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978-0-521-08155-9 - A Medieval Society: The West Midlands at the End of the Thirteenth Century

R. H. Hilton

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

This book is about the society of peasants, townsmen, knights, barons and clergy who inhabited a part of the English midlands. It is a description of this society at the end of the thirteenth and the beginning of the fourteenth century, roughly the period covered by the reign of Edward I (1272–1307). It is one of the difficulties of writing about a period when documentary evidence is, if not exactly scanty, at any rate unevenly distributed, that one must take one's evidence over this rather long span of time on the assumption that the various social classes and the relationships between them did not substantially change during this period. This may well be an unjustified assumption, but in this case my study of this society is intended to set the stage for a later work covering the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in which I will attempt to show how things changed during that longer period.

As the reader will see, I have not hesitated to use evidence from the twelfth century or earlier in order to explain how a situation, which I attempt to describe in more detail as it was at the end of the thirteenth century, came about. On the other hand, I have attempted to keep my use of evidence later than the 1320s to a minimum. The changes of the mid-fourteenth century were so great that it is very misleading to use examples from, say, about the year 1400 to illustrate any aspect of social life a century earlier. Only when an aspect of the earlier period is a complete blank (as in the case of the building of the houses of the peasants) have I risked using the later evidence.

There was probably a certain (quite relative) stability of social and economic conditions in the last two or three decades of the thirteenth and the first decade of the fourteenth century. This was the period when the rising curve of population growth was flattening

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out, when almost all land capable of use with the techniques available was under cultivation or used for pasture. In fact, such was the demand for foodstuffs that the area under the plough had encroached so dangerously on the land (such as meadow, pasture and wood) which was needed for keeping livestock, that there was a serious shortage of animals. Since the animals not only provided meat and pulling power but the only good manure that was known to the medieval agriculturalist, this shortage was one of the most serious weaknesses of the economy.

The late thirteenth century was also the period when urban industry and commerce were reaching the limit of a major phase of expansion. European towns and merchants, above all those of Italy and the Low Countries, achieved during this period a degree of wealth and social and political influence which makes one compare this phase of the urbanization of western and central Europe with that of the early Roman Empire. Merchants were not rulers, however, and governments had enough power to be able to divert a considerable proportion of the cash which was in circulation, thanks to the vigour of local and international trade, into their own coffers. It was then spent almost entirely on war. But wealthy warring states also needed, besides soldiers, a considerable administrative apparatus. This then is also a period of the rapid growth of the machinery of government, of which the English kingdom provided no mean example.

England at this time had come through a period of political upheaval and civil war. Historians differ in their interpretation of the politics of this period, but there is general agreement that the great lay and ecclesiastical landowners of the kingdom were very wealthy, powerful in relation to all other social classes and sufficiently self-conscious as a class to hold in check a king of strong will, considerable ambitions and great material resources. This baronial class had become divided during the so-called Barons' Wars, and there continued, as a matter of course, to be divisions of interest within it after the wars were over. Nevertheless, there was no European aristocracy which, as a class, had the same power in the state as the English barons. We should remember this when we consider the local people over whom they ruled.

But if, when considering the problems of regional society, we remember the wider social and political pressures of the period, we must also bear in mind other general conditioning factors. In a

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peasant society which relied for its livelihood on grain crops, the weather, or rather the effect of the weather on the crops, was of primary importance. In 1315 and 1316 there was a famine of European dimensions, so severe that some historians have thought it a more important factor than the bubonic plagues of mid-century in causing the prolonged economic crisis which they suppose to have dominated the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.¹ During this famine, the price of wheat on occasions reached a price of more than 20s a quarter. Conditions were never as bad as this during the period which interests us. However, continual fluctuations in the price of various grains must have brought an atmosphere of great uncertainty to the majority of the population. Low agricultural prices were not mourned by the agricultural population as they are now, since the first charge on the harvest was the subsistence of the peasant family. Low prices resulted from abundance, high prices from dearth and these meant high mortality. The great pioneer of agricultural history, J. E. Thorold Rogers, thought that at the end of the thirteenth century, a price per quarter of wheat in excess of 6s was high, though recent expert writing has suggested that only when the price of wheat rose above 7s a quarter did the poorer peasants experience more than ordinary privation.² Peasants did not of course depend on wheat alone for their own subsistence. They grew wheat primarily to sell, relying much more on rye, barley and oats for their own food. In the west midlands it was barley and oats or a mixture of the two called 'drage' or 'dredge' which was the principal alternative to wheat. Barley prices followed the fluctuations of wheat prices fairly closely, so the conditions of production as well as of supply and demand must have been similar. Oats, however, were less harmed by wet weather than the other two grains, and tended to be an alternative to wheat and barley. Fluctuations in oat prices were therefore less violent.

Grain prices fluctuated not only from year to year, but within the year. After the harvest they tended to be low and then to rise progressively until the eve of the following harvest. This favoured those who were well enough off to keep a supply in reserve, but most peasants had to sell their surplus quickly in order to raise cash. When, therefore, we write about the average grain price of a particular year, it must be understood that this average is based on wide variations within the year. Between 1265, the year in which Simon de Montfort's army was defeated at Evesham, and the great famine

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years of 1315 and 1316, the average price of wheat exceeded 6s a quarter in seventeen years. It was fairly high in the early 1270s and early 1280s and reached famine levels in 1294 and 1295. There was another bad period, the end of the first decade of the fourteenth century. On the other hand, the late 1260s, the late 1270s and the early 1300s were years of reasonably low prices, while the late 1280s was a period of abundance. Within these broader trends however, there were more or less considerable year by year fluctuations, which, it seems clear, resulted almost entirely from the effects of the weather on the harvest. For we can take it that prices during the period were not affected by any alterations to the currency.

The years between the end of the Barons' Wars and the great famine of 1315–6 did not therefore know any abnormal natural, political or social catastrophe. Conflicts between peasants, and landowners, townsmen and countrymen, laymen and clerics, kings and barons occurred as normal incidents of medieval society at this particular stage of its development. The well-known legislative and military activity of Edward I seems rather less significant at the level of the village, hundred and county than it appears to be in the writings of national chroniclers, or in the records of the central government. Perhaps the fiscal and administrative pressures resulting from the king's constant wars against his neighbours made more acute existing tensions in regional society by the turn of the century but such changes are difficult to measure. It is not suggested that in medieval England the political antagonisms and combinations of king and aristocracy had nothing to do with the problems of the rest of society. It is possible, however, that by looking from the bottom upwards we might get a more accurate picture of the whole of society, and of the state, than if we look at society from on high, assuming that king, council, Parliament, chancery, exchequer and household were as important and effective as they would have wished to be.

A note on medieval monetary values

It is very risky to attempt to give modern equivalents of medieval monetary values. The increase in the prices of different common commodities since the middle ages has not been at the same rate. It is not right, therefore, to draw conclusions about the general rate of

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increase from a few examples. Some prices (the price per quarter of grain for example) are mentioned in the introduction and in other chapters. But perhaps the best way to appreciate the enormous difference in monetary values is to consider the payment of labour. At the end of the thirteenth century, the daily wage, in cash, without food provided, of a skilled worker such as a carpenter could be 3d. With food provided it would be $1\frac{1}{2}$ d or 2d. An unskilled labourer, man as well as woman, would get 1d or $1\frac{1}{2}$ d without food. Permanent farm servants got varying rates. Ploughmen and carters usually got about 5s a year in cash with an issue of a quarter of mixed grains every ten to thirteen weeks. The value of other perquisites is not calculable. There are, of course, further variations in daily and annual wage rates, as between occupations and districts. This note does not aim to discuss these, but simply to give one or two typical figures to help the reader to get prices quoted in the book in perspective.

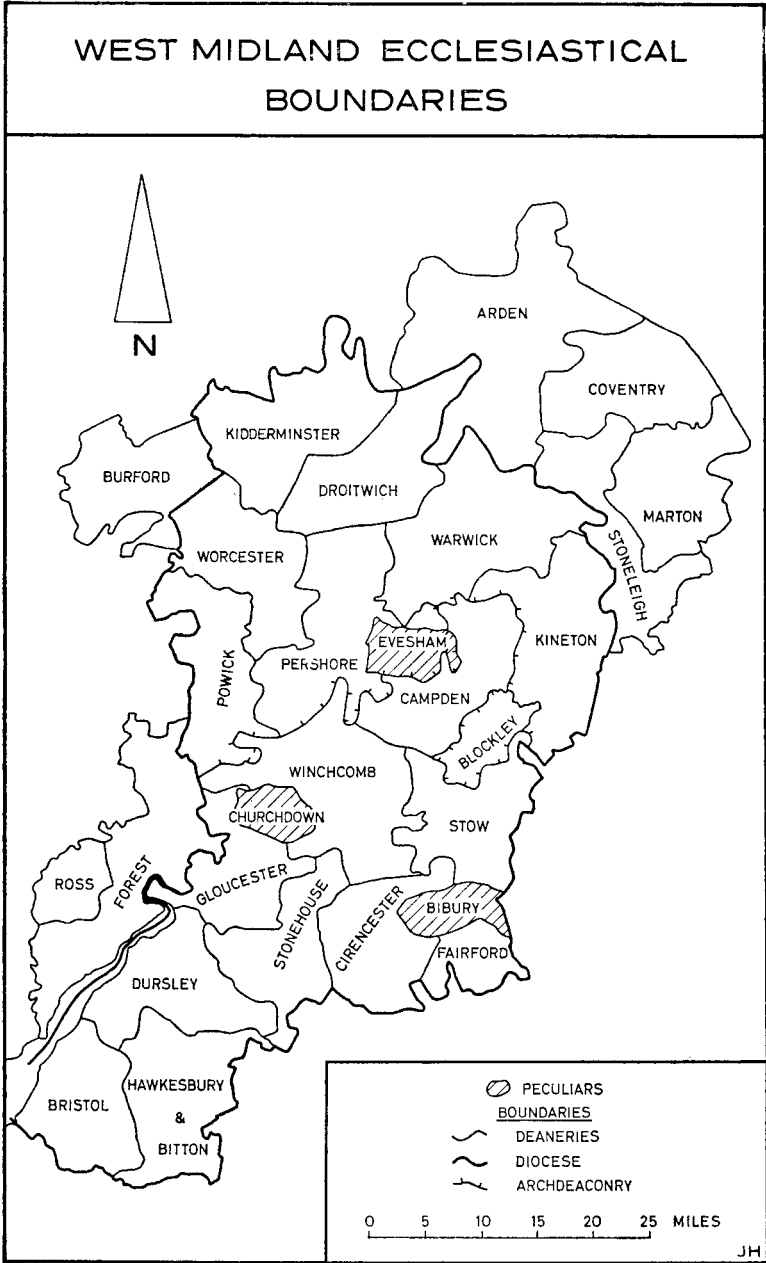
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CHAPTER 1

THE REGION

There were few countries of medieval Europe which were as unified as the English kingdom at the end of the thirteenth century. One reason was that it was small, both as regards population to be controlled and distances to be travelled. It is true that the Marches of Wales, the north-western counties from Cheshire to the north, and the country north of the Vale of York were somewhat remote from the centre of government, and apt to be ruled by the local baronage with little help from the king and his officials. But these were very sparsely settled areas. The weight of England was in the lowland zone, south of York and Chester, east of Hereford and Shrewsbury. It was there that the bulk of the population of town and village, city and seaport, was to be found, with its attention already focused in the direction of London and Westminster, an urban concentration overwhelmingly big compared even with Bristol, the next largest town, and with York, the second capital.

Even so, the regional differences of medieval England were by no means insignificant. The English kingdom had only known three centuries of political unification under the Wessex, Norman and Angevin dynasties. In spite of the commercial growth of London and the south-east, there was nothing like a national market for agricultural or industrial products. The ruling class still spoke a language foreign to the majority of the population, and the regional dialects of English were still strongly marked. While there were important factors making for intercommunication, such as the journeys of merchants, government officials, barons and their servants visiting their scattered estates, judges on circuit, and ecclesiastics, most people lived their whole lives within a twenty- or thirty-mile radius of their place of birth. It should be said, however, that

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within these circumscribed limits there was a great deal of mobility. Middle and lower class Englishmen (and women) may not normally have travelled long distances, but they moved about over shorter distances a great deal. Consequently, regions in which communications were relatively easy developed something of a regional identity, and can be studied by the social historian in greater depth than is possible even for so small a state as the English kingdom. But such regions were by no means hermetically sealed from their neighbours. Naturally, they overlapped at the edges, and for reasons already given, their more influential inhabitants were in the habit of travelling considerable distances for business or pleasure.

The medieval west midlands is a region with extremely vague frontiers when considered from the standpoint of economic and social structure. Some would include within the region the counties of Shropshire and Herefordshire. But those really belong to the Marches of Wales, a regional society well worth studying in its own right. Others would include Staffordshire. But that county rather looks north and east to Derbyshire and the Trent Valley.* There was, however, an ancient nucleus to the west midlands which persisted as a unit of economic, social and cultural life throughout the middle ages, as well as being a unit of ecclesiastical administration. I refer to the diocese of Worcester. As has been convincingly demonstrated, this diocese had the same boundaries as the ancient Anglo-Saxon kingdom of the Hwicce, which was absorbed into the larger midland kingdom of Mercia in the eighth century.¹ The Hwiccan kingdom was occupied in the early days of the Anglo-Saxon conquest by Saxons from Wessex and the Thames Valley as well as by Anglians moving across midland England from the Wash. But these invaders found an already ancient and strongly rooted native culture with its focus in the Cotswold Hills and the Avon and Severn valleys. The small frontier kingdom, in the manner of the times, also became, after the conversion of the English, a diocese of the church, served by priests from their minster in the capital of the kingdom at Worcester.

* The west midlands of modern times which includes the counties which I exclude is determined partly by the existence of the great Birmingham–Black Country conurbation. The centre of gravity has moved north as a result of post-medieval industrialization. Cf. *Birmingham and its regional setting: a scientific survey* (British Association, 1950).

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The diocese of Worcester, in the apparently illogical fashion of ecclesiastical topography, included the counties of Worcester and Gloucester almost entirely (except for the south-west corner of Gloucestershire and the north-west corner of Worcestershire, in Hereford diocese) but the eastern boundary of the diocese runs down the centre of Warwickshire, including Stratford-on-Avon, but excluding Coventry. This is because the counties were created after the Hwiccan kingdom had disappeared as a political entity. Coventry was in fact the seat of one of the two electoral chapters of the diocese which adjoins that of Worcester. This diocese was known during most of the middle ages and early modern times as that of Coventry and Lichfield, though in the twelfth century it was still called by its old name, the Bishopric of Chester. However, we shall include the whole of Warwickshire in our west midland region. Firstly, because even though county boundaries sometimes cut across natural regions their original creation as administrative units was not purely artificial, and their continuous history as units of taxation, government and jurisdiction added to their individuality. Secondly, Coventry itself, already by 1300 a large industrial and trading town, completed the commercial and therefore the social and economic unity of the west midland region whilst at the same time linking up this region with others and with the capital.

Like many regions of midland and southern England, the west midlands contained within it much variety as well as features which gave it unity. We must first describe their unifying features, for those provide our justification for studying the region as an entity. Foremost are the two major river valleys, those of the Severn and Avon. The Severn was, in the middle ages, navigable as far as Shrewsbury; merchants and shipmen argued that it should be free for navigation as far as the sea, and that the weirs put up by riparian landowners to catch fish were illegal.² Below Bridgnorth in Shropshire there were only two bridges, one at Worcester, and one at Gloucester. This of course enhanced the importance of both towns for it concentrated upon them many of the routes from England to Wales. The fact that Bristol, the second biggest town of thirteenth-century England, was close to the estuary of the Severn meant much both for the Severn river traffic itself and for the life of those districts through which the river flowed. Bristol was a contact with the world at large, from Iceland to the Mediterranean. It imported and redistributed commodities from those foreign parts, often of course by

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road, but up the river too. Bristol itself being a market for agricultural commodities, the river was naturally busy with craft taking foodstuffs and raw materials down river to feed the town. This traffic was swelled by other riverside dwellers, for on or near the river's banks were to be found market towns (like Tewkesbury), villages, and landing places both for up and down river boats and for ferries.

The other principal river route of the region was the Avon which flows into the Severn at Tewkesbury. This river was not as navigable as the Severn. Attempts in medieval and early modern times to open it for through traffic from Tewkesbury to Warwick were unsuccessful. Consequently, it was mainly used for local traffic while goods going through to Coventry from the Severn valley had to go overland. River valleys are, however, important as channels of communication not only by boat, but also by foot and pack animal. Air photographs have recently confirmed for prehistoric and early historic times what we already knew from medieval documents, that the valley was a dense and homogeneous area of settlement from the area immediately south of Coventry as far as the confluence with the river Severn.³

The road system which bound the different parts of the region together, and with the outside world, is not easy to document, either historically or archaeologically, because of continual modifications and building, and because legal, administrative and similar documents refer to them usually only in passing. We do however know something of the main routes. The Fosse Way, coming from the south-west through Cirencester, ran across the Cotswolds and through Warwickshire to Watling Street, and was the main survivor in the west midlands of the Roman road system. There may have been a riverside road of Roman origin from Bristol to Worcester on the east bank of the Severn, though this is not certain. There was certainly a very important road from Worcester, through Droitwich and Birmingham, to Lichfield and the north. A Roman road, called in the middle ages, and now, Ryknield Street, ran south from Watling Street, passing a few miles west of Birmingham to cross the Avon at Bidford-on-Avon, climb the Cotswold ridge between Saintbury and Weston-sub-Edge and continue across the plateau to Bourton-on-the-Water, where it met the Fosse Way. Ryknield Street was joined at Alcester by another Roman road from Droitwich which then continued and crossed the Avon at Stratford. This