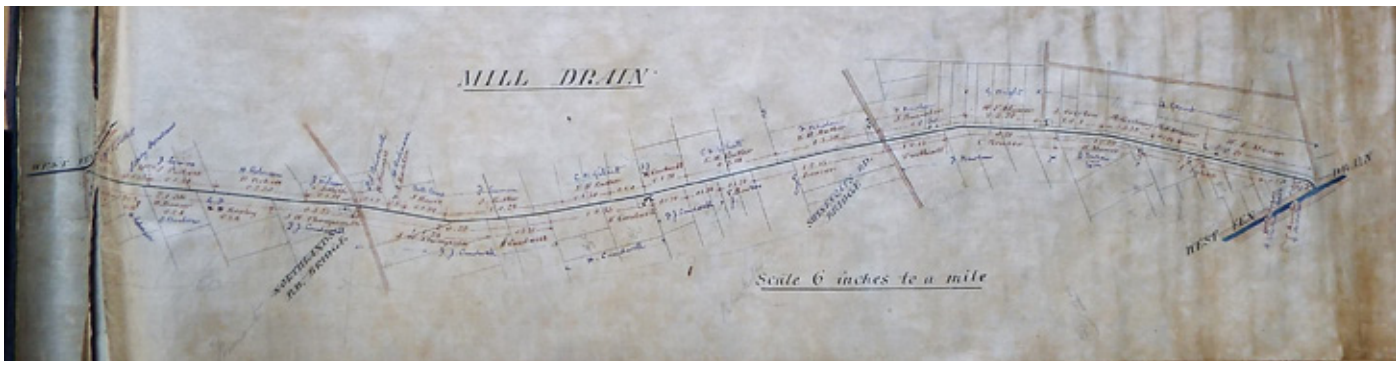
Until the early twentieth century, acts governing the draining of land, and the maintenance of the drains thereafter, were made on a case by case basis through the process of parliamentary enclosure, creating a web of conflicting legislation which became virtually unenforceable. The pressures of agricultural depression in the later nineteenth century severely curtailed the viability of large-scale drainage schemes, while the complexity of existing regulations and responsibilities often made draining prohibitively expensive. These issues were exacerbated by the need for more efficient drainage to support the drive for self-sufficiency after the outbreak of war in 1914. The most drastic change in drainage history came with the 1930 Land Drainage Act, which made sweeping changes to the existing legislation, which had been condemned as:

'a confused tangle of Authorities, established by the piecemeal legislation of 500 years, and exercising a great variety of powers and functions. There is no uniformity of method, of powers, or of liability. Many Drainage Authorities are doing admirable work: others are doing none. The efforts of some Authorities are rendered ineffectual by the lack of co-operation of their neighbours, or by the fact that the drainage of adjoining land is under no control whatever. Liability for works is regulated by no common or uniform system, and is frequently obsolete and obscure.[1]

The 1930 Act is the basis on which most IDBs function today, but modern Drainage Authorities remain some of the

Drainage timeline

1531 Statute of Sewers, the basis of all drainage legislation prior to 1930 Land Drainage Act
1833 Sewers Act allowed Commissioners to divide areas into defined districts
1849 Sewers Acts Amendment Act allowed creation of differently-rated sub-districts
1861 Land Drainage Act, 'in which the representative principle was adopted, as regards the choice of persons, to deal with arterial drainage'
1877 Select Committee of House of Lords enquiry into operation of existing legislation, including 2000–3000 private Acts which often conflicted with public Acts
1878 River Conservancy Act
1918 Land Drainage Act enabled MAF to constitute Drainage Districts
1926 Land Drainage Act rectified problems of 1918 Act, which transferred powers of MAF to County Councils, which were largely unable to use them due to lack of funding
1927 Royal Commission investigation
1930 Land Drainage Act removed previous legislation and established IDBs
1937 Association of Drainage Authorities established
1945 Water Act introduced concept of national policy for water
1961 Land Drainage Act allowed River Boards to act as IDBs where no IDB existed
1989 Water Act established National Rivers Authority, forerunner to Environment Agency
1991 Land Drainage Act set out functions of IDBs and local authorities in relation to land drainage
2000 EU Water Framework Directive committed EU member states to achieve good qualitative and quantitative status of all water bodies by 2015
2010 Flood and Water Management Act established Regional Flood and Coast Committees



Scroll map of Mill Drain Lincolnshire Witham Fourth IDB

most dissimilar bodies to be grouped under one appellation. They range from Boards which still add entries to their original, handwritten minute books, to those which can monitor and alter water levels across their districts with a single smartphone.

One of the key responsibilities of a modern IDB is the care of environments and ecosystems which rely on the banks and channels of minor watercourses. Modern IDBs often practice alternate side cutting; cutting back the reeds on one side of the channel only, alternating each year, partially clearing the watercourse to allow water to continue to drain out to sea, while preserving habitats for amphibians, small fish, dragonflies, moths and other insects, water voles, shrews and harvest mice, which in turn support larger endangered predators like otter, and wild birds like the bittern. The measures to achieve successful ecosystems often conflict with historically-informed community expectations of what good flood risk management should look like, as one IDB representative explained:

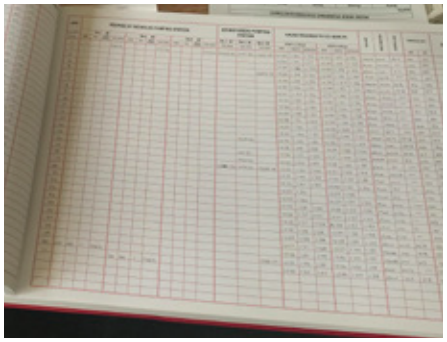
'If there's one single thing that could stop us doing what do... it's environmental legislation. So we've got to work with it... Reed beds are our biggest bugbear. Cutting the reeds, but we're trying to encourage more to grow!'[2]

This places IDBs at a curious intersection between modern priorities and historical responsibilities.

Archival treasures

The archives of IDBs represent a valuable but underused resource. Many documents, including minute books and maps, are kept in IDB offices, a treasure trove recording the everyday activities and decisions which have shaped the British lowland landscape for over 500 years. They are filled with references to customary rights and practices, and details of boundaries in the landscape which are still used in decision-making today.

These sources contain important local knowledge which show how landscapes have changed beyond all recognition, with centuries of drainage activity transforming Britain's marshlands into some of the most agriculturally productive land in the country. In conjunction with oral histories from water level management practitioners, they form a significant body of evidence which reveals the complex balancing act at the interface of cutting edge hydroecological approaches and historical land management.



Engine Record Book still in use at Pode Hole Pumping Station

All photographs by the author

1 *Report of the Royal Commission on Land Drainage in England and Wales* (London, 1927), p. 15.
2 'Anonymous Interview with IDB Chief Executive, J. Rowling, February 2019.'

Vernatt's Drain Pode Hole, Lincolnshire

Going **astray**

Jordan Claridge and Spike Gibbs discuss the management of stray livestock in Late Medieval England

In September 1392, the manor court of the village of Little Downham, which was part of the Bishop of Ely's large estate in the fenland area of Cambridgeshire, reported the finding of eight animals designated as *'de ext(ra)y'* or in English, simply 'stray'. They had been found a month earlier and were in the custody of the lord's official. The court ordered the discovery of these animals to be advertised locally. This yielded some results as, in the following session of the court in December, one William Ludgate from the village of Doddington (around nine miles northwest of Downham) came with 'six hands'; sworn witnesses who attested that a 'whitblakspottyd' (piebald) mare, one of the eight animals, belonged to Ludgate. He then paid the lord a small fee of 12d. to retrieve it. However, seven remained unclaimed and the lord's official was ordered to re-advertise them in courts of February and July 1393. This story ends a year after it started, in September 1393. Having remained within the lordship of Little Downham for a year and a day, the court declared that the animals would be forfeit to the Lord Bishop to become his own property.

The stray system

A similar version of this narrative played out thousands of times in the rural communities of late medieval England. However, while well documented in the rolls which record the proceedings of manorial courts in this period, stray animals have received little attention from historians. In a recent project, we examined records from manors across England for the period 1274 to 1453 to better understand the 'stray system' by which village communities dealt with wandering animals. We discovered a remarkably effective procedure which met two important needs of medieval agriculturalists. The first was to ensure that wandering livestock were quickly captured, so that they did not damage crops and therefore threaten the livelihood of the whole community. However, at the same time a lost animal represented a significant asset for its owner and therefore it was vital to facilitate retrieval. This, moreover, needed to be a public process to avoid accusations of theft and conflict over ownership. The genius of the stray system was how it combined these two requirements.

How did the stray system work? Firstly, an animal had to be found. Sometimes this was on an *ad hoc* and individual basis but at some manors, such as at the aforementioned Downham, the community did an annual drive of the local fenland in which all unclaimed livestock were collected and identified. Any unidentified animals found had to be registered publicly in the next session of the local court, to make the lord and community aware of its presence. Of course, this process had the potential for abuse and was not always followed by more entrepreneurial members of the community or even the officials of lords.

Image: Wikipedia – Reptonix

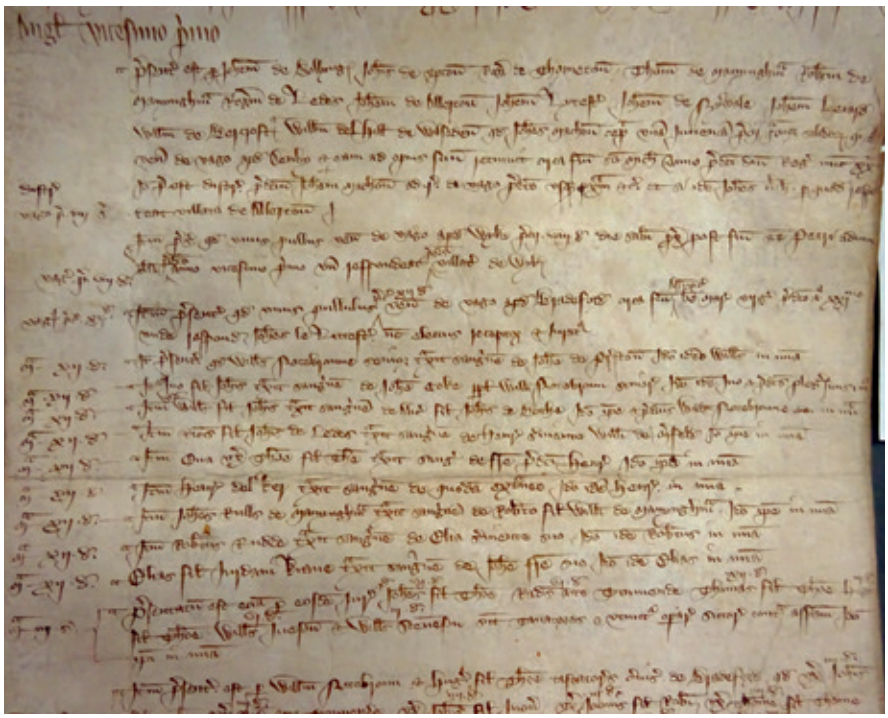
Capenhurst pinfold, Cheshire. A pinfold has existed on this site since the 10th century.

In 1410, the court at Downham discovered that Thomas Colleson, one of the lord's officers, had delivered two stray bullocks 'without claim in court' and had sold the foal born of a stray mare at Ely market for his own profit. Even more audacious was the case of William de Godeley Jr of the Yorkshire manor of Wakefield, who was punished by the court for selling a stray ox without permission. When the ox, for reasons left unstated, 'returned to William's house,' he had sold it for a second time illicitly to a *second* buyer!

Proclamation and retrieval

After being registered, animals were then advertised, or 'proclaimed' in nearby public forums to allow owners to retrieve them. For instance, in 1328, the records of the court of Alrewas in Staffordshire report that a cathedral official of Lichfield (around 5 miles southwest of Alrewas) retrieved a stray foal after it had been 'cried twice in Lichfield fair and three times in the church'. Upon hearing of its discovery, an owner wanting to retrieve their property was required to 'prove' or 'haymald' (a Scottish and Northern English word meaning 'belonging to one's household' used specifically for this legal procedure) their animal by attending the next session of the manor court in the community in which it had been found. Claimants were typically required to appear with between 3 and 12 'hands', witnesses who would vouch that the stray was indeed their property. For example, in 1390 at the manor of Tottenham Bruces in Middlesex, Thomas Benworth of Walthamstow came with 'true men of the neighbourhood' to 'prove' his calf. Occasionally, courts also asked claimants to provide 'pledges': guarantors that promised they would produce the animal, or its monetary value, if another person later came to claim the same creature and it was judged their claim was genuine.

Despite the existence of a system which allowed ample opportunity for owners to retrieve their lost animals, many strays remained unclaimed. The law required lords to hold animals for a year and day but after this time, they became their property and could no longer be retrieved. In several cases of forfeiture, lords simply added a working animal to their own farms, such as in 1274 at the Yorkshire manor of Wakefield, where the court noted that two unclaimed horses and



Bradford Court Roll

a cow were to be placed with the Earl's stock. In 1450 the Bishop of Downham seemingly went for a more instant form of gratification, as an exceptionally valuable black bullock was slaughtered 'in hospitality of the lord to the use and welcome of the lord'.

However, in many cases strays would have been surplus to requirements. Moreover, these animals were often of comparatively low quality. A comparison of the values of stray horses, as opposed to the average sale prices of horses in this period, reveals that the former were always of a significantly lower value.

Adjectives applied to stray animals in the documentary sources are not charitable: beasts were generally 'infirm', 'disabled' and 'debilitated', a pig at Wakefield was 'leprous' and a bull at the Yorkshire manor of Bradford 'insane'!

Yet a lord's 'trash' was, if perhaps not a peasant's 'treasure', at least of some value to these smaller-scale cultivators. This led lords to realise the value of stray animals through sale to their tenants, either via public auctions or separate deals with particular individuals. Thus, the stray system helped circulate a stock of cheap animals which could be productively utilised by the peasantry.

This brief discussion of the management of strays by rural communities in late medieval England cannot give full justice to the topic. Yet it does reveal the sophisticated practices lords and peasants could develop together to meet important practical needs: in this case avoiding destruction of crops while allowing owners to retrieve their lost property. While lords nominally controlled this system, our fuller quantitative work reveals that it would have been impossible for them to profit from it, and thus it is unlikely they were the driving force behind the management of these roaming beasts. The stray system instead testifies to the inventiveness of rural communities in the pre-modern era and the relatively complex legal systems they administered for their own benefit at the very local level. It was, after all, the peasants who found, registered, advertised, and cared for stray beasts. They were the owners who came and claimed their lost animals, as well as the people who ended up buying those whose owners never came forward.

▶ A full version of this paper is forthcoming in the Journal of British Studies under the title *'Waifs and Strays: Property Rights in Late Medieval England'.*

A fresh look at alternative agriculture

Alternative Agriculture in Europe (Sixteenth–twentieth centuries) edited by Gérard Béaur (Brepols, 2020) re-examines Joan Thirsk's 1997 book *Alternative Agriculture*. That work concentrated on the British Isles and celebrated small farmers, whose innovations were framed as responses to periods of low, main-crop prices.

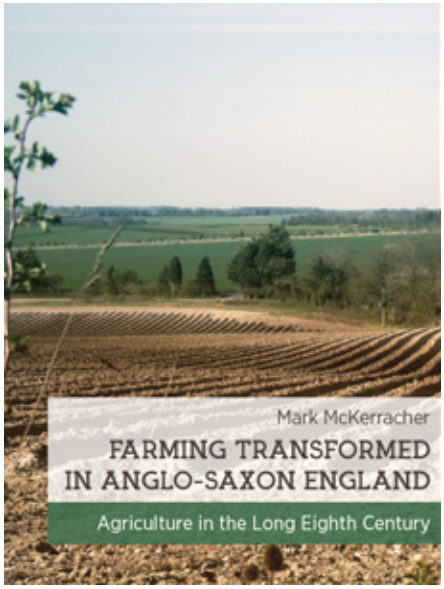
Olive (Olea europaea), Anselmus Boëtius de Boodt, 1596–1610 (detail view)

Trends in neighbouring countries were identified as triggers for the introduction of new crops and techniques. Béaur's book shows how parallel processes were taking place in the European countryside. There are case studies of familiar crops such as hemp, flax, clover and fruit but also it considers vegetables, flowers, wine, olive oil, oranges and rice across south-western Europe, from Flanders, Switzerland and Italy through France and Spain. It does so in a context of constructive criticism, provided by the editor's introduction and Jean-Pierre Poussou's revisionist chapter which asks whether we need to rethink the relationship between 'alternative' agricultural initiatives and periods of low grain prices, and to question whether these were simply something for the small producer, or could be integrated into existing agricultural systems at all levels of production. For Poussou, it is the demand side of the equation that needs much more attention and was a constant factor in stimulating the adoption of new crops. This could be urban growth, industrial change, or the effects of economic crises and wars, as exemplified in the various sections of the book. He also gently chides English agricultural and rural historians for their failure either to address the main arguments of Joan Thirsk's book, or to seek wider generalisations about changing agricultural products and systems within the older paradigms of an 'agricultural revolution'. This is a stimulating read, and I hope it evokes responses from English rural historians.

John Broad

Archaeology and agriculture: insights from an Essex farmer

Following the publication of his book *Farming Transformed in Anglo-Saxon England* (Windgather, 2018), an archaeological study of agricultural development in seventh- to ninth-century England, Mark McKerracher heard from a number of readers.



One, David Bloomfield, a farmer and local historian in his seventies from Brentwood, Essex, suggested that he might be 'groping in the dark over understanding harvesting and cereal storage'. Here, Mark provides an edited transcript of some of their subsequent conversations and correspondence, together with his reflections on the insights provided.

▶ **David Bloomfield:** The very greatest part of my life I was a working farmer. I have hand milked, stooked and stacked cereal sheaves, and made and stacked loose hay. I have also acted as binder following the scythe.

I always have been interested in history... I've worked out my version of a lot of things that academics don't understand. How can they? They don't have the same background.

The central argument in *Farming Transformed* (hereafter 'FT') is that, between the seventh and ninth centuries AD, arable farming in Anglo-Saxon England became much more productive, with greater cereal surpluses. In support of this, I drew particularly upon two strands of archaeological evidence: charred plant remains and structural remains.

Reconsidering charred plant remains

For decades, archaeobotanists have made deductions about past agricultural regimes from charred plant remains – largely cereals and arable weeds – which are usually seen as the result of accidental conflagrations of harvested crops (FT, p.83). Mr Bloomfield suggested a different origin and introduced me to the term 'cavings' for those parts of the cereal plant which remained once the grains had been removed. In the archaeobotanical literature, the non-grain parts of harvested cereals are generically referred to as 'chaff', a word for which Mr Bloomfield had an alternative definition:

▶ Your frequent referral to burnt cereals is easily explained by the fact the cavings were usually burnt ... to dispose of the weed seed. This practice certainly kept the wild oat at very small populations until the coming of the combine.

Now cavings, in its pure form, is the actual pieces which enclose the grain... as a general term, [it is used] to cover all the material that was wind-blown away from the grain. If the flail-man was doing oats or wheat, he would carefully save that, because that would mix with the hard feed for working horses... Horses were given supplementary feed if they were working hard, which was based on cereals, and they weren't allowed to eat just a cereal mix on its own: it was very bad for the digestion. So they mixed it with cavings – or chaff, which was cut hay – so that they didn't bolt this more concentrated feed.

With this definition, 'cavings' corresponds to the archaeobotanist's 'winnowing by-product' (FT, p.87). In Anglo-Saxon archaeology, it is extremely rare to find charred deposits with high proportions of such cavings, relative to grain. This is probably due, in part, to the fact that grains survive the process of charring better than the other, more fragile parts of the cereal plant (FT, p.85). But this pattern might also suggest that, unlike the practice witnessed by Mr Bloomfield, the cavings were not habitually burned in bulk after the barn

Image from the Luttrell Psalter. Originally published/produced in East Anglia, circa 1325–1335. British Library

Continued from page 7

work, but were rather, as in his further comments, fed to livestock. The dearth of such cavings at many excavated sites has sometimes led to the assumption that these were 'consumer' sites receiving clean grain from elsewhere. But if we think of the material as cavings rather than waste, then we need not expect the material to be preserved at either 'producer' or 'consumer' sites.

Reconsidering corn-driers

In terms of structural remains, arable growth in Anglo-Saxon England is suggested by the appearance in the archaeological record, from the seventh century onwards, of 'corn driers' and new storage facilities, such as granaries and at least one helm, i.e. an elevated platform for the open-air stacking of harvested crops (FT, pp.70–80). Mr Bloomfield contends, however, that corn-drying ovens would not have been necessary, especially not in tandem with open-air storage. Rather, he argues, cereals would have been harvested when dry, and then stacked:

▶ I can't understand why there was any need for corn-drying kilns, apart from what I think are called hulled grains, where they put them in to crisp the ear, the cavings which were around it, so that they would come off easily. But [for successful milling] ordinary corn has to be dry, otherwise it just won't mill... you can't put wet material in the stack, because it will heat and the corn will damage, and it will get hotter and wetter, and you will not be able to mill it. You have to only put dry material in the stack.

If you wait until the corn is really ripe and dry before you put it in the stack, as soon as you use the reaping hook (or much later, the scythe), the chances of shedding a lot of grain – especially wheat and oats – is so great that you couldn't do it. So you knew the exact time to cut it... and the saying was, I believe, that you left it in a field to hear the church bells twice on two Sundays, depending on the weather, of course. And you had to be very careful to make sure that you parted the sheaves so that they would dry. [To check if a sheaf was dry] the test was to put your fingers under the band, and if it was cold – this was when the sun was up – then it wasn't dry, then you didn't cart it away...

Mr Bloomfield's comments here echo Gavin Bowie's argument that grain driers were long important in the north and west of the British Isles, but not in the south and east except during the Late Roman period of high-input agriculture (Bowie, 2017). Given that post-Roman corn-driers have been identified by archaeologists in southern Britain, these are important objections.

'Corn-drier' is a convenient off-the-shelf interpretation for excavated oven-like structures, particularly those associated with charred plant remains. But have we archaeologists presumed too blithely a universal need to dry corn? Mr Bloomfield acknowledges the parching of hulled wheats as an alternative function but, since free-threshing cereals heavily dominated Anglo-Saxon and medieval English farming (FT, p.96–106), this possibility cannot realistically account for every so-called corn-drier that has been excavated. Structures found in specific association with the remains of germinated grains are more often interpreted as malting ovens (e.g. Hardy *et al.,* 2007). Given the oft-presumed importance of beer in Anglo-Saxon society, should we assume by default that malting was the primary function of such structures, whether or not germinated grains happen to have been preserved within them? Indeed, nearly four decades ago, replica Romano-British ovens at Butser Ancient Farm proved inefficient at drying moist grain but could produce satisfactory malt for brewing (Reynolds, 1981, pp.36–43). So, should 'malting oven' be the archaeologist's default interpretation, in place of 'corn-drier' – at least in Anglo-Saxon and medieval England?

On reflection

These examples illustrate how the insights of a farmer – whose understanding of agricultural history is born of practical experience – have caused me to reflect on the presumptions concealed within archaeological commonplaces such as charred by-products and corn-drying ovens. Conventional terms like these inevitably come with pre-packaged interpretations, and however much I may try to unpack these ideas, I wonder how often I am guilty of putting the terminological cart before the living, breathing horse. Mr Bloomfield has reminded me, politely and firmly, that the horse must always come first.

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Articles for the next issue should be sent by 7 June 2021 to Dr Rebecca Ford: **rebeccafordmail@gmail.com**

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