Microhistories: demography, society and culture in rural England, 1800–1930

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1

Place and people

I

Boughton-under-Blean, Dunkirk and Hernhill, the three adjoining parishes which are the focal point of this study, are situated in England's south east in the Blean area of Kent, about midway between the towns of Faversham and Canterbury. They have seldom featured in the history books. The district had a brief moment of infamy in 1838 when a messianic figure, the self-styled Sir William Courtenay, led an abortive rising of agricultural labourers which was crushed with some savagery by the military.[1] A London lawyer, sent out in the wake of the massacre to examine life in these parishes, was struck by the beauty of the place: 'The scenery of this district is peculiarly English. Gently rising hills and picturesque vales, covered with a rich herbage, or bearing the show of a minute and skilful husbandry, succeed to each other. Fields of waving corn are interspersed with gardens, hop-grounds and orchards.' He thought it particularly tragic that the 'moral condition of the inhabitants of so fair a spot should stand ... in such mournful contrast with its order and beauty'.[2] The land that so impressed our observer was part of the 'foothill' area of Kent, the county's main grain district and a centre for hops and fruit.[3] But the area was not all 'gently rising hills and picturesque vales'. It bordered the marshes, malaria country, habitat of mosquitoes as well as sheep. The outsider was taken with the orderly patchwork of orchards and fields, yet much of the land was wooded. Indeed the vast bulk of Dunkirk – four out of every five acres – was woodland, providing a

[1] See B. Reay, *The last rising of the agricultural labourers* (Oxford, 1990).
[2] F. Liardet, 'State of the peasantry in the county of Kent', in *Central Society of Education, third publication* (London, 1968), pp. 88–9 (first published 1839).
[3] A. Everitt, *Landscape and community in England* (London, 1985), p. 67.

Plate 2 The area between Faversham and Canterbury

steady profit for its owners and a hard living for the assortment of wood-workers and wood-stealers who harvested the oaks and chestnut underwood.

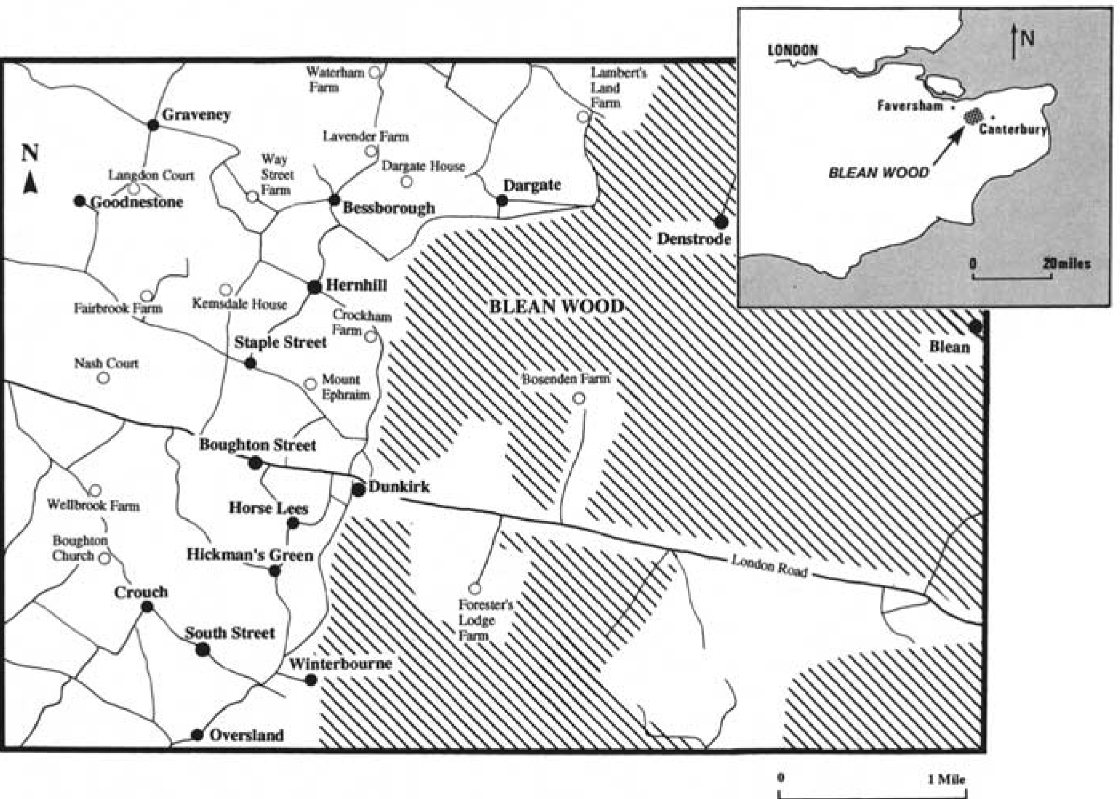
Although we may delude ourselves that we are stepping back in time whenever we leave the motorway and wind our way down a narrow hedged lane, the rural world of the past is truly a vanished country. So many visual markers have gone: the windmilled village sky-line, the wells, smoking chimneys, wash- and bake-houses, vault privies and cesspools, the small shops (the butcher's with its freshly killed meat hanging outside), the ubiquity of wood as a raw material. At the start of our period, we have to imagine an environment without the motor, where the horse and horseman ruled. It is a world we glimpse fleetingly in the story of the two seasoned draught horses who came cantering like colts at the sound of the voice of their waggoner, long-absent with pneumonia, wrenching the plough from the hands of his astonished stand-in, pushing one another to get to the old man first: 'you could hear them crying almost because they was so pleased to see their master, and the poor old boy stood and cried, he just stood and wept because his horses knew him'.[4] Then came the traction engines, mechanical mammoths which groaned between the narrow hedgerows until petrol replaced steam. But motorized vehicles were scarce in the early decades of this century and children could play on country roads. Now motorways cut huge grey swathes through the Blean countryside, covering old hop-fields and orchards with bitumen and cement. The children have vanished from the lanes. Petroleum is king.

The sounds were different too. We can no longer hear the dull 'thud, thud' of the flail echoing throughout the Blean, the repetitive 'clang' of the smithy, the never-ending sawing which drifted over the meadows and orchards from the Dunkirk woods. Even the language of the inhabitants has changed. Who hears these days of 'clung' (dull), 'cotchering' (gossiping), 'dunty' (stupid), 'ernful' (lamentable), 'feasy' (whining), 'flammed' (deceived), or 'glincey' (slippery)?[5]

Of course we pretend a link with the past when we stand outside the former home of a nineteenth-century craft family or admire an eighteenth-century farmhouse. But the threads are tenuous. Apart from a few substantial cottages built by a philanthropic landlord in the mid to late Victorian period, the homes of the labouring population have long

[4] Hernhill Oral History, A. Bones, b. 1912. The Hernhill Oral History Tapes are interviews which I carried out in 1991–2 as part of my research on the Blean area of Kent.

[5] W. D. Parish and W.F. Shaw, *A Dictionary of the Kentish Dialect and Provincialisms in use in the County of Kent* (London, 1887) (Kraus reprint, Vaduz, 1965).



Map The hamlets and settlements of the Blean in the mid nineteenth century.

Plate 3 Richardson's Mill, Boughton Street.

Plate 4 A Staple Street butcher, early this century.

Plate 5 The Forge, Preston Street.

Plate 6 Traction engine in Canterbury, late nineteenth century.

since disappeared. What we read as our architectural heritage is merely the surviving houses of farmers, some trades and crafts families and the landed gentry: it is a material image of our past which renders the majority of the population invisible. The example of Dargate's Dove beerhouse encapsulates the dangers of visual distortion. No doubt the handsome, late nineteenth-century, red-brick Dove public house tells us something of the wealth of Victorian brewers. But it provides little sense of the nineteenth-century Dove, the plaster-and-thatch beerhouse which preceded its brick descendant and which provided a living for the Goodwin family and momentary escape for labouring folk for the best part of a hundred years.

At least the names of the hamlets, farms and small villages are much the same – though only the old people know where 'Sluts Hole' is. The main unit of settlement was the hamlet, the rural equivalent of the urban neighbourhood. Hernhill parish contained four main hamlets: the houses and cottages around the church ('Hernhill village'), Staple Street, Dargate and Bessborough or the Forstall. In the 1870s Staple Street consisted of about thirty houses or cottages and had a population of just under 200. But there were other smaller groups of cottages around farms such as Waterham, Way Street and Crockham. Each hamlet had wells (Staple Street had nine) and often a public house or beershop: the Red Lion opposite the church, the Three Horse Shoes at Staple Street, Noah's Ark at Bessborough and the Dove at Dargate.

Dunkirk consisted of scattered settlements on the edge of the Blean woods and along the main road. There were hamlets at Denstrode, Winterbourne and at the bottom and top of Boughton Hill. Boughton's main settlements were at Boughton Street (a long row of trades and crafts and labouring households on either side of the London Road), South Street, Horse Lees, Hickman's Green, Oversland and Crouch; there were other collections of dwellings around Boughton pottery and at Fairbrook, Wellbrook and other farms.

It is difficult to know how the occupants of such rural areas perceived their communities. Although the church would have encouraged those involved to think of a Hernhill, a Boughton or (from the 1840s) a Dunkirk, the parish was an administrative unit which did not necessarily signify any sense of identity. Indeed Dunkirk did not have a church for the first third of the nineteenth century and Boughton's church was situated some distance from the parish's largest concentration of inhabitants at Boughton Street, an absence recognized by the Methodists (Wesleyan and Primitive) who had chapels at each end of the Street. Moreover, several hamlets cut across parish boundaries. Denstrode was half in Dunkirk and half in Blean parish; Dargate was