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In 1596, the 'chieffe inabitants' of Swallowfield (Wilts.) set down the celebrated 'Swallowfield Articles', a list of twenty-six resolutions designed to help the community 'better ... lyve together in good love ... to the praise of god and ... better [serve] her Ma(jes)tie when wee meete together'.[1] This document has been cited by a number of early modern social historians as 'the merest glimpse of what might well have been an extremely sophisticated system of parish governance' revealing 'the extent to which middling groups had emerged as agents of social and political transformation even by the turn of the sixteenth century'.[2] The articles make many references to quintessentially early modern governance structures, namely the quarter sessions and Justices of the Peace (JPs), which, while operative since the fourteenth century, saw increasingly dynamic usage under the Tudors and Stuarts.[3] The geographical framework employed by the inhabitants is undoubtedly the parish, which, while again an ancient administrative unit, was increasingly put to secular use in the sixteenth century.[4]

However, alongside these references to more novel governing apparatuses, the articles are also replete with references to what could be

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[1] S. Hindle, 'Hierarchy and community in the Elizabethan parish: the Swallowfield Articles of 1596', *Historical Journal*, 42 (1999), 835–51, at 848.

[2] *Ibid.*, 836, 843–4, 848; P. Collinson, '*De republica anglorum*: or history with the politics put back' in P. Collinson, *Elizabethan Essays* (London, 1994), 1–30, at 23–5; M.J. Braddick, *State Formation in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2000), 75; S. Hindle, *The State and Social Change in Early Modern England, 1550–1640* (Basingstoke, 2000), 27–8; E.H. Shagan, 'The two republics: conflicting views of participatory local government in early Tudor England' in J.F. McDiarmid (ed.), *The Monarchical Republic of Early Modern England: Essays in Response to Patrick Collinson* (Aldershot, 2007), 19–36, at 19; M. Gaskill, 'Little commonwealths II: communities' in K. Wrightson (ed.), *A Social History of England, 1500–1700* (Cambridge, 2017), 84–104, at 92.

[3] Hindle, 'Hierarchy and community', 848, 849 [9], 850 [15], [21], 851 [25]; J.A. Sharpe, *Crime in Early Modern England, 1550–1750* (London, 1984), 28–30; J.G. Bellamy, *Crime and Public Order in England in the Later Middle Ages* (London, 1973), 95–6.

[4] Hindle, 'Hierarchy and community', 848, 849 [8], 850 [13], [20].

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considered a quintessentially medieval institution, namely that of the manorial court leet and its officers. Article 12 orders that the inhabitants 'ioyne together in purse, travel and credett' for any suit that 'touchethe the whole Tythinges or in any of them' referencing tithings, traditional divisions of manorial structures responsible for the maintenance of law and order.[5] Explicit references to officers associated with these tithings are made in articles 10 and 16, in the former that 'all ... offycers for the publique affayers of the Tythyngs . . . shalbe countenanced and borne out of us all' and the latter 'that the offycers shall not be dislyked ... in fyrtherynge ... any other busyness of the Tythynges'.[6] Article 25 addresses the specific apparatus of the court leet, stating that 'tow of us shall be present at Sessions leete & Law days for to use the best means for to keepe dowen Synne'.[7] Such language speaks to the persistence of manorial officeholding as a governing structure in early modern village life, but also suggests a longer continuity. Even in 1596, as the inhabitants of Swallowfield attempted to formulate solutions to new problems, in a meeting that involved participants from across the boundaries of several manors, they still operated, at least in part, within a system of local governance rooted in the manor and leet.

The example of Swallowfield encapsulates, in a rare source generated by village elites, the fundamental subject at the heart of this book. This is the long history of the manor as an institution of local governance. Manor courts, or courts baron, were the most immediate source of law and governance for the rural population of late medieval England. These institutions were established by lords to monitor their rights over, and administer justice to, their tenants. Many manors, as referred to in the Swallowfield Articles, also held courts leet, a specific franchise granted to a lord which allowed courts to oversee the enforcement of petty elements of the royal law within the boundaries of the manor.[8] While the two types of courts were legally distinct, on the ground they were intertwined as part of the same institution helping structure the political, economic and social life of the village.

To operate, manor courts, and manorial institutions more generally, relied on a set of manorial officers. Devising an appropriate definition for 'manorial officer' is difficult, but for the purposes of this study, these offices are defined as specific roles which gave an individual authority within the manorial structure. This includes presentment jurors, who brought cases to the court and amerced (subjected to a financial penalty)

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[5] *Ibid.*, 849 [12].   [6] *Ibid.*, 849 [10], 850 [16].   [7] *Ibid.*, 851 [25].
[8] While the terminology 'court baron' and 'court leet' is slightly anachronistic for the early part of the period covered in this book, the terms are used throughout as a useful shorthand to differentiate the two types of court.

rule-breakers; reeves, who managed seigniorial property and collected rents; beadles and messors, who helped enforce the court's decisions and monitored common lands and agriculture; ale tasters, who enforced royal legislation concerning the quality of bread and ale; bylawmen, who monitored adherence to specific agricultural ordinances made by village communities; and constables, who enforced royal legislation. Crucially, these offices were filled by individuals drawn from among a lord's tenants. Acting in these roles gave incumbents significant authority within their villages, providing them with the power to use the manorial governing apparatus to meet the varied aims of lord, crown, village community and, of course, themselves.

This book explores this authority and its exercise between 1300 and 1650. It examines the functions of manorial offices, who filled these offices, and the ways in which officeholding systems changed in response to the decline of lordship and the process of state formation. In doing so, manorial officeholding serves as a prism through which to examine political and social change in the late medieval and early modern English village. The rest of this introduction sets up the study. The following survey of the literature examines the way officeholding has typically been explored separately in medieval and early modern scholarship before highlighting a series of historiographical interventions that have increasingly connected processes identified for both periodisations. Subsequently, the study's methodological intervention in the shape of a long-run approach is explained, as well as the key questions it seeks to answer. The next section describes the five full case studies and complementary evidence subject to investigation, while the final section briefly outlines the rest of the book and its conclusions.

BRIDGING THE MEDIEVAL/EARLY MODERN DIVIDE

Historians of both the medieval and early modern eras have long been interested in questions of local authority and how this related to officeholding. However, scholars have been divided by the traditional periodisations of historical inquiry, which has led to two separate analyses, in turn creating an overall narrative of transition. Medievalists have recognised the importance of manorial officeholding but have frequently argued that the Black Death and its economic and social effects led to a decay of manorial structures. Meanwhile, early modernists have often stressed that state formation strengthened links between the state and prominent officeholders, creating a novel 'middling sort' of local elites.

This study draws on a newer set of historiographical trends which have increasingly bridged the medieval/early modern divide and emphasised

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elements of continuity across the period between 1300 and 1650, chal-
lenging a model of transition. The following discussion briefly outlines
the two literatures, and the corresponding revisionism of continuity-
focused approaches, showing how this provides a starting point for
a new study of manorial officeholding and local authority which encom-
passes both the Middle Ages and the early modern era.

Manorial Institutions and Officials

Medievalists have generally focused on manorial officeholding from two
different perspectives. These have been guided by the two principal
sources generated by lords' estate bureaucracies, namely account and
court rolls. The account tradition has examined officers as seigniorial
servants and particularly their role in managing their lord's demesne.
Early pioneers such as H.S. Bennett and Paul Vinogradoff investigated
the expectations lords had of their servants and the type of agricultural
techniques used to meet these expectations.[9] In the past few decades,
there has been a resurgence of interest in estate management utilising
quantitative approaches, which has largely been focused on examining
how far medieval peasant cultivators were rational economic agents.[10]
While the debate over peasants' price-responsiveness remains open, it is
clear that officials were competent managers by contemporary standards,
and at the high point of direct demesne management before the Black
Death were able to meet seigniorial expectations as well as profit legiti-
mately and illicitly from their position.[11]

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[9] P. Vinogradoff, *Villainage in England* (Oxford, 1892), 317–19; H.S.A. Bennett, *Life on the English Manor: a Study of Peasant Conditions, 1150–1400* (Cambridge, 1937), 155–92.

[10] D. Stone, *Decision-Making in Medieval Agriculture* (Oxford, 2005), 13–14, 168–9; B. Dodds, 'Demesne and tithe: peasant agriculture in the late Middle Ages', *AgHR*, 56 (2008), 123–41, at 124; E.B. Schneider, 'Prices and production: agricultural supply response in fourteenth-century England', *EcHR*, 67 (2014), 66–91, at 84–5.

[11] Stone, *Decision-Making*, 189–203; Stone, 'Medieval farm management and technological mental-ities: Hinderclay before the Black Death', *EcHRI*, 54 (2001), 612–38, at 634; Stone, 'The reeve' in S.H. Rigby (ed.) with the assistance of A. Minnis, *Historians on Chaucer: the 'General Prologue' to the Canterbury Tales* (Oxford, 2014), 399–420, at 413–16; P.D.A. Harvey, *Manorial Records*, rev. edn (London, 1999), 6; Harvey, *A Medieval Oxfordshire Village: Cuxham, 1240–1400* (London, 1965), 69–71; C.D. Briggs, 'Monitoring demesne managers through the manor court before and after the Black Death' in J. Langdon, R. Goddard and M. Müller (eds.), *Survival and Discord in Medieval Society: Essays in Honour of Christopher Dyer* (Turnhout, 2010), 179–95, at 180; C.C. Dyer, *Lords and Peasants in a Changing Society: the Estates of the Bishopric of Worcester, 680–1540* (Cambridge, 1980), 114; S. Justice, *Writing and Rebellion: England in 1381* (Berkeley, 1994), 228–9; M. Carlin, 'Cheating the boss: Robert Carpenter's embezzlement instructions (1261x1268) and employee fraud in medieval England' in B. Dodds and C.D. Liddy (eds.), *Commercial Activity, Markets and Entrepreneurs in the Middle Ages: Essays in Honour of Richard Britnell* (Woodbridge, 2011), 183–98, at 184–90.

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While this literature has shed light on previously unappreciated aspects of the medieval economy and management practices, it can only provide a partial picture of manorial officeholding. The focus on accounts only reveals a particular type of manorial official, the reeve, and one aspect of this official's work, namely their role as the agriculturalist running the lord's farm. This excludes a range of officials, such as jurors and capital pledges, and ignores crucial functions performed by reeves for the manor court. Two recent studies have examined the way tenants could pressure officials to get them to act in their interests through reporting on demesne managers, and how a fear of a loss of social status might have encouraged ex-officials to lease demesnes.[12] Yet, typically, studies working in the management tradition have relatively little to say about the social context of officeholding.

The second strand of the historiography, which is more significant for this book, has centred around studying court rolls. For this reason, it has focused far more on the use of officeholding to study the social structure of village communities. While some of the earliest legal historians of court rolls had recognised that manorial officials were of higher social status, the work of sociologist G.C. Homans represented the first real attempt to examine village social structure.[13] In his study of 1941, he emphasised the importance of manorial officeholding in creating social hierarchies, noting the existence of 'an aristocracy of jurymen'.[14]

Homans' ideas were further developed by the so-called 'Toronto School' of medieval village historians: a group of North American scholars led by J.A. Raftis active in the second half of the twentieth century.[15] These scholars attempted to reconstitute the structure of villages, developing a typology for families based on their prominence in certain activities in court rolls, with officeholding being seen as crucial. This statistical approach drew out particular families as having 'A' status, meaning that their members disproportionately held more offices more frequently.[16] Despite discovering this evidence of stratification, the

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[12] Briggs, 'Monitoring demesne managers', 90, 194; A.T. Brown, 'The fear of downward social mobility in late medieval England', *Journal of Medieval History*, 45 (2019), 597–617, at 612–13.

[13] F. Seebohm, *The English Village Community* (London, 1883), 29; F.W. Maitland and W.P. Baildon (eds.), *The Court Baron: Precedents of Pleading in Manorial and Other Local Courts* (London, 1891), 113.

[14] G.C. Homans, *English Villagers of the Thirteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA, 1941), 312.

[15] It should be noted that the grouping 'Toronto School' is rejected by some of the members of this group; for example, see E.B. DeWindt, 'Introduction' in E.B. DeWindt (ed.), *The Salt of Common Life: Individuality and Choice in the Medieval Town, Countryside and Church: Essays Presented to J. Ambrose Raftis* (Kalamazoo, 1995), xi–xvii, at xii–xiv.

[16] J.A. Raftis, 'The concentration of responsibility in five villages', *Mediaeval Studies*, 28 (1966), 92–118; E.B. DeWindt, *Land and People in Holywell-cum-Needingworth: Structures of Tenure and Patterns of Social Organization in an East Midlands Village, 1252–1457* (Toronto, 1972), 206–33; A.R. DeWindt, 'Peasant power structures in fourteenth-century King's Ripton', *Mediaeval*

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Toronto School largely argued that villages before the Black Death were relatively harmonious and that officials essentially worked to promote the interests of communities as a whole. Offices saw enough turnover and participation to prevent these being controlled by an oligarchy.[17] Individuals from these families were chosen for their suitability and experience by the community at large, often developing a skill-set through serving in a series of positions, and bloodline alone was not a sufficient criterion for office.[18]

A second argument of the Toronto analysis focuses on the supposed decline of the village community after the Black Death. The School emphasised several indicators such as the rise of trespass and violence, the breakdown of the pledging system and changes to officeholding as showing a shift from the previously harmonious and communal village to a rise of individualism along more acquisitive lines.[19] Using the Toronto method, Ian Blanchard emphasised that by 1525 bonds between different groups of villagers had changed, with lower groups forming patron–client relationships with elites, while elites themselves increasingly looked beyond the village to create regional powerbases driven by individualistic ambitions.[20] Anne DeWindt suggested that this breakdown of community may in part have been caused by new post-Plague officers being less experienced.[21] Sherri Olson modifies this view, claiming that changes the Plague wrought meant officeholding increasingly became a way for immigrants to establish status in the community through multiple officeholding rather than individuals being chosen for an official role due to pre-existing social standing.[22] Offices were now being used for 'schooling the individual' to

Studies, 38 (1976), 237–66, at 244–58; E. Britton, *The Community of the Vill: a Study in the History of the Family and Village Life in Fourteenth-Century England* (Toronto, 1977), 98–102; S. Olson, 'Jurors of the village court: local leadership before and after the Plague in Ellington, Huntingdonshire', *JBS*, 30 (1991), 237–56, at 238–42; Olson, 'Families have their fate and periods: varieties of family experience in the preindustrial village' in DeWindt (ed.), *Salt of Common Life*, 409–48, at 410–28; Olson, *A Chronicle of All that Happens: Voices from the Village Court in Medieval England* (Toronto, 1996), 104–61.

[17] DeWindt, *Land and People*, 213; DeWindt, 'Peasant power structures', 247; Olson, 'Jurors of the village court', 238–9, 244; Olson, *Chronicle of All that Happens*, 161, 228–9.

[18] Raftis, 'Concentration of responsibility', 108; DeWindt, *Land and People*, 216–20, 241; DeWindt, 'Peasant power structures', 248; Olson, 'Jurors of the village court', 242–54; Olson, 'Families have their fate and periods', 436; Olson, *Chronicle of All that Happens*, 141.

[19] J.A. Raftis, 'Changes in an English village after the Black Death', *Mediaeval Studies*, 29 (1967), 158–77, at 163–5, 177; DeWindt, *Land and People*, 263–74; DeWindt, 'Peasant power structures', 249; Olson, 'Jurors of the village court', 240–2; Olson, *Chronicle of All that Happens*, 229; P. R. Schofield, *Peasants and Historians: Debating the Medieval English Peasantry* (Manchester, 2016), 208.

[20] I. Blanchard, 'Social structure and social organization in an English village at the close of the Middle Ages: Chewton, 1526' in DeWindt (ed.), *Salt of Common Life*, 307–39.

[21] DeWindt, 'Peasant power structures', 249.

[22] Olson, 'Jurors of the village court', 251–6; Olson, 'Families have their fate and periods', 446–8.

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become a better villager as part of a response by the village community to the social pressures brought on by demographic decline and the concomitant rise of violence and decline of personal responsibility.[23]

While the detailed statistical work performed by members of the Toronto School is impressive, this work is problematic for reasons of both interpretation and evidence, which have brought its findings into question. On a methodological level, the School's work has been criticised for relying on unstable identifications of families by surname; using an individual's officeholding career as a status marker for their whole family; assuming that court rolls record verbatim the activity of manor courts; and applying statistical techniques to extremely fragmentary court-roll series from one estate.[24]

On a theoretical level, perhaps the most significant issue with the later work of members of the Toronto School is the way the lord is treated in their narrative. While Homans focused on aspects of the reciprocity of lord–tenant relations, later studies suggested that the lord had little incentive or even ability to exercise power over his tenants, a conception which reaches its apogee in Olson's statement that the Abbot of Ramsey, lord of Ellington and Upwood (Hunts.), 'might be said to appear in the court rolls . . . as a very powerful equal'.[25] The contention that the village community declined after the Black Death has also been subject to specific criticism.[26] On the one hand, the School presented too positive a view of pre-Plague harmony, which cannot account for bylaws restricting gleaning or the apportionment of common amercements without regard for the ability of villagers to pay.[27] The indicators used

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[23] Olson, *Chronicle of All that Happens*, 195–203.

[24] K. Wrightson, 'Medieval villagers in perspective', *Peasant Studies*, 7 (1978), 203–16, at 211–13; R. M. Smith, '"Modernization" and the corporate village community in England: some sceptical reflections' in A.R.H. Baker and D. Gregory (eds.), *Explorations in Historical Geography: Interpretive Essays* (Cambridge, 1984), 140–79, at 156; Z. Razi, 'The Toronto School's reconstitution of medieval peasant society: a critical view', *P&P*, 85 (1979), 141–57; Razi, 'Family, land and village community in later medieval England', *P&P*, 93 (1981), 3–36, at 29; J.M. Bennett, *Women in the Medieval English Countryside: Gender and Household in Brigstock before the Plague* (New York, 1987), 212–13; P.L. Larson, 'Village voice or village oligarchy? The jurors of the Durham halmote court, 1349 to 1424', *Law and History Review*, 28 (2010), 675–709, at 678 n. 10; Schofield, *Peasants and Historians*, 208.

[25] Homans, *English Villagers*, 339–48; J.A. Raftis, *Tenure and Mobility: Studies in the Social History of the Mediaeval English Village* (Toronto, 1964), 207; J.A. Raftis, *Peasant Economic Development within the English Manorial System* (Montreal, 1997), 11; Raftis, 'Social structures in five East Midland villages: a study of possibilities in the use of court roll data', *EcHR*, 18 (1965), 83–100, at 98; DeWindt, 'Peasant power structures', 252–8; Olson, *Chronicle of All that Happens*, 21–6, 232; J. Hatcher and M. Bailey, *Modelling the Middle Ages: the History and Theory of England's Economic Development* (Oxford, 2001), 101; Schofield, *Peasants and Historians*, 105

[26] K. Wrightson, 'The "decline of neighbourliness" revisited' in D.R. Woolf and N.L. Jones (eds.), *Local Identities in Late Medieval and Early Modern England* (Basingstoke, 2007), 19–49, at 20.

[27] C.C. Dyer 'The English medieval village community and its decline', *JBS*, 33 (1994), 407–29, at 421–4.

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to show post-Plague tensions are questionable; the decline of personal pledging may simply represent procedural change in the court rather than the collapse of mutual bonds, while the increasing number of trespass cases were often linked to stray animals, so could be an artefact of more livestock breeding in the land-abundant post-Plague period.[28]

More recent studies of manorial officeholding from a social perspective have taken more of a middle ground, drawing on the insights provided by the Toronto School of seeing officials as persons of significant social status, but also drawing on the management literature perspective of seeing these men as servants of the lord. The crucial theme is one of negotiation, as officers balanced the demands of the lord and their fellow villagers.[29] Their position gave them the ability to side with the lord in order to increase their own standing and power or to side with their fellow tenants by overlooking obligations owed by tenants to their lords.[30]

Similarly to the Toronto School, this newer literature also presents a narrative of late medieval decline. The post-Black Death period is seen as a key turning point which spelled the end of the important local status of manorial officials. Falling prices after the 1370s in combination with higher wages made demesnes increasingly unprofitable, putting officials in a difficult position. Where lords tried to draw on labour services performed by unfree tenants to replace expensive hired labour, officials also came under pressure from their fellow tenants.[31] These difficulties made officeholding increasingly unattractive, especially as the lack of skilled labour in the post-Black Death world offered opportunities for capable agriculturalists beyond their home manor.[32] In the longer term, in response to the dwindling profits of direct management, lords

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[28] Razi, 'Toronto School's reconstitution', 149–52.

[29] C.C. Dyer, 'The political life of the fifteenth-century English village' in L. Clark and C. Carpenter (eds.), *Political Culture in Late Medieval Britain* (Woodbridge, 2004), 135–58, at 144–6; Dyer, *Lords and Peasants*, 141; P.L. Larson, *Conflict and Compromise in the Late Medieval Countryside: Lords and Peasants in Durham, 1349–1400* (London, 2006), 22–7, 58; M. Müller, 'A divided class? Peasants and peasant communities in later medieval England' in P.R. Coss and C. Wickham (eds.), *Rodney Hilton's Middle Ages: an Exploration of Historical Themes* (Oxford, 2007), 115–31, at 117–18; P.R. Schofield, 'England: the family and the village community' in S. Rigby (ed.), *A Companion to Britain in the Late Middle Ages* (Oxford, 2003), 26–46, at 42; G. Owen, 'A comparative study of rural and urban manorial officialdom in the later medieval period', unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Birmingham (2021), 283.

[30] P.R. Schofield, *Peasant and Community in Medieval England, 1200–1500* (Basingstoke, 2003), 42–4, 168; R. Evans, 'Merton College's control of its tenants at Thorncroft, 1270–1349' in Z. Razi and R.M. Smith (eds.), *Medieval Society and the Manor Court* (Oxford, 1996), 199–259, at 210; Briggs, 'Monitoring demesne managers', 180.

[31] R.H. Hilton, *The Decline of Serfdom in Medieval England*, 2nd edn (London, 1983), 44; Stone *Decision-Making*, 221–4; Dyer 'Village community', 416–17, 427–8.

[32] Stone, *Decision-Making*, 105, 168; Stone, 'The reeve', 413–16.

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increasingly shifted to leasing their demesnes, often to the same men who had once acted as their reeves.[33] This meant that they no longer required demesne-managing officials, leading to the disappearance of these offices from account records.[34]

The end of direct management was combined with the decay and disappearance of serfdom, meaning that lords no longer needed manorial courts to monitor aspects of unfreedom and direct lordship.[35] This in turn led to decline as court rolls became 'shorter, less frequent and less informative', and continued into the sixteenth century as courts increasingly focused only on land transactions, significantly lessening officials' importance and power in rural communities.[36] Historians have noted that courts did continue to serve some functions, particularly through the increased use of bylaws to monitor behaviour, although some have seen this as an attempt to prop up weakening manorial authority rather than a true innovation.[37] These interpretations argue that village elites tried to fill the gap left by an increasingly distant lordship, and maintain communal bonds in a period of greater social stratification, although how far manorial officeholding fulfilled this need has been disputed.[38] Instead, efforts towards community cohesion were increasingly channelled through religious institutions such as via the growth of gilds, reconstruction of parish churches and raising of poor relief through the parish,

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[33] B.F. Harvey, *Westminster Abbey and Its Estates in the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1977), 148–51; M. Bailey, 'Rural society' in R. Horrox (ed.), *Fifteenth-Century Attitudes: Perceptions of Society in Late Medieval England* (Cambridge, 1994), 150–68, at 152–4; Hilton, *Decline of Serfdom*, 33; J. L. Bolton, *The Medieval English Economy, 1150–1500* (London, 1980), 214; C. C. Dyer, *An Age of Transition? Economy and Society in England in the Later Middle Ages*, (Oxford, 2005), 196–7; Dyer, 'Political life', 144–6; Dyer, *Lords and Peasants*, 113, 209–17; S.H. Rigby, *English Society in the Later Middle Ages: Class, Status and Gender* (Basingstoke, 1995), 84–5; B.M.S. Campbell, 'England: land and people' in Rigby (ed.), *Companion to Britain*, 3–25, at 17; E.B. Fryde, *Peasants and Landlords in Later Medieval England, c.1380–c.1525* (Stroud, 1996), 80–1; J. Hare, *A Prospering Society: Wiltshire in the Later Middle Ages* (Hatfield, 2011), 101–2; Brown, 'Downward social mobility', 612–13.

[34] K.J. Workman, 'Manorial estate officials and opportunity in late medieval English society', *Viator: Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, 26 (1995), 233–40, at 224.

[35] Larson, *Conflict and Compromise*, 235–30; M. Bailey, *The Decline of Serfdom in Late Medieval England: From Bondage to Freedom* (Woodbridge, 2014), 326–9; C.D. Briggs, 'The availability of credit in the English countryside, 1400–1480', *AgHR*, 56 (2008), 1–24, at 14.

[36] C.C. Dyer and R.W. Hoyle, 'Britain, 1000–1750' in B.J.P. van Bavel and R.W. Hoyle (eds.), *Social Relations: Property and Power* (Turnhout, 2010), 51–80, at 67; J.S. Beckerman, 'Procedural innovation and institutional change in medieval English manorial courts', *Law and History Review*, 10 (1992), 197–252, at 200; M. Bailey, *The English Manor, c.1200–c.1500* (Manchester, 2002), 186–7.

[37] Bailey, *English Manor*, 186–7; Dyer, *Lords and Peasants*, 368–9; R.M. Smith 'Contrasting susceptibility to famine in early fourteenth- and late sixteenth-century England: the significance of late medieval rural social structural and village governmental changes' in M.J. Braddick and P. Withington (eds.), *Popular Culture and Political Agency in Early Modern England and Ireland: Essays in Honour of John Walter* (Woodbridge, 2017), 35–54, at 49–50.

[38] Bailey, 'Rural society', 161; Dyer, 'Village community', 428; Dyer, 'Political life', 146–7.

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activities which Christopher Dyer has interpreted as policies 'by the
village elite . . . to foster a community spirit in danger of being eroded
by economic realities'.[39]

This book seeks to challenge this narrative of decline and demonstrate
the continued importance of manorial office into the early modern era. In
this endeavour, it builds on an array of studies which have argued for the
long-run importance of manor courts, and especially those with leet
jurisdiction, in communities after *c*.1500. Medievalists have long recog-
nised that manor courts had functions beyond simply enforcing aspects of
lordship. They acted as a forum for interpersonal litigation, regulated
agriculture, policed petty crime and monitored the tenure of
landholdings.[40] While courts did decline as a civil law institution in the
fifteenth century, early modernists have emphasised the continued use of
manor courts for many communal purposes.[41] Courts leet were used to
police crime owing to their provision of a cheap and local form of justice
in a period when there were simply not enough magistrates to control
disorder heightened by socio-economic problems.[42] Manor courts
remained important for commons' management as a forum to make
and enforce bylaws.[43] Brodie Waddell has taken a long view, arguing
that manor courts remained important up to the mid-nineteenth century.
He has emphasised that the flexibility of the courts made this possible,

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[39] Dyer, 'Village community', 428–9.

[40] Rigby, *English Society*, 26–7; C.D. Briggs, *Credit and Village Society in Fourteenth-Century England*
(Oxford, 2009), 12–13; P.R. Schofield, 'Peasants and the manor court: gossip and litigation in
a Suffolk village at the close of the thirteenth century', *P&P*, 159 (1998), 3–42, at 17; Bailey,
English Manor, 168–9; S. Walker, 'Order and law' in R. Horrox and W.M. Ormrod (eds.), *A Social
History of England, 1200–1500* (Cambridge, 2006), 91–112, at 97–8; M. Bailey, *After the Black Death:
Economy, Society, and the Law in Fourteenth-Century* (Oxford, 2021), 45–6.

[41] C.D. Briggs, 'Seignorial control of villagers' litigation beyond the manor in late medieval
England', *Historical Research*, 81 (2008), 399–422, at 421.

[42] W.J. King, 'Untapped resources for social historians: court leet records', *Journal of Social History*, 51
(1982), 699–705; W.J. King, 'Early Stuart courts leet: still needful and useful', *Histoire Sociale/Social
History*, 23 (1990), 271–99, at 298–9; M.K. McIntosh, 'Social change and Tudor manorial leets' in
H.G. Beale and J.A. Guy (eds.), *Law and Social Change in British History: Papers Presented to the Bristol
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