A community transformed

The manor and Liberty of Havering, 1500–1620

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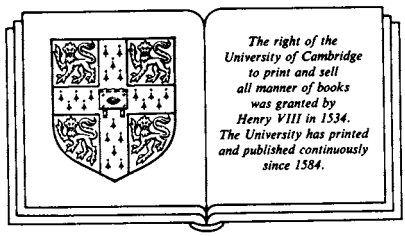

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Contents

	List of figures	*page* xi
	List of tables	xii
	Acknowledgements	xv
	Abbreviations	xvii
	Introduction	1
1	**Life and death**	8
	The demographic context	9
	The household unit	34
	Stages in the life cycle	45
2	**Changing economic patterns**	92
	Agriculture	94
	Crafts, trade, and Romford market	130
	Labour, money, and credit	155
	The economic role of the Crown	159
	Havering's relative wealth	165
3	**Religion**	176
	The clergy	178
	The religious beliefs and practices of the laity	187
	Ecclesiastical authority	211
	Lay activity within the parishes	219
	The church courts and social control	240
4	**Facets of a society in transition**	259
	Education, literacy, and the arts	259
	Charity and the care of the poor	276
	The roles of women	287

5 Havering's declining independence 297
The decreasing vitality of the manor court 298
The Liberty of Havering-atte-Bower 326
The extension of outside control over Havering 332
Havering's reactions to the loss of autonomy 350

6 Overt conflict, 1607–19 364
Conflicts among the leading families 364
The Crown on the offensive, 1608–19 389
The Liberty of Havering after 1620 398

Conclusion 402

Appendices
A Minimum numbers of Havering crafts- and tradespeople, 1460–1619 412
B Officers of the manor, Liberty, and park of Havering, 1500–1620 421
C Corrected parish register figures, Romford, 1562–1619 427
D Corrected parish register figures, Hornchurch, 1576–1619 432
E Clergymen within the parishes of Hornchurch and Romford, 1500–1620 436
F Havering wills, 1500–1619 441
G Surviving Havering manor court rolls, 1500–1620 442
H Obtaining confirmation of Havering's expanded charter, 1588 444

Bibliography 447
Index 458

Figures

Intro. 1 The manor and Liberty of Havering-atte-Bower, 1500–1620 *page* 3
1.1 Estimated population of Havering, 1524–1620 10
1.2 Vital statistics, Romford and Hornchurch 15
1.3 Combined vital statistics for Havering (Romford plus Hornchurch) 16
1.4 Number of burials annually: Romford, Hornchurch, and nationally 18
1.5 Vital statistics: Watford, Bromley, and Romford 21
2.1 Activity of the Havering land market, 1450–1619 101
2.2 The 'economic pyramid' in Havering, 1524 and 1675 171
3.1 Number of people reported to the church court from Romford and Hornchurch for selected types of social misbehaviour 252
5.1 The administrative divisions of Havering, 1500–1620 318

Tables

1.1	Estimated total population of Havering, 1562–1619	*page* 12
1.2	Baptism/marriage and baptism/burial ratios by quinquennia, 1562–1619	13
1.3	Years of crisis mortality and plague: Romford, Hornchurch, London, and Essex, 1560–1626	20
1.4	Infant mortality rates, Romford and elsewhere	23
1.5	Immigration: place of birth of Havering deponents before the archdeacon's court, 1580–1620	28
1.6	Immigration: age at arrival at Havering	30
1.7	Immigration: occupations of male deponents	31
1.8	Distribution of stated household sizes in Romford, 1562, by region	36
1.9	Place within the household of stated members of legible families, Romford, 1562	37
1.10	Stated and projected household sizes, Romford, 1562	38/40
1.11	Mean Romford household size, 1562, by occupation of male head	41
1.12	Family status and replacement rates of male Havering testators, 1565–90, by occupation	48
1.13	Number of servants per Romford household, 1562	57
1.14	Number of servants per Romford household, 1562, by occupation of male head	59
1.15	Bequests to relatives, kin, friends, and godchildren by Havering testators, 1565–90	86
2.1	Male occupations, 1560–1619	96
2.2	Types of Havering land transfers which came before the manor court, 1488–1617	103
2.3	Settlement of Havering land by male testators, 1565–90, by occupation	106

2.4	Continuity of landholding and/or resident families, 1497–1617	108
2.5	Distribution of sizes of holdings, 1352/3 and 1617–18	112
2.6	Landholding and background of 'the principal tenants' in 1617	114
2.7	Worth of the manor of Havering, 1481–1650	160
2.8	1524 lay subsidy assessments for Havering	166
2.9	1524 subsidy assessments: Havering and elsewhere	167
2.10	Geographical distribution of population and wealth in Havering, 1524 and 1675	168
2.11	Hearth tax figures, 1671–5: Havering and elsewhere	170
2.12	Number and type of hearths in Havering, 1675, by region	173
3.1	Religious content of Havering wills, 1535–65	189
3.2	Religious statements in Havering wills, 1560–1619, by occupation	192
3.3	Religious statements in wills of Havering men, 1560–1619, by region	194
3.4	Parish leaders of Romford, 1500–63: occupations and office-holding	232
3.5	Occupations of Romford and Hornchurch churchwardens and sidesmen, 1580–1615	234
3.6	Romford and Hornchurch churchwardens and sidesmen, 1580–1615: office-holding, land, and age	235
3.7	Romford and Hornchurch churchwardens and sidesmen, 1580–1615: religious views and literacy	237
3.8	Havering issues in the church court, 1560–1619: social misbehaviour and marriage	244
3.9	Havering issues in the church court, 1560–1619: wills, church-related problems, and other	246
4.1	Literacy of Havering testators, 1560–1619, by occupation	266
4.2	Literacy of male testators, 1560–1619, by region	270
4.3	Literacy of male testators, 1560–1619, by religious statement	271
4.4	Charitable bequests, 1565–90, by occupation of testators	278
4.5	The involvement of women in craftwork and trade, 1460–1619 (minimum figures)	288
4.6	Women in the 1524 subsidy and 1675 hearth tax lists	290
5.1	Private suits recorded by the Havering court, 1469–1564	302

5.2	Public business of the Havering court, 1490–1617	306
5.3	Occupations of homageman and elected officers, 1489–1505	321
5.4	Homagemen and officers, 1529–30, as assessed for the subsidy of 1524	322
5.5	Occupations of homagemen and elected officers, 1564–80 and 1601–17	324
5.6	Continuity of the families of the homagemen, 1516–1610	325
5.7	Havering cases heard in the central courts, 1480–1619	334
5.8	Felonies committed within Havering, 1560–1619, as heard by the assize justices and Essex quarter sessions	343
5.9	Perpetrators and victims of felonies committed within Havering, 1560–1619	345
6.1	Summary of occupations of local officials, 1489–1617	365
6.2	Background of Havering's leading families, 1600–19	368

Introduction

At no time during the later Middle Ages or early modern period was Havering-atte-Bower a typical English community. Although this royal manor and Liberty in Essex contained many features found in other places, new developments emerged here long before they became common elsewhere. Between 1200 and 1500, Havering's economic and political forms grew in a precocious fashion, marked by unusual personal freedom and widespread prosperity for the tenants, considerable co-operation among them in running their community, and exceptional independence from outside control.[1] By the end of the fifteenth century, Havering displayed many patterns and attitudes which would be seen elsewhere in England during the decades around 1600.

The community continued to change between 1500 and 1620, a process to be traced in this study. Havering's medieval characteristics were transformed over the course of the sixteenth century by demographic forces and pressure from the economy, religion, social and cultural forms, and local administration and law. This restructuring had several main consequences. The shared outlook of the later medieval years was disrupted and the willingness to work together for common goals weakened. Economic power and influence over religion and local government, formerly distributed among more than a hundred families of yeomen, husbandmen, and craftsmen/traders, were by 1620 concentrated into the hands of just a few gentlemen and nobles with great landed estates. Social control – both the punishment of crime and the regulation of personal behaviour – was likewise implemented now by the leading houses, who used the distribution of

[1] McIntosh, *A. and c.*, chs. 1–6.

poor relief to reinforce their authority.[2] Havering was also becoming integrated into a wider social and political context, its distinctive legal and administrative privileges abandoned. Yet beneath these changes certain stable features remained. The household unit retained its centrality, and common experiences while moving through the stages of the life cycle provided a shared base for all but the wealthiest and poorest families. By the early seventeenth century, Havering contained an array of features that were similar to aspects of English life more generally in the eighteenth century.

Not only is this history of intrinsic interest, the sources which document it are exceptionally rich and varied. Because Havering was a royal manor, many special records survive in the Crown's archives. Documents kept by the church are abundant, including wills and the marvellously rich information reported to the ecclesiastical courts. William of Wykeham's muniment tower at New College, Oxford has safeguarded a range of economic and religious records. The manor court rolls are divided between the Public Record Office in London and the Essex Record Office in Chelmsford, the latter holding a wide variety of private and county documents as well. Records from Havering's parishes include the registers of baptisms, marriages, and burials, financial accounts, and some extra bonuses like a list of communicants in Romford church from 1562, arranged by household. This wonderful array of sources is scattered between 80 collections at the Public Record Office, 35 collections at the Essex Record Office, and ten other archives in England and North America.

There are nevertheless some gaps. Because we have no diaries and few letters, we know little about relationships within families or between friends. This limitation has a particular effect upon our ability to discuss the roles of women, since more of their time was spent within the largely private world of the household and female friends. It was not possible to do systematic reconstitutions of Havering's families owing to the high level of geographic mobility and some holes in the parish registers. Nor do we know what Havering's literate population was reading or what people heard in sermons. We therefore cannot discuss local ideologies – what people thought about their society and lives. Still, the remarkable range of surviving records permits us to examine Havering between 1500 and 1620 from a wider set of vantage-points than has been possible for any other community

[2] Throughout this study the term 'social control' is used in the broadest sense of an effort by those people holding local power to enforce standards of behaviour which they consider appropriate and conducive to social wellbeing upon all members of the community; a technical sociological definition is not intended.

Fig. Intro. 1. The royal manor and Liberty of Havering-atte-Bower, 1500–1620

in this period. We are able to capture the breadth and diversity of local life in a way which one hopes may begin to approach reality.

Before turning to Havering during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, we may look briefly at the community's physical setting and medieval background. Located just 14 miles east of London, Havering was large in both area and population (see Figure Intro. 1).[3] The manor stretched northward from the banks of the Thames for more than 8 miles and contained 16,000 acres; it had *c.* 1,400–1,500 inhabitants around 1500 and 2,600–3,000 people by 1620. The region beside the river was valuable marsh, while the soil in the

[3] For the administrative divisions of Havering (sides and wards), see Figure 5.1 below.

southern part of the manor was light and easily worked but relatively infertile. In the north, heavy clay was suited to grazing and the production of wood. Three towns or villages had grown up within Havering, each with its own church or chapel, in addition to many smaller hamlets. The economic and administrative centre was the market town of Romford, straddling the main Essex road leading from London to Chelmsford and Colchester. Hornchurch village, located a few miles southeast of Romford, contained the original parish church of the entire manor. In the northwest lay the village of Havering-atte-Bower, adjacent to a royal hunting lodge and park.[4] New College, Oxford had impropriated the medieval parish, naming clergy to the three churches and taking all tithes. By the later fifteenth century, Romford town and the area north of the London road were acting as a separate parish; Hornchurch parish henceforth comprised only the southern half of the manor.

Between 1200 and 1460 Havering bore little resemblance to most English peasant communities.[5] The tenants were functionally free in personal terms and profited from an unrestricted land market, fully enclosed fields, woodland open to assarting, and the proximity of London. Romford was a major supplier of consumer goods to the city's traders who came to its weekly markets. The Crown was unable to tap the landed or mercantile income of Havering's residents because this was a privileged manor of the ancient royal demesne: rents and entry fines were frozen at their 1251 level, and local people were free from payment of market tolls. Further, the tenants were able to exercise unusual control over what went on within the community through the weakness of royal administration and the privileges of their own powerful manor court. Havering's ancient demesne status gave the court the right to hear a wide range of cases, and local juries had exceptional authority. Power was shared among nearly 200 middle-level families working 20–100 acres of land or supporting themselves through craftwork or trade. Together they addressed matters of importance to the community, resolving personal disputes and dealing with public problems. Royal supervision was normally minimal, and if the Crown did try to enforce its own prerogatives more actively, the tenants joined in resistance.

The period between 1460 and 1500 saw pronounced changes in

[4] Throughout this study, the village will be referred to as Havering-atte-Bower, while the manor and Liberty will normally be called Havering (although its formal name was the Liberty of Havering-atte-Bower). For placenames, see McIntosh, *A. and c.*, pp. 6–7.

[5] *Ibid.*, chs. 1–5.

many aspects of Havering's life.[6] In the 1450s and 1460s immigration climbed to an unprecedented level and remained active until around 1480. The newcomers included a few extremely wealthy tenants and many poor people. The established families of middling status who were accustomed to wielding power within the community were more stable and managed to retain their traditional authority. Both landholders and craftspeople were quick to respond to the new availability of labour. Since they had already been selling animals and goods to the London consumer market, they realised that larger units of land could now be profitably worked and the level of production of craftwork increased. But a heightened scale of production required more capital. Putting together the great holdings of 500 acres or more which were now economically advantageous was beyond the capacity of the existing tenants. Another development of the later fifteenth century solved this problem. In the 1460s three powerful outsiders with London and court connexions invested heavily if temporarily in Havering land. Sir Thomas Cook bought up *c.* 900 acres, Avery Cornborough acquired *c.* 1,200 acres, and Sir Thomas Urswick gained *c.* 500 acres.[7] Between them they held 11 of the 25 estates in Havering which were coming to be regarded as manors in their own right. The new tenants were in a position to develop the combined economic potential of extensive acreages, focused production for the market, readily available labour, resources for investment in agricultural stock and equipment, and the continuing demand of London.

The demographic and economic transitions of the later fifteenth century were accompanied by new religious concerns. The churchwardens of Hornchurch and Romford, the same men who dominated the manor court, built up stocks of land and animals with which to support repair of their churches, maintenance of roads, and assistance to the needy. In Romford they hired a priest to conduct services and a parish clerk. Lay fraternities or gilds not only supported altars or lights in the churches but, more significantly, hired their own priests. A chantry established in 1487 by Avery Cornborough used a lay

[6] *Ibid.*, ch. 6, and, for a broader context, McIntosh, 'Local change and community control'.

[7] Cook, a draper and Lord Mayor of London, was named KB by Edward IV in 1465; Cornborough was originally a west country merchant and MP for Cornwall who served as yeoman or esquire of the Crown to both Henry VI and Edward IV; Urswick was a successful lawyer who became recorder of London and the city's MP. Their decision to acquire large blocks of land near London presumably stemmed from the political uncertainties of the period and the relative immunity of land from royal confiscation: since they held their land through feoffees to their use rather than in their own name, the property could not be seized, whereas movable goods were far more vulnerable.

supervisory board to ensure that its priest carried out his appointed round of preaching in local churches. Through these actions, the laity acquired control over most of the priests within the community, sidestepping rather than overtly challenging the established clergy named by New College. One sees no lack of enthusiasm for religion *per se* but rather a desire to have strong lay participation and an active ministry. With the expansion of the number of clergymen came a rise in education. Several of the fraternity priests taught children, and the earliest surviving letters of local people date from the 1460s.

Havering also experimented with ways of dealing with the growing number of poor people. The first attempt was a dismal failure, for the hostel set up in Romford around 1450 to provide temporary housing for transient poor men was a centre of violent behaviour. It was allowed to fall into disuse in the 1490s. A more judicious definition of which people ought to receive help was reflected in the almshouse endowed by Roger Reede in the 1480s, specifically intended for Havering people of respectable, godly, and humble character. This establishment was operated by a group of trustees chosen from among the same men who ran the manor court and parishes.

Havering's autonomy in administrative and legal terms was expanded in 1465 when the tenants obtained a royal charter establishing the area as a formal Liberty. The Liberty had its own Justices of the Peace, one of them elected by the tenants and inhabitants, and its own coroner and clerk of the market. These officials henceforth carried out all functions performed elsewhere by regional or county bodies. During the later fifteenth century, the middling families who dominated the manor court and the wealthy newcomers who controlled the Liberty offices tackled local issues together. A gaol built in Romford for the Justices of the Peace quickly became a valuable weapon for the manor court, which could now hold people until trial, thus ensuring the appearance of reluctant parties in private suits and wrong-doers who could not produce guarantors. In public matters, the court and JPs dealt not only with traditional issues such as the maintenance of order and regulation of food and drink but also with some new topics, especially the social behaviour of the poor. Jurors reported upon men who played illegal games and frequented disorderly alehouses. In the broadest interpretation of its role, the court dealt with sexual misconduct, fining or expelling from the manor women and men whose actions violated the jurors' sense of appropriate standards.

In the later fifteenth century, then, Havering was a vigorous and independent community. Outside control was almost entirely absent, and the Crown as lord could be safely ignored. Although geographical

mobility was high, shared values permitted the leading newcomers to work side by side in the manor court and Liberty with men of intermediate status and longer residence. Together they provided a setting for profitable economic interactions and good social order. Among the self-supporting, established population, community solidarity was strong. Here one finds many features commonly associated with the period around 1600, in terms not only of demographic and economic developments but also of attitudes toward religion, the poor, and social behaviour. Aspects of 'puritanism' were present in Havering well before the introduction of Calvinist theology.

Our discussion of Havering's history between 1500 and 1620 will trace the major transformations and the elements of continuity through a series of chapters devoted to particular aspects of the community's life. We begin with the demographic context, looking at the impact of a rising population, high mortality, and active geographic mobility; the household unit and stages of the life cycle are then described. Economic change is considered in the second chapter, followed by a discussion of religion in Havering. The fourth chapter deals with three facets of a society in transition (education and the arts, charity and the poor, and the roles of women), while the fifth addresses the declining activity and independence of the manor court and Liberty. We can then examine the period of overt conflict between 1607 and 1619, when the transformations of the previous century came to a head. Rivalry between two of the dominant houses led to a bitterly disputed election for Havering's Justice of the Peace in 1607; lack of cohesion became dangerous when the Crown began a series of attacks on local rights and land titles in 1608. In the conclusion we shall summarise the main themes which traverse these chapters and consider the similarities and differences between Havering's situation in 1620 and that of England more generally in the eighteenth century. Comparisons between Havering and other places will be made throughout the discussion, highlighting the precocious nature of this community's development. All dates are given in the old style used in England at the time, except that the year is always taken to begin on 1 January; quotations from primary sources have been converted to modern spelling and punctuation. Christian names appear in modern form, while surnames are given in the spelling most commonly used by each individual, with variants noted in the index.