

PART I

Reflections on a transitional era

In 1502 in the Essex parish of Walthamstow, a labourer named Richard Gamone drew up his last will and testament. As did virtually every other testator of his time and place, Gamone began by commending his soul to God and all the saints, and his body to Walthamstow churchyard. He went on to leave a cow to the churchwardens for them to rent out to parishioners, and he asked them to apply the proceeds to various 'lights' in the church: lamps to Our Lady, St Katherine, the Trinity, and others. Hopeful of the lasting nature of his gift, he added, 'This money to be payde to the seid lights yerly whylys the Worlde last'.¹ Gamone could not know that, in one very important way, the world he was speaking of would last barely a generation after his death, when the English Reformation would render unacceptable these conventional Catholic pieties. But it is less easy to speak with confidence about how long the rest of the world Gamone knew as his would last.

English history from the late fourteenth to the early sixteenth century has often been regarded as a transitional era, a phrase historians commonly employ to indicate that they understand what had gone before and what came after much better than what was going on in between. If a recent survey of British history can claim that 'the later Middle Ages now appear as an age of turbulence and complexity',² the social, economic and demographic characteristics and evolutions that the era witnessed are particularly difficult to schematise. And yet, buried somewhere within that cluster of characteristics and evolutions, there was much that lies at the very core of what most historians understand to have divided the 'medieval' from the '(early) modern'. It is little wonder, then, that few social historians are bold, or foolhardy, enough to try to span this era. But evolutionary

¹ ERO D/AER 2/6.² Morgan, *Oxford history of Britain*, p. 193.

schemes to explain that transition are not altogether lacking in recent historiography.

Probably the most influential model of change within England during this period is a cyclical model, arising from renewed attention in the post-war years to quantitative economic history and first adumbrated by M. M. Postan.³ This understanding of late-medieval society places prime emphasis upon the long-term relationship between aggregate population and agrarian resources as chief determinant of prices, wages, living standards and land utilisation. Pressures of people upon land as the English population reached its medieval peak in the decades around 1300, the extermination of roughly one-third of the country's people in the Black Death of 1348–9, and more than a century of demographic stagnation and agrarian contraction thereafter: all these had far-reaching effects not only upon England's economy but also upon the structure of rural society, effects which in some, though by no means all, cases would be reversed in the next wave of demographic expansion in the 1500s.

Somewhat counterpoised to cyclical models of this sort are unilinear schemes, the most vehemently expressed being that posed by Marxist historiography.⁴ Under such views a complex of political, legal, social and economic power relationships approached crisis point by the later fourteenth century. Out of the trauma of that crisis a different social order eventually emerged: a fundamentally 'feudal' order gave way to a fundamentally 'capitalist' one. Other unilinear schemes of different ideological stripes, whether concerned with the transformation of state power and the establishment of a more modern apparatus of monarchical or parliamentary rule, or of ecclesiastical settlement and the institutional and religious implications of the Protestant Reformation, none the less emphasise those aspects of English society that were irreversibly broken off from their late-medieval antecedents.

Putting these schemes and theories into such uncompromisingly foreshortened forms does, of course, risk caricaturing them. What is more noteworthy, though, is that all these schemes tend to presuppose that such wide-ranging changes must have been accompanied by

³ These arguments find their classic expression in Postan, *The medieval economy and society*; more recent mainstream writers of medieval English economic history follow Postan's lead to a large extent, e.g. Miller and Hatcher, *Medieval England*; Bolton, *The medieval English economy*; Hatcher, *Plague, population and the English economy*.

⁴ The classic exposition to this 'crisis' debate on the European-wide scale is contained in Hilton, ed., *The transition from feudalism to capitalism*; a more recent synthetic statement is Martin, *Feudalism to capitalism*. The unease with which Marxist historiography still contemplates demography is exemplified by the essays in Aston and Philpin, eds., *The Brenner debate*. Some perceptive critical remarks are made concerning the meaning of these changes by Glennie, 'In search of agrarian capitalism'.

transformations in English society at its most basic levels: those of family, household, neighbourhood and parish, and of individual English men's and women's experiences of them. A recent polemical debate concerning the origins of English 'individualism' demonstrated, if nothing else, how self-evident it is to most historians of the period that these basic levels of English society must have been fundamentally affected by all that was going on around them.⁵

This book is an attempt to disentangle one small piece of this large puzzle. It is a study of rural social structure – that much-banded-about term being taken here to mean, broadly, patterns of common people's migration, settlement, marriage and work, along with associated patterns of material and mental culture. Each of these experiences is comprehensible only within the matrix of all the others. This study takes as one of its points of departure the immense body of knowledge that has been gained over the last twenty years or so – much more, alas, than can ever be recovered about previous centuries – about England's early-modern social structure. Recent studies have concluded beyond reasonable doubt that from the mid-sixteenth until well into the eighteenth century, English rural society was characterised by a cluster of features at some odds with traditional depictions of its medieval precursors. In early-modern English rural society, men and women were highly mobile, married late and resided mostly in small nuclear households, and their behaviour in all these respects was keenly sensitive to their economic environment and its changes across time and space.⁶ And so this study deliberately sets up what is known empirically about these later centuries as a benchmark against which to gauge late-medieval England's 'medievality', and seeks to find ways to measure the similarities and differences.

This book is also a local study of rural life in a particular corner of England at the end of the middle ages: a district in the northern and central areas of the county of Essex, little more than 500 square miles, and probably containing no more than 20,000 people at any point in the fifteenth century. 'The district', as this study's shorthand for it will often be, can be formally defined as the Hundreds – administrative divisions larger than townships but smaller than counties – of Chelmsford, Dunmow, Freshwell, Hinckford and Uttlesford (see Figure I.1).

⁵ The debate referred to here is that ensuing from Macfarlane, *Origins of English individualism*. See, in particular, Hilton, 'Individualism and the English peasantry'; White and Vann, 'The invention of English individualism'; Poos and Bonfield, 'Law and individualism'.

⁶ The most recent literature at time of writing this is cited in the appropriate chapters below. The single most important study in this context is Wrigley and Schofield, *Population history of England*.

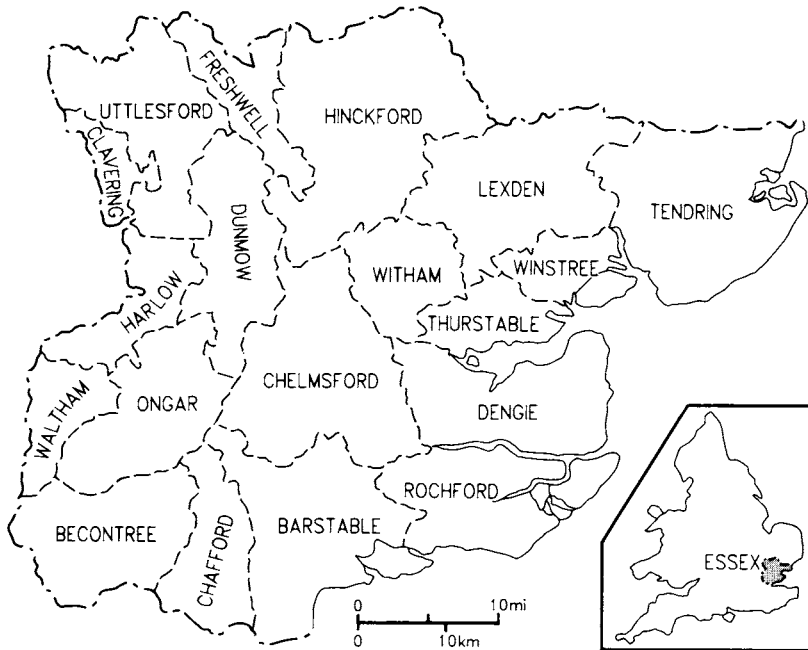


Figure I.1 The hundreds of medieval Essex

But what distinguished this district as a unit was a handful of measurable features of its local economy and social structure: among others, a high density of population, an unusually marked development of rural industry (especially textiles), a large degree of social and economic differentiation, and a propensity toward religious nonconformity and violent agrarian unrest.

This district was by no means, then, a 'typical' corner of England at the time, if there were such a thing. In fact, in many ways its social structure exhibited features (as much of this book will be taken up with showing) usually regarded as characteristic of England well after the middle ages closed. It was, in that sense, more complex than English society in this period has conventionally been regarded. Whether its social structure was indeed so precocious as all this would imply would become clear only after much study of other places, and such a claim need not be pressed here. But case studies of places on the sharp end of change, if such this district was, are often useful test cases of the limits of chronological evolution, for to understand the limiting case is to appreciate better the factors contributing to that very same change.

To propose a district as the subject of local study of social structure

in medieval England is something of a departure from recent norms. Studies of individual villages or communities, both in the middle ages and in the early-modern period, have been among the most illuminating recent contributions to social history.⁷ Village studies offer many advantages, not least in their offering a scale of enquiry that allows individuals and families to be reconstituted through painstaking linkage of their many appearances in different documentary contexts. Village studies also mesh well with the geographical limits of the manor, the institution that generated some of the most useful records of medieval rural life. But village studies also pose difficulties. Manorial-court records, so rich for some aspects of village society, have their limits, and fall some way short of substitutes for complete registers of demographic events.⁸ Moreover, they become rather less informative in precisely this period, because most manors' jurisdictional powers were irrevocably ebbing away in the later fourteenth century with the eclipse of serfdom and the seigneurial order it entailed. On the other hand, there are many other sources – church- and royal-court records, tax lists, central-government tenurial records and wills, for example – that may cover particular communities sparsely or not at all, but when taken in the aggregate present meaningfully large bodies of evidence at larger geographical levels. And despite the variations of local economy and society even at the sub-county level, it will still be necessary to treat some bodies of evidence in this study at the county level, and to go to other portions of Essex or even just outside the county's borders for evidence entirely lacking within the strictly defined district.

The nature of the evidence also makes it necessary to pretend at times that 1350–1525 is a period of some characteristic coherence. That is to say, where only one body of evidence from some specific point within the period is available for a particular analytical problem, one can do little more than cautiously take that evidence as somehow generally representative of the period as a whole, with informed speculation about the changes that lay on either side of that point. For changes there of course were; and if the following chapters appear in places to treat the period as an undifferentiated block of time, that

⁷ Some noteworthy examples of such studies include Wrightson and Levine, *Poverty and piety*; McIntosh, *Autonomy and community*; and several of the essays included in Smith, ed., *Land, kinship and life-cycle*.

⁸ These issues are discussed in Poos and Smith, 'Legal windows onto historical populations?'; Razi, 'The use of manorial court rolls'; Poos and Smith, 'Shades still on the window'; Razi, 'The demographic transparency of manorial court rolls'.

must not be taken to imply that the era lacked its own internal rhythms.

Ultimately, the documents that medieval England has left exposed to the scrutiny of social-structural historians will never be as satisfactory as the parish registers, household listings, settlement examinations and diaries with which students of post-medieval England have been blessed. This book must, then, seek to recreate a district by combining as many different bodies of evidence as are available. And it turns out that north-central Essex is unusually well provided with material for the reconstruction of demography and social structures in this period. Even so, for only some aspects of local economy and society will this evidence be anything like unequivocal. All the more necessary, therefore, does this fact make it to construct a holistic picture. If a number of patterns that individually are less than conclusive still point in one direction, that direction must surely be the more credible. Many of these sources are oblique, in the sense that they were generated for purposes even further removed from the interests of twentieth-century historians than is usually the case with social-history sources. Extra effort is required, then, to transform their data to forms even generally comparable with later material.

It is one of the primary assumptions of this book that in historical research which is oriented towards the social sciences, scrutiny of both raw materials and the processes required to extract meaningful patterns from them must be rigorous, systematic, explicitly articulated, and replicable. Concern with the process of derivation is part of the telling, even at the risk of intruding into the story itself. The chapters that follow address many problems that only quantitative data can meaningfully illuminate, and it is inherent in the nature of the evidence from this period that calculations from records like the later-fourteenth-century poll-tax returns or manorial rentals demand especially careful explication.

On the other hand, manorial-court cases, depositions rendered before ecclesiastical courts, and evidence taken before royal tenurial inquests have left much in the way of narrative or anecdotal accounts. The present study also uses these accounts extensively. But the Essex countryfolk who made their fleeting appearances on the historical stage in these contexts almost all remain just names, and to understand administrative context is vital for assessing the meaning of their stories. In fact, the importance of evidence of a legal nature for the chapters that follow is a recurrent theme. Discourses upon the nature of evidence and upon how one must work with it have been kept to a minimum in the following pages, and where possible they are rele-

gated to footnotes or appendices.⁹ To separate such matters entirely from the analysis, though, would be to risk damage to the analysis itself.

What follows does not aspire to total reconstruction of the district in the period, for such is impossible. To state merely one of the most obvious limitations, the experiences of rural women in this as in most preindustrial societies – experiences that were critical to the demographic makeup of this society, to say nothing of their claim to a commensurate share in its material and mental culture – are perforce more difficult to recover, though necessary to infer. The following chapters can be read, rather, as a series of interlocking essays, each confronting a specific knot of problems but all contributing to an edifice. What runs through them is a concern to see each knot as part of a larger web. That is, in fact, what this world was.

⁹ It has been unavoidable to exclude from the main text some lengthy discussions, for example of calculations from the poll-tax returns (Chapter 7), consistory-court depositions (Chapter 8), or testimony rendered at proof-of-age hearings (Chapter 9). Appropriate cross-references are given elsewhere when these bodies of material are referred to. Appendices at the end of this study discuss in more detail the poll-tax data, derivations of time-series data for land rents, prices and wages, and evidence for fulling mills as an index of the rural cloth industry.

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PART II

'Country-dwellers, common folk and craftsmen'

A chronicler's description of a rural mob at Pleshey, 1400¹

The central and northern district of Essex during the later middle ages contained a quite distinctive configuration of social, economic and occupational groups, and of local economic and settlement geography. By the early fourteenth century, at least half of local households were smallholders or landless, drawn into wage labour or artisanal by-employment. Unlike what may have happened in other regions of England, this situation did not change appreciably after the Black Death of 1348–9 extinguished one-third or more of the district's residents. To the contrary, marked disparity of landholding and occupation continued to characterise the area well beyond the close of the medieval period. Hence much of the following chapters will address the factors contributing to this situation, their ultimate implications for local social structure, and the differences in experiences that different groups within the local population underwent.

The district was very densely populated during the period. Besides helping to account for economic disparity, two further corollaries of population density were market dependence and occupational complexity, both probably stemming from local circumstances rather than the influence of external urban centres such as London. In fact, the economic typology of local communities did not make for sharp demarcations between 'urban' and 'rural'. Craftsmen and retailers permeated the smallest villages and the smallest satellite hamlets of larger settlements.

As in most of England, the post-Black Death period witnessed shifts

¹ Thompson, ed., *Chronicon Adae de Usk*, p. 42, describing how the Earl of Huntingdon, imprisoned at Pleshey after an abortive *coup* attempt, was taken and beheaded by a mob: '... per paganes captus ... per plebeyos et mecanicos decapitatur ...'. See also below, Chapter 11.

10 *'Country-dwellers, common folk and craftsmen'*

in local agriculture and land use as animals gained in relative importance to grain. The district's settlement and field systems did, however, mitigate against disruptive transformations of the rural landscape, which in this district has remained remarkably unchanged over the centuries. At the same time as agriculture contracted, however, rural-based clothmaking expanded rapidly in importance here, absorbing significant numbers of people from the countryside. Rural industry in the district comprised a loose network of individuals, working part-time in different phases of the production process, instead of a classic putting-out or cottage industry. Local economy and social structure thus complemented one another, as many of the land-poor were absorbed into clothmaking and other artisanal work.

One of the most tangible artefacts of economic differentiation in the district was the rural houses that locals occupied, still standing in surprisingly large numbers. Houses grew in size and in the variation of their living spaces, though this was primarily the experience of better-off agriculturalists. Local houses were thus flexible enough to accommodate a variety of household sizes and types. They were, in that sense, a microcosmic mirror of the social structure that fitted into them.

1

People, land and occupations

There are many ways to approach the study of an historical rural society. One of the most revealing is to begin by inspecting cross-sections of its economic composition, for doing so can lead to many insights into the nature of that society that are not necessarily obvious at the outset. In this respect the two most revealing indices that late-medieval Essex sources can provide are landholding profiles and occupational structures.

The rural economy of northern and central Essex in the later middle ages was a mixture of farming, crafts or industry, and trading, and the basic unit of production in this economy was the household, with family labour inputs supplemented, at times heavily, with hired workers. And yet households differed widely in their endowments of land or other capital, and at least half of all the families in the district during the later fourteenth and fifteenth centuries derived much or most of their income from wages earned from others. Landholding and occupation were therefore intricately intertwined. Later sections of this study will observe that many demographic and other aspects of life in late-medieval Essex differed considerably between different occupational groups, so a first step towards understanding the significance of these experiences is to be quite precise about how the groups were configured.

Within any traditional agrarian society the landholding profile – the distribution of landholdings of different sizes among its population – bears much influence upon the nature of social relationships and economic development. It is unlikely that any such society could be found in which every household, family or individual enjoyed an absolutely equal share in land.¹ But although distributions of landholding sizes are only an imperfect measure of economic inequality in any

¹ Hilton, 'Reasons for inequality'.