Contrasting Communities
Contrasting Communities
English Villagers in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries

MARGARET SPUFFORD
Sometime Calouste Gulbenkian Research Fellow
Lucy Cavendish College, Cambridge, and S.S.R.C. supported
Senior Research Fellow, Keele University

Cambridge University Press
Cambridge
London • New York • Melbourne

© Cambridge University Press
Contents

List of maps and graphs  page vii
List of tables  viii
List of abbreviations  ix
Acknowledgements  xiii
Introduction  xix

PART 1  People, Families and Land

1 The peopling of a county  3
Medieval overpopulation and the great decline  5
Population changes, 1524, 1563, 1664  10
Rapid population growth in the fens - Willingham  18
Stagnant population on the clay - Orwell  22
Prosperity and social structure in the 1520s  28
Prosperity and social structure in the 1660s  36

2 The problem: the disappearance of the small landowner  46

3 The reality: the small landholder on the chalk: Chippenham  58
Sources, population changes, fields, crops and stock  58
Land distribution  65
Inheritance customs  85
Provision for widows  88
Conclusion  90

4 The reality: the small landholder on the clay: Orwell  94
Sources, fields, crops and stock  94
Land distribution  99
Inheritance customs  104
Provision for women  111
Conclusion  118

5 The reality: the small landholder in the fens: Willingham  121
Sources, fields, crops and stock  121
Land distribution  134
# Contents

Causes of the breakdown of holdings  
Inheritance customs  
Provision for women  
General Conclusions to Part One  

## PART 2 The Schooling of the Peasantry

6 A general view of schools and schoolmasters  
Cambridgeshire schools and schoolmasters  
7 The elementary ability to write: Willingham and Orwell  
8 The importance of reading in the village community  

## PART 3 Parishioners and their Religion

9 Dissent before and after the commonwealth  
10 A general view of the laity in the diocese of Ely  
Liturgical change in the reformation  
The search for Puritanism and early separatism  
11 Fragmentation and the growth of sects  
The failure of the parish church  
General Baptists  
Quakers  
Congregationalists  
The restoration and persecution  
12 The possible determinants of dissent  
The social spread of dissent in corn-growing and fenland communities – Orwell and Willingham  
The influence of lordship  
The influence of the clergy  
The influence of schooling  
13 The reality of religion for the villager  
Wills and their writers – Orwell, Dry Drayton and Willingham  
The opinions of the testators – Willingham, Orwell, Chippenham, Snailwell and Milton  
Membership of the gathered churches  
Conclusion  

Appendix 1  The Butlers of Orwell  
Appendix 2  Notes on Graphs 3 and 5  
Index of contemporary names  
General index
Maps

1. Cambridgeshire: natural boundaries and soil types  \( \text{page xxiv} \)
2. Cambridgeshire: county and parish boundaries  \( \text{xxv} \)
3. Distribution and density of population in Cambridgeshire in 1524-5  \( \text{11} \)
4. Distribution and density of population in Cambridgeshire in 1563  \( \text{15} \)
5. Distribution and density of population in Cambridgeshire in 1664  \( \text{17} \)
6. Percentages of houses with one and two hearths in Cambridgeshire in 1664  \( \text{42} \)
7. Percentages of houses with three, and four-and-more hearths in Cambridgeshire in 1664  \( \text{43} \)
8. The Lordship of Chippenham in 1544  \( \text{60} \)
9. Orwell in the 1670s  \( \text{93} \)
10. Willingham in about 1603  \( \text{120} \)
11. The continuity of schools in Cambridgeshire, 1570-1620  \( \text{185} \)
12. Nonconformity in Cambridgeshire, 1654-76  \( \text{224} \)
13. Villages with five or more identifiable petitioners against Bishop Wren in 1640  \( \text{235} \)

Graphs

1. Nine-year moving averages of Willingham population, 1560–1740  \( \text{19} \)
2. Nine-year moving averages of Orwell population, 1560–1700  \( \text{24} \)
3. Transactions in the manor court of Chippenham, 1560–1605  \( \text{79} \)
4. Nine-year moving averages of Willingham population by harvest year, 1560–1700  \( \text{153} \)
5. Transactions in the manor court of Willingham, 1575–1603  \( \text{155} \)
### Tables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Tenants and farm size in Chippenham, 1544 survey</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Tenants and farm size in Chippenham, 1560 rental</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Tenants and farm size in Chippenham, 1636 reconstructed</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Tenants and farm size in Chippenham, 1712 map</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Landholding in Chippenham, thirteenth to eighteenth centuries</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Landholding in Chippenham (copyhold and customary tenures only), sixteenth and seventeenth centuries</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Landholding in Orwell (copyhold and customary tenures only), seventeenth century</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Tenants and farm size in Willingham, 1575</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Tenants and farm size in Willingham, 1603</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Tenants and farm size in Willingham, 1720s</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Landholding in Willingham, 1575-1720s (numbers)</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Landholding in Willingham, 1575-1720s (percentages)</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Landholding on the chalk and in the fen (numbers)</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Landholding on the chalk and in the fen (percentages)</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Status of testators signing and marking wills at Willingham</td>
<td>199</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Status of testators signing and marking wills before 1700 at Willingham, Orwell and Milton</td>
<td>202</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Yeomen and other testators signing wills before 1700 at Willingham, Orwell and Milton</td>
<td>202</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Economic status of dissenters in 1674</td>
<td>305</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Villages with large numbers of dissenters in 1676</td>
<td>308</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Villages without dissenters in 1676</td>
<td>310</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Abbreviations

Only abbreviations and the short titles of primary and secondary works more frequently referred to in the footnotes are given below.

A Collection: J. Parnell, A Collection of the Several Writings Given Forth from the Spirit of the Lord, through that Meek, Patient and Suffering Servant of God, James Parnell, no place 1657
Calamy Revised: A. G. Matthews, Calamy Revised, being a Revision of E. Calamy’s Account of the Ministers and others ejected and silenced, 1660–2, Oxford 1934
Church Book of Bunyan Meeting: G. B. Harrison, The Church Book of Bunyan Meeting, 1650–1821, being a reproduction in facsimile of the original folio, London 1928
Clarke, A Generall Martyrologie: S. Clarke, A Generall Martyrologie, containing a Collection of all the greatest Persecutions which have befallen The Church of Christ . . . whereunto are added the Lives of Sundry Modern Divines, London 1651
C.R.O.: Cambridgeshire Record Office
C.U.L.: Cambridge University Library
D.N.B.: The Dictionary of National Biography
Early Quaker Letters: G. F. Nuttall, Early Quaker Letters from the Swarthmore MSS, to 1660, London 1952
E.D.R.: Ely Diocesan Records
Abbreviations


Lysons, Magna Britannia: D. and S. Lysons, Magna Britannia, vol. ii i, Cambridge 1808

P.C.C.: Prerogative Court at Canterbury

P.R.O.: Public Record Office, London


R.C.H.M.: Royal Commission on Historical Monuments


Spufford, Chippenham: M. Spufford, A Cambridgeshire Community: Chippenham from Settlement to Enclosure, Department of English Local History, University of Leicester, Occasional Papers vol. 20, 1968


Abbreviations


V.C.H.: Victoria County Histories of England and Wales

Walker Revised: A. G. Matthews, Walker Revised, being a Revision of J. Walker’s Sufferings of the Clergy during the Grand Rebellion, 1642–60, Oxford 1948
Acknowledgements

This book owes so much to the help of so many people, in various spheres, that it is almost invidious to single out any by name. I do, however, stand particularly indebted to five groups of people.

My research has been mainly done while I have been immobilised for one reason or another at Keele. The materials for it are in Cambridge and London. Without the unending patience of the Cambridgeshire County Archivist, Mr J. M. Farrar and the Archivist to the University of Keele, Mr Ian Fraser, who were always willing to transfer documents between them, frequently with the help of Mr Stitt, the Staffordshire County Archivist, it would have been quite impossible to complete it. Mrs Dorothy Owen, Archivist to the Bishop of Ely, has shown similar patience, and spent a very considerable amount of time advising me, and xeroxing documents for me. None of these people is in any way to blame for the, no doubt, frequently erroneous use of the materials with which they have kept me supplied. Miss Rosemary Graham has spent a great deal of time checking on my references. Many friends, and students at Keele, have spent time collecting or perusing documents I would not have been able to examine by any other means. Amongst them, I would particularly like to thank Mrs Elizabeth Key.

I have been almost overwhelmed by the kindness of nonconformist historians. Dr G. F. Nuttall has spent much time looking out references for me, not all of which I have been able to follow up, unfortunately. The local historians of the different Cambridgeshire churches have been amazingly willing to share both their bibliographies and their private information with me, and to rescue me from many pitfalls. I should like particularly to mention Mr Kenneth Parsons, who has given me much Baptist material, and Mr Andrew Smith, who steered me through much Congregationalist information.

Financial help for a married woman with a young family, who remains bent on doing part-time research, is never easy to obtain. Without the help of the Covenantors’ Educational Trust, and of a grant from
Acknowledgements

The Eileen Power Fund, I would certainly not have got far enough to
be appointed to a Calouste Gulbenkian Research Fellowship of Lucy
Cavendish College, Cambridge, from 1969 to 1972. The depth and
warmth of support I have received from my college in this time has
meant a very great deal to me.

Personally, my debts range from the frankly bizarre onwards. The
technicians of the Keele University Workshop took apparent pleasure,
in 1967, in spending much time designing a piece of apparatus which
enabled me to compare three different copies of documents, and write
at a suitable angle, whilst lying flat on my back. It saved me six months,
which would have otherwise been academically wasted. This book’s
existence also owes much to Mrs Elizabeth Jepson, Kirsten Carlsen,
Gertrud Reiter, Birgit Rasmussen and Susan Le-Pla, who all aided me
superbly in times of particular domestic stress. I am also very grateful
to Sally Daunt and Susan Paine. My friends Dennis Jeeps and Jack
Ravensdale have spent time which they could ill afford discussing the
text, and reading it. So has Dorothy Owen. Ione Shaw helped with
corrections which would never otherwise have been completed. I would
also like to thank Roger Schofield and Tony Wrigley, who have read
and commented on parts of my work, and patiently assisted me, particu-
larly in my statistical worries.

I owe all the training in my craft which I possess to my Professor,
H. P. R. Finberg, formerly Head of the Department of English Local
History of the University of Leicester. I wish I had a better thank-
offering to make.

I have also been greatly helped by the Department of History of the
University of Keele; the members of which under successive heads,
and most recently under Professor Rolo, have tolerated my presence
working under their roof these last ten years, with a hospitality and
lack of questioning which is typical of the Department. Mrs Carolyn
Busfield, the Departmental Secretary, typed my manuscript. Only my
friends will recognise, in that statement, the acknowledgement that
she possesses palaeographic powers which are quite out of the com-
mon.

I would like to thank Wing-Commander R. F. Pemberton for com-
piling the indexes. I have also much appreciated the courtesy and con-
sideration for my wishes shown by Mrs Christine Linehan and Mr
Robert Seal of Cambridge University Press, who have done a great deal
more for this text than their official positions demanded.

Finally, it is customary to thank one’s wife, both for her patience,
and for compiling the index. In my case, it is more appropriate for me
to thank my husband, who did much of the arithmetic, and checked the

xv
Acknowledgements

tables. Much more, he has been, for nearly ten years, the only person fully aware of what I was attempting to do, who continued to encourage me to do it, however adverse the external circumstances. Only someone placed in a similar position could appreciate what that has meant.

Lucy Cavendish College, Cambridge Margaret Spufford
St Mary’s Abbey, Malling Epiphany, 1973

Publisher’s Note

The author and publisher are grateful to the following for permission to reproduce extracts from copyright material held by them: Faber and Faber Ltd, for T. S. Eliot, ‘East Coker’, in Four Quartets, published in Collected Poems, 1909–1962; Oxford University Press, for Flora Thompson, Lark Rise to Candleford; Penguin Books Ltd, for Leo Tolstoy, Anna Karenin, translated by Rosemary Edmonds (Penguin Classics 1954), copyright © Rosemary Edmonds, 1954.
In that open field
If you do not come too close, if you do not come too close,
On a summer midnight, you can hear the music
Of the weak pipe and the little drum
And see them dancing around the bonfire
The association of man and woman
In daunsinge, signifying matrimony –
A dignified and commodious sacrament.
Two and two, necessarie coniunction,
Holding eche other by the hand or the arm
Whiche betokeneth concorde. Round and round the fire
Leaping through the flames, or joined in circles,
Rustically solemn or in rustic laughter
Lifting heavy feet in clumsy shoes,
Earth feet, loam feet, lifted in country mirth
Mirth of those long since under earth
Nourishing the corn. Keeping time,
Keeping the rhythm in their dancing
As in their living in the living seasons
The time of the seasons and the constellations
The time of milking and the time of harvest
The time of the coupling of man and woman
And that of beasts . . .

The dancers are all gone under the hill.

T. S. Eliot, ‘East Coker’, in *Four Quartets*,
quoting from Sir Thomas Elyot, *The boke named the Gouvernour*, Bk i, Ch. xx (1531)
For Francis and Bridget, and principally for Peter,

who helped me find the excavation of the graveyard
of one of the lost villages of Cambridgeshire and who
discovered, with me, that the bones of the long-dead,
whose lives I have here partially tried to reconstruct,
lie very peacefully below the fields they tilled.

Also for the other local historians of Cambridgeshire
above all

Dennis Jeeps and Jack Ravensdale.
Introduction

J'avais commencé, tout au début, par additionner les hectares et les unités cadastrales; j'aboutissais, en fin de recherche, à regarder agir, lutter, penser les hommes vivants.¹

In general, local historians have confined themselves, since the discipline became respectable, to the economic setting in which local communities, at the village level at least, lived their lives. In a famous inaugural lecture, the study of local history was defined as that of the 'origin, growth, decline, and fall of a local community'.² Professor Finberg in that definition did not intend only economic historians to fasten onto the magic words 'growth' and 'decline'. Indeed, he intended local history to develop as a discipline which prevented the tendency of the national historian 'to lose sight of the human person', and even quoted Chesterton on Notting Hill, to defend the local historian from the obvious charge of only chronicling small beer: 'Notting Hill . . . is a rise or high ground of the common earth, on which men have built houses to live, in which they are born, fall in love, pray, marry, and die. Why should I think it absurd?' It has therefore been a source of surprise to me that local historians have almost always interpreted that initial brief in economic terms. We have many studies now of the gentry, landowners, tenants, village economies, open fields, of the way, in fact that most ordinary people, in ordinary villages before enclosure earned their bread-and-butter, or rather lard. What we have not got are studies of the way the ordinary villager before enclosure thought and felt. We do not know much about the religious opinions of the laity, the common people of God, or even whether they had any. We do not know what was argued about, except for crops and boundary stones, or how far the village was open to debate and influence from the outside world. The cync, or realist, can easily dismiss the notion that the mass of villagers, in the days before the 1870 education act, and of

Introduction

newspapers, had much time for developing any opinions at all. The life of the ordinary villager has been pictured as, and probably was, a struggle with his environment, and with hard labour, from dawn until dark. Some evidence has been produced that the villager’s life was short; there is plenty of other evidence that it was often nasty and brutish. Surely the ‘intellectual’ life of such people, caught in a ceaseless web of sowing and procreation, harvest and reproduction, ploughing and death, in their fields and their homes, can safely be neglected?

The greatest single piece of evidence that even the mass of common folk in the countryside did not live by bread alone, and that therefore studies of their communal life should not be confined to the way they grew their corn to make their bread, is the way the parish church, and sometimes the dissenting chapel, are, with the manor house, the monuments which dominate the village layout. Furthermore, even the most cursory study of the episcopal records dealing with the bishop’s work of visitation and correction in his diocese, shows the amount of constant pressure, usually moral, but occasionally doctrinal, to which the parishioners were subjected.

I have therefore tried to portray the villager in this period, not merely as an economic animal, an item on a rent-roll, or even a man whose moveable assets were conveniently listed and priced at his death, but also as a sentient human being, who could possibly read and even write, and who might be expected to have some reactions to the successive changes in his parish church. As I have done so, my sympathies have increasingly gone out to those who have avoided this very nearly impossible exercise, and the reasons why it has been avoided have become increasingly plain.

There are obvious and glaring omissions in this work. I have, purposely, avoided any consideration of the gentry and parochial clergy whose influence on their tenants and parishioners could obviously be an overriding one, even though Bunyan himself saw it as only one of many.¹ I think myself the docility of tenants to both their lords and their priests can be overstated.²

I have also, more seriously, from my point of view, avoided any consideration of the villager as a political animal. I have not the slightest doubt that, particularly in the seventeenth century, he was one, and the consideration of religious opinions without politics, when the

³ Peter Laslett, The World We Have Lost, University Paperback (London 1965), pp. 93–4.
⁴ See below, pp. 306–7.
⁵ See below, pp. 64 (Chippenham), 97–8 (Orwell), 121–4 (Willingham) for action by tenants against their lords; pp. 273–4 and 315–17 for action against the clergy; and 234–7 for general complaints by the laity against ‘scandalous ministers’.
Introduction

two were so closely linked as to be almost synonymous, is inexcusable. When an ex-corporal of Cromwell’s Ironsides formed one of the first General Baptist churches in Cambridgeshire, at the same time as an ex-cornet was ‘preaching the Gospel to every creature’, in the Baptist version, and when all three of the lords of the villages which I have used for special case-studies were on the committee of the Eastern Association, I have no doubt that the peasantry in these villages were as actively involved in politics as they were in religion. The loving care and pride with which the ‘sword and bandoliers’ of one of the yeomen of these villages were recorded in his, and his son’s, inventories is proof enough.

Cambridgeshire was one of the areas of recruitment of the Eastern Association. The army was based on Saffron Walden, fourteen miles from Cambridge, when it revolted in 1647 and campaigned for public support linking peasant grievances with those of the soldiery. There were organised Leveller groups in the next county of Hertfordshire. It is impossible to believe that Leveller ideas did not spread into Cambridgeshire. Newmarket, half in the county, and Hitchin and Ware in Hertfordshire, all within easy striking distance of Cambridge, were at various times important sites for meetings and demonstrations. Overton’s pamphlet The Hunting of Foxes from Newmarket and Triplœ Heaths to Whitehall by five small Beagles (late of the army) written in 1649 showed that the whole area was one in which both the Levellers and the army were active. Thriplow in Cambridgeshire was later a centre of Independence. Positive proof that the peasantry had religious opinions, and that once these had manifested themselves as a political menace, they were of importance, is to be found in the episcopal records after the Restoration, which suddenly focused, not on the moral state of the parishioners, but on their attendance at ‘seditious conventicles’.

However, although I have no doubt that the political bias and actions of the villagers could be traced, at least in part, here courage and time have failed me. I have not, therefore, written a complete local study. What I have done has also suffered from being done in the interstices of domestic life and above all, from lack of time to read comparative

---

6 See index of names for Benjamin Metcalf and Henry Denne.
8 Robert Tewett of Chippenham, see index of names.
11 Ibid. p. 80.
Introduction

matter, and put my work in a general context. For instance, Le Roy Ladurie’s superb work on the peasantry of Languedoc came out in an available form in 1969, too late for me to reshape the work that I had already done. In many ways he walked the same road before me, as the only reference to his work that I have made, standing at the head of this introduction shows. I also began by counting acres, roods, perches and some thousands of strips, and have ended here by considering the peasant as a human being, as fully as I could. Yet I have not been able to make allusions to the work of the Sixième section, or Ladurie, even though it is so relevant, simply for lack of time. Certainly it is true of all of us that ‘One always writes too soon,’ but it is truer of me than most of us that if ‘One puts it off, one may not write at all.’

What I have attempted to do is to give some kind of general survey of the population of the whole county of Cambridge, excluding the Isle of Ely, and another survey of that part of the Diocese of Ely which lay within southern Cambridgeshire and impinging on the parishioners’ lives, morally, doctrinally, and in its ratification of the work of schoolmasters.

Even within the limited compass of the county, there is enough regional diversification to provide very great economic contrast, from the villages of the chalk uplands, to those of the clays, those of the heavily settled river valleys, those of the fen-edge which run down to the fens and included a comparatively small area of fen common, to the comparatively small number of true fen villages, lying along the old course of the Ouse. Against this general description of the county, the education available within it, and the pastoral work of the diocese, which formed the backdrop to the lives of the commonalty, I have attempted to set detailed studies of the economy, social structure, opportunities for elementary schooling, and religious beliefs of three contrasting villages: Chippenham, which lies on the chalk, but has a couple of hundred acres of fen common; Orwell, which lies on the spring line at the edge of the western clay uplands, but runs down to the river valley below; and Willingham, which was a true fen settlement.

This book therefore represents an attempt not merely to give an account of the way the villager lived his life in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but also his literacy and religious attitudes, his reactions and beliefs, if not his morals. In part the task is impossible, because the source material simply does not exist. However, I hope that I have collected enough divers fragments of material to show that even if a complete picture cannot be drawn, the microcosm of the village


xxii
Introduction

reflected, and often interpreted after its own fashion, intellectual and doctrinal movements higher in society. The villager was indeed a sentient reflecting being, with opinions of his own, and he should be treated as such, even if the nature of his opinions can only occasionally be established.