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978-0-521-78954-7 - A Social History of England, 1200-1500

Edited by Rosemary Horrox and W. Mark Ormrod

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A SOCIAL HISTORY OF ENGLAND, 1200-1500

What was life really like in England in the later middle ages? This comprehensive introduction explores the full breadth of English life and society in the period 1200–1500. Opening with a survey of historiographical and demographic debates, the book then explores the central themes of later medieval society, including the social hierarchy, life in towns and the countryside, religious belief, and forms of individual and collective identity. Clustered around these themes a series of authoritative essays develops our understanding of other important social and cultural features of the period, including the experience of war, work, law and order, youth and old age, ritual, travel and transport, and the development of writing and reading. Written in an accessible and engaging manner by an international team of leading scholars, this book is indispensable both as an introduction for students and as a resource for specialists.

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
 Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo

Cambridge University Press
 The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
 Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521789547

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First published 2006

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data

A social history of England, 1200–1500 / edited by Rosemary Horrox and W. Mark Ormrod.
 p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-521-78345-3 (hardback)

ISBN-10: 0-521-78345-3 (hardback)

ISBN-13: 978-0-521-78954-7 (pbk.)

ISBN-10: 0-521-78954-0 (pbk.)

1. Great Britain – Social life and customs – 1066-1485. 2. Great Britain – History – Medieval period, 1066-1485. I. Horrox, Rosemary. II. Ormrod, W. M., 1957–
 DA185.s63 2006
 942.03 – dc22

ISBN-13 978-0-521-78345-3 hardback

ISBN-10 0-521-78345-3 hardback

ISBN-13 978-0-521-78954-7 paperback

ISBN-10 0-521-78954-0 paperback

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Preface

This book is intended as a comprehensive and accessible account of the society of England between the early thirteenth and the late fifteenth centuries. The dates 1200–1500 conventionally describe the ‘later middle ages’ in England, but are obviously not impermeable: some of the contributions that follow necessarily take certain matters back to the eleventh and forward to the sixteenth centuries. The book is organised around five large chapters which provide analyses of the historiographical background and the debate about demography (chapter 1), the social hierarchy and attitudes towards it (chapter 2), the experience of life in towns (chapter 6) and in the countryside (chapter 7), the forms of religious belief current in the society (chapter 11) and the other kinds of identity, individual and collective, that built on and helped to inform social organisation (chapter 15). Around these chapters is a series of shorter, more specialised studies that develops further some of the major themes from war to work, law to literacy, consumerism to magic.

The book thus aims to respond to a new agenda of social history which has extended the range of the sub-discipline from a preoccupation with the material existence of the lower orders to include a range of non-material aspects of life including attitudes to work and to crime, the development of ideas about nationality, and the existence (or otherwise) of self-consciousness or ‘individualism’. As such, this book draws no distinction between ‘social’ and ‘cultural’ history, and tries to represent the experience of those who lived in the later middle ages in as broad a manner as possible. An important part of this holistic approach involves an understanding that interpretation of historical evidence is often unstable, reflecting in turn the patchy nature of the evidence. This is particularly evident with regard to the estimates of the population of England before and after the Black Death, and we have aimed not

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to impose arbitrary figures but to allow different contributors to set out their own arguments on this important and still controversial theme.

In the notes the place of publication is London, unless otherwise stated.

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Abbreviations

<i>Ag. Hist. Rev.</i>	<i>Agricultural History Review</i>
<i>AmHR</i>	<i>American Historical Review</i>
BL	British Library
<i>EcHR</i>	<i>Economic History Review</i>
EETS	Early English Text Society
<i>EHR</i>	<i>English Historical Review</i>
<i>JEH</i>	<i>Journal of Ecclesiastical History</i>
<i>JMH</i>	<i>Journal of Medieval History</i>
<i>P&P</i>	<i>Past and Present</i>
PRO	Public Record Office (The National Archives)
RS	Rolls Series
<i>TRHS</i>	<i>Transactions of the Royal Historical Society</i>