

Elizabethan Village Surveys: A Comment

By C. J. HARRISON

THE completion of a thesis on the history in the second half of the sixteenth century of the peasant communities of Cannock and Rugeley, two central Staffordshire manors, has prompted me to question the value of such a study, and to examine current assumptions about the form which such a local history should take.¹ Are there not already a sufficient number of studies of this sort: Miss Davenport on Fornceett (Norfolk), the Orwins on Laxton (Nottinghamshire), Professor Hoskins on Wigston Magna (Leicestershire), and Mrs Spufford on the Cambridgeshire villages of Chippenham, Orwell, and Willingham? Such studies, together with the numerous manorial histories in the Victoria County Histories, have been expanded into county histories such as Joan Thirsk's on Lincolnshire, and incorporated into national surveys such as Dr Kerridge's *The Agricultural Revolution*, and, most influentially, in the publication ten years ago of volume IV of *The Agrarian History of England and Wales*.² May we not now assume that we have a reasonably complete and accurate picture of the agrarian history of England and Wales in the Tudor and early Stuart period? Are not all subsequent local histories merely the dotting of already dotted "i's" and the crossing of already crossed "t's," little more than convenient exercises for the journeyman historian? Should not the master craftsmen move on to other, more pressing, subjects instead of burdening the historical world with an unmanageable weight of

true but unilluminating facts? Furthermore, is not the form of such local studies well established after over seventy years of research? Is there not general agreement on what constitutes the basic questions, and on the materials and methods necessary to tackle them? What is the value of further local studies?

This investigation is based upon work on Cannock Chase, and thus begins with a description of the area. There then follows a detailed examination of two land surveys of the manor of Cannock. Finally, the uses to which such surveys have been put, and the validity of the assumptions underlying such uses, will be considered.

I

Cannock was the largest of the royal forests in Staffordshire, with boundaries extending along the rivers Penk, Sow, Trent, and Thame, and as far south as Wolverhampton and Walsall. By the mid-fourteenth century forest jurisdiction was restricted to seven discontinuous hays. Larger than any of these, dominating the original forest area, was Cannock Chase. Its forty square miles were organized into two bailiwicks which were coextensive with the ancient demesne manors of Cannock and Rugeley. Chase and manors came into the possession of the Paget family in 1546.

Most of the Chase was uninhabited, the villages lying on the edge of an upland plateau, Cannock on the southern extremity, Rugeley on the north-eastern. In 1570 there were fifty-two dwellings in the township of Cannock, and a further nineteen at or near the dependent hamlets of Hednesford and Leacroft. The total population was about 320, and this had risen to 400 by the turn of the century. In Rugeley and the associated hamlet of Brereton there were 115 dwellings in 1570, a population of about 520, which had risen to over 600 by the end of the century. Both townships had a weekly mar-

¹ C. J. Harrison, *The Social and Economic History of Cannock and Rugeley, 1546-1597*, unpubl. Ph.D. thesis, Keele, 1974.

² F. G. Davenport, *The Economic Development of a Norfolk Manor, 1086-1565*, Cambridge, 1906; C. S. and C. S. Orwin, *The Open Fields*, 1938, 3rd edn, Oxford, 1967; W. G. Hoskins, *The Midland Peasant*, 1957; Margaret Spufford, *Contrasting Communities*, Cambridge, 1974; Joan Thirsk, *English Peasant Farming*, 1957; E. Kerridge, *The Agricultural Revolution*, 1967; Joan Thirsk, (ed.), *The Agrarian History of England and Wales (1500-1640)*, IV, Cambridge, 1967.

ket, and Rugeley even boasted some permanent shops. (There were a large number of ale-houses, nine in Cannock and eighteen in Rugeley, one for every twenty resident adults.) Each manor combined an open-field system with a large number of enclosures. As for communications, Watling Street was clearly important for Cannock, whilst the bridge over the Trent gave access from Rugeley to Uttoxeter, Burton, Lichfield, and Tamworth; the main route between Cannock and Rugeley was along the valley of the Rising Brook.³

There is no doubting the importance of the Chase: a barrier to communications, a source of fuel, food, and work, its resources were competed for by rich and poor alike. About one-quarter of the total area of waste, 5,400 statutory acres, was oak woodland. Assuming fifteen oaks an acre, a conservative estimate, there must have been at least 81,000 trees. This acreage of woodland was maintained until the late 1580's.⁴ From the 1560's there was a major development of the Chase ironworks with a consequent demand for locally produced charcoal. Felling, cording, and charking provided employment for some of the local people, but, on the whole, the peasant community benefited more from other uses of the Chase.⁵ It was a source of domestic fuel, and materials for building, hedging, and tool-making. It provided pannage for pigs, and both sheep and cattle were fed on the trowse or loppings from the oaks and hollies which grew there. This trowse was a most important source of fodder, enabling about 7,000 sheep to be commoned on the Chase each winter. Two detailed and complete censuses of this commoned flock show that the majority of constituent flocks were very small—in the winter of 1581-2 nearly a half of all flocks (78 out of 164) numbered twenty or less—and that these flocks were all owned by

locals, many, probably most, being the poorer villagers. The importance of these grazing rights, which cost a nominal 12d. per twenty sheep per six months, can be seen when one notes that in 1598-9 there were sixty-one flocks from Rugeley and Brereton, totalling 2,380 sheep, commoned on the Chase; that is to say, one in three men owned and commoned a flock that winter.⁶

The Chase also provided bracken which was used as a litter, and later on in the century, in the form of ash, as a lye for the bucking of clothes. Population pressures in the 1580's led to shift cultivation of corn, and the erection of squatters' cottages on the Chase. As one would expect, poaching was widespread—hares, rabbits, game birds, even the occasional deer were regular, if illegal, supplements to the peasant diet.⁷

It is clear from the evidence that the Chase was an important source of food, fuel, and employment for the peasants of Cannock and Rugeley. To establish how important, one must ascertain what other resources were available, i.e. one is committed to a conventional study of the pattern of farming within these villages.

II

In 1897 W. J. Corbett published a seminal article on Elizabethan land surveys.⁸ Since then historians have used such surveys as the basis of their accounts of the structure of particular village societies (as of Forncett, Chippenham, and Laxton) or the structure of farming in a region (as in Joan Thirsk's work on Lincolnshire) or to identify and categorize a particular group within the rural community (as in Tawney's *The Agrarian Problem in the Sixteenth Century*). The question is, ought one to use such surveys for these purposes? In short, are they a reliable source? The evidence of two surveys of the manor of Cannock suggests that they are not as secure a source as has been believed. One

³ Harrison, *op. cit.*, pp. 2-6, 14-15, 143; L. M. Cantor, 'The Medieval Forests and Chases of Staffordshire', *North Staffs. Journal of Field Studies*, VIII, 1968, pp. 39-53.

⁴ Harrison, *op. cit.*, pp. 91-3; Staffs. C.R.O. (hereafter S.R.O.): D1734/2/2/43.

⁵ A. C. Jones and C. J. Harrison (eds.), 'The Cannock Chase Ironworks, 1590', *English Historical Review*, xciii, 1978, pp. 794-810.

⁶ Harrison, *op. cit.*, pp. 102-8; S.R.O.: D1734/2/1/264, fos. 8-13; D1734/2/1/298, fos. 9-14.

⁷ Harrison, *op. cit.*, pp. 29, 101, 107.

⁸ W. J. Corbett, 'Elizabethan Village Surveys', *Trans. Roy. Hist. Soc.*, n.s., xi, 1897, pp. 67-87.

is a conventional survey of tenancies, made in 1570, the other, made in 1554, records, atypically, not only tenancies but also sub-tenancies. An analysis below of these two surveys shows that conventional surveys can be a seriously misleading source of social and economic structure.

The survey of 1570 was made to provide the basis for a new rental.⁹ Firstly, it should be noted that there was at that time no change either in the tenure by which manorial land was held or in farming practice; thus, the survey records a normal not an abnormal situation. Secondly, virtually all land was held directly or indirectly from the lord; thus, this survey includes all cultivated land in the manor which, it should be remembered, was coextensive with the village and dependent hamlets.

One cannot be certain of the procedure adopted, but the volume of topographical information recorded, and the condition of the Field Book, which looks and feels as though it was written under difficult circumstances, suggest that the surveyor, accompanied by the estate officials and the jury, did in fact perambulate the fields and enclosures, noting what he saw as he went. This was not a survey in the sense now understood: no map or plan was produced, but one need not doubt either its accuracy or its completeness. Those involved, the surveyor, the estate officials, and the thirteen local landholders who made up the jury, were accustomed to making visual estimates of the size of plots of land. None had a motive to misreport, not even the jurors, whose advantages of security and valued common rights as customary tenants far outweighed the potential advantage of avoiding payment of rents which were low, and heriots and entry fines which were reasonable. Tendency to error in one group would have been checked by the others.

The surveyor recorded the position and size (expressed in customary acres) of every enclosure, together with the name of the tenant and, where appropriate, the name of the holding. He also recorded the position, size, and the name of the tenant of each parcel of

"landes" or strips within the common fields. (Interlineations and changes were made in 1574 when the manor was again surveyed. The completeness of the 1570 survey is evidenced by the small number and small size of lands omitted in 1570 and noted in 1574.) The surveyor then calculated from the Field Book the size of each tenant's holding both in the common fields and in the enclosures; he also noted the number of dwellings, if any, held by each tenant. His arithmetic was remarkably accurate, eloquent comment on the importance which he attached to the operation. This information was then incorporated into a new rental.¹⁰

One may reasonably conclude that there was a complete and accurate survey of all cultivated land in the manor of Cannock. (As far as one can tell, all land was held directly or indirectly from the manorial lord.) From this evidence one can reconstruct the pattern of land usage: there were 1,450 acres in enclosures, and 300 acres in the common fields. Cannock was a manor of numerous small enclosures, the largest only 40 acres, and the vast majority 10 acres or less. Of the enclosed land, 376 acres, about one-quarter, were under permanent grass. No doubt some of the remaining enclosures were also used for grazing, though not all, for it is doubtful if the common fields on their own were large enough to supply the grain needs of the community. (The shift cultivation on the Chase suggests that land for corn was at a premium. And in Rugeley, with double the acreage in the common fields but also double the population, grain was regularly imported from Lichfield, at least that is my interpretation of the numerous presentments of Lichfield bakers in the manor court for "illegally" selling in Rugeley.) Crops grown in the common fields were winter rye and barley; there is, unfortunately, little evidence in the court rolls on the crops grown in the enclosures.¹¹

The land survey recorded in the Field Book provides unequivocal if limited information on the global usage of cultivated land in the manor. The question is, may it also be used to establish

⁹ Harrison, *op. cit.*, pp. 67-82; S.R.O.: D1734/2/3/32.

¹⁰ S.R.O.: D1734/2/3/44-5; D1734/J2028-9.

¹¹ Harrison, *op. cit.*, pp. 71-3.

the distribution of land for farming, and from that the structure of the community? It is possible to calculate from the survey the distribution of tenancies. If the pattern of tenancies was identical or close to the distribution of land for farming then one could establish the structure of the village community, using size of tenement as one's index.

With this objective in mind, an analysis of the tenancies was made. The small holdings of two knights and one armigerous were omitted from the analysis. These men were all major landholders elsewhere; were they to be retained in the analysis they would appear as small copyholders, clearly a distortion of the reality. Certain unassigned lands were also deleted. Allowing for these excisions, the 1570 Field Book reveals that there were just over 1,700 acres shared between forty-eight tenants. (Most held by copy of court roll; there were some tenants-at-will and a few leaseholders; and a small number of acres were claimed as freehold. Tenure affected rights and rents, not the size of a holding. For the purpose of reconstructing the distribution of land, these tenurial distinctions may be ignored.) An analysis of this information in the Field Book shows that there was great inequality in the distribution of land. Four men held between them 810 acres, just under one-half of all land in Cannock. At the other end of the spectrum one-fifth held less than 5 acres, and a further fifth between 5 and 10 acres.¹²

The question is, may one use these data on the distribution of tenancies to identify the various socio-economic groups within the community? Obviously much will depend upon definition. In the context of a pastoral community with extensive common rights over the waste and much by-employment, should one term as peasants those with less than 5 acres or should one include in this category those with between 5 and 10 acres of land? What was the minimum size of holding in this manor sufficient to support a household? Within certain limits the choice is in large measure arbitrary, and to select different criteria is to generate different

structures. But before selecting and justifying the use of particular criteria, it is necessary to show that the data may be used in this way.

Figures on tenancies, *ipso facto*, give no information on the number of landless labourers; their existence, numbers, and significance must be established from other sources. This, in itself, is not an unimportant limitation in the use of land surveys to establish the structure of a community. Secondly, figures on tenancies will only be an accurate summary of the distribution of land for farming (the assumed and accepted index of structure) if there was little or no sub-tenanting. In the case of Cannock there is little quantifiable information on labourers. What of sub-tenants? There are no direct references to sub-tenanting in the 1570 Field Book or, for that matter, in the consequent rental. The Field Book does include one indirect clue to their existence: seventy-one dwellings are recorded but only forty-eight tenants are noted. (The three excluded tenants are known to have lived elsewhere.) If all the dwellings were occupied then there must have been twenty-three sub-tenants, though not all of these need have been engaged in farming for themselves: some may have been servants, artisans, or labourers, and others elderly, even peasants retired.

Alerted to the possibility of a large number of sub-tenants, one turns to other evidence. There are very few references to them in the numerous rentals of the period—made in 1545, 1549, 1570, 1585, and 1597. Nor, in general, are they referred to in the numerous, detailed, and virtually complete court rolls. Over the period 1545 to 1600 only thirty-nine cases of sub-tenanting are recorded in the court rolls, and most of these relate to very small acreages. There was one important exception. In 1575 Leveson, a major copyholder, died, and as was customary the jury reported in the manor court on the deceased's holding.¹³ In this case, and only in this case, the jury added information on sub-tenants. They recorded that all 208 acres of Leveson's holding were in the hands of sub-tenants whom they also named. But for the survival of this *single* entry the number of

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 79–81.

¹³ S.R.O.: D1734/2/1/184 m.12d.

known sub-tenancies would fall by a dozen, and the amount of land known to have been redistributed through sub-tenanting would not exceed 8 per cent. As it is, given the Leveson evidence, one may say that at some time in the fifty-five-year period examined, up to 20 per cent of all land was in the hands of sub-tenants. (This figure is weighted in favour of the widespread existence of sub-tenanting. It is impossible to say how much land was sub-tenanted at any particular time, on this evidence, save for 1575 when the figure was about 15 per cent.) Even on this evidence, the data on the distribution of tenancies cease to carry conviction as an accurate reflection of the distribution of land for farming. The weight of all this evidence, itself unusually full, including as it does one field survey, five rentals, complete and extensive court rolls, and numerous court papers, indicates that at any one time up to 15 per cent of all cultivated land in Cannock was in the hands of sub-tenants. This conclusion is entirely erroneous.

In 1554 London-based estate officials came to Staffordshire to oversee the surveying of the Paget manors, including Cannock. A field survey was made. The common fields were either excluded or, more probably, written up in a now missing document; apart from this omission, the 1554 Field Book is complete.¹⁴ This Field Book, unlike that of 1570, records not only the name of the tenant but also the sub-tenant, where there was one, of each parcel of land. Given this information, one can calculate both the distribution of tenancies and the distribution of land for farming. The basic data are summarized in Table I. In order that meaningful comparisons between the distribution of tenancies in 1554 and 1570 may be made, the figures for the latter have been adjusted: land in the common fields is excluded, and the holdings of the two knights and the armigerous, held by non-gentles in 1554, are included.

Dealing first with the tenancies, there seems to have been a small movement towards the consolidation of holdings between 1554 and 1570. More interestingly, and more impor-

TABLE I
TENANCIES AND FARMS IN CANNOCK,
1554 AND 1570

<i>Size of holding (in acres)</i>	<i>1554 Field Book</i>		<i>1570 Field Book</i>
	<i>Farms</i>	<i>Tenancies</i>	<i>Tenancies</i>
0-9	45 (62%)	28 (54%)	24 (47%)
10-49	24 (33%)	18 (35%)	21 (41%)
50-99	1 (1%)	1 (2%)	3 (6%)
100-149	1 (1%)	4 (8%)	—
150-199	—	—	2 (4%)
200-249	1 (1%)	1 (2%)	—
250-299	1 (1%)	—	1 (2%)
	73 (99%)	52 (101%)	51 (100%)

tantly, the 1554 Field Book shows that the distribution of land for farming was very different from the distribution of tenancies. In 1554 there was a minimum of 1,400 acres in enclosures, of which 510 acres (36 per cent) remained in the hands of the tenants, and 890 acres (64 per cent) were sub-let. That is to say, two-thirds of the manorial land in Cannock was cultivated by sub-tenants; this compares with a maximum upper limit, estimated from all other evidences available, of 15 per cent at any particular time.

Some tenants retained no land; of the fifty-two tenants, sixteen sub-let all their land. Their holdings varied in size from a single cottage and a rood to 223 acres. These men, just under a third of all the tenants, neither lived on nor farmed the land they held. They were absentees; their tenancies were primarily an investment; their function in the economy of the village was largely parasitic. Once alerted to their identity through the 1554 Field Book, one can find other evidence to confirm that the practice of sub-letting continued. In 1554 the Fowkes held 1 messuage, 3 cottages, and 59 acres in Cannock, all of which were in the hands of sub-tenants. Twenty years later title to this land was in dispute, and the tenant copyholder, Edward Fowke, was instructed to present his evidence in the manor court. He was given time to do this because, to quote the surveyor's memorandum of 1574, Fowkes

¹⁴ S.R.O.: D1734/2/3/36.

"dwelleth ferre of at Cateshill in Bromsgrove."¹⁵ Clearly, the Fowke holding was still in the occupation of sub-tenants.

Land was redistributed not only amongst the resident tenants but also amongst non-tenants. There were thirty-seven men, one-half of all the cultivators of the land, whose entire holdings were in sub-tenancies. Were these men identified at all from other records they would appear at this time as landless. Most of these men had very small farms, but this was not true in every case: Alporte had 35 acres; Fynney, 35 acres and 1 messuage; Nykin, 23 acres and 3 closes; and Rusheton had 41 acres, 6 crofts, and a cottage. To call these men "landless" would be to make a serious misidentification. Similar errors are possible with the tenants: significant accumulations of sub-tenanted land were not restricted to the "new men." Some tenants with small holdings increased the size of their farms out of all proportion through sub-tenanting. Bostocke held 9 acres of which he let out 8; to this single retained acre he added over 200 in sub-tenanted land. Thus, an apparently poor peasant emerges as one of the largest farmers on the manor. Less surprisingly, larger copyholds were added to in this way. Colman let out some of his 118 acres, but more than made up for this by sub-tenanting a further 187 acres. His farm, the largest on the manor, totalled 278 acres. The above cases show that some men acquired sizeable farms through sub-tenanting, and as a result accumulated a disproportionate amount of the farming land. At the same time, there were more men competing for the finite acreage available. The over-all effect was to increase the percentage, and more importantly the number of smaller holdings. Extensive sub-tenanting did not lead to a more equitable distribution of resources.

Many of those with the smallest farms, such as Thomas Ball with a messuage and 5 acres, never became tenants in this manor. But for the survival of the 1554 Field Book such men would always appear as "landless". Some sub-tenants did eventually acquire their own tenancies. In 1554 Ralph Bromall's holding of 8 acres, a close,

and a cottage was entirely in sub-tenanted land. In August 1560 he was admitted to a small copyholding; this was not the same land as that which he held in 1554.¹⁶

The flexibility of this system of landholding made possible any variety of provision for relatives, and family connections often underlay the sub-tenanting arrangements. Most of William Fynnye's 35 acres was in the tenure of Agnes, wife of Roger Fynnye, a relative of William. Hugo Dekin sub-let his holding of 1 acre 2 roods to Ralph Dekin, and in his turn held a sub-tenancy of a messuage and just over 2 acres from Ralph. (Such exchanges of land were fairly common.) Thomas Henney, who held a messuage and 18 acres, had by 1554 sub-let land and dwelling to his fifteen-year-old son. The son was not formally admitted to the copyholding until 1560. This is one of a number of cases where the transfer of land by sub-tenanting preceded its formal conveyance. (The transfer of a sizeable farm to a fifteen-year-old boy shows that in this village community maturity was reached and responsibility taken at an early age.)¹⁷

Whilst family connection was often important, the majority of sub-tenancies were arrangements between non-relatives.¹⁸ Where there was a family connection, as in the case of Henney and his son, there was probably no financial arrangement between the parties, but the majority of sub-tenancies, i.e. all those between non-relatives and many between relatives, must have been based upon payment either in kind (crop rents) or in money.¹⁹ We have here, then, evidence of a large and, for this manor, hitherto unsuspected peasant land-market. The existence of a market in sub-tenancies, operating alongside and to a certain extent superimposed on a by no means inactive copyhold market, presents a number of problems for the historian. Firstly, the inherent

¹⁶ Harrison, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 47. Nor was this a unique case. See *ibid.*, p. 53.

¹⁸ The same was true at Rossendale. See G. H. Tupling, *The Economic History of Rossendale*, Chetham Soc., n.s., LXXXVI, 1927, p. 88.

¹⁹ Thirsk, *Agrarian History*, IV, p. 106.

¹⁵ S.R.O.: D1734/2/3/113, fo. 26.

complexity of two complementary systems of acquiring land and lack of evidence make it impossible to give anything other than an inadequately partial and misleadingly limited account of the distribution, over a period of time, of land for farming. Secondly, the existence of this market makes it impossible to establish how much the peasant farmer had to pay for his land. It is difficult enough to calculate the real annual cost of copyhold land where one needs to know (a) the annual rent and size of holding, (b) the amount of all heriots and entry fines, and (c) if the land was transferred by inheritance or, if by sale, what consideration was paid. Even for a manor as well documented as Cannock, there are only seven cases where such calculations are possible; charges varied between 1. 6d. and 19d. per acre per annum, with smaller holdings costing more than larger ones.²⁰ The exactness of these figures, so laboriously accumulated, brings little comfort. They do not represent the real cost of farm land because they do not incorporate details of the rents which sub-tenants paid to their landlords. Such rents could be considerably greater than the copyhold rent, as Tupling has shown in his work on Rossendale and Accrington.²¹ Thirdly, there is the problem of the legal status of these lettings.²² The tenure of copyhold land was shared between lord and copyholder; the estate resided in the latter. It is difficult to see what legal status the sub-tenancies had, and yet given that two-thirds of all land was held in this way, and over a half of all farmers had holdings which consisted entirely in sub-tenanted land, there must have been some security of tenure. Of these three problems, it is the first which has the widest ramifications.²³

²⁰ Harrison, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

²¹ See Tupling, *op. cit.*, App. E, where he lists the copyhold rent and then the sub-tenant's rent of a number of holdings in Rossendale: 1s. 4d., 4s.; 2s. 9½d., 7s. 2½d.; 4d., 9s. 4d. The proportionate increase in the manor of Accrington was even greater: 2½d., 13s. 11½d.; 4d., 43s. 11d. (*ibid.*, App. F).

²² At Rossendale such lettings "operated very much as leases": *ibid.*, p. 86.

²³ This account of the 1554 Field Book is based on Harrison, *op. cit.*, pp. 82-7.

III

Was the proportion of sub-tenancing in Cannock atypically high? Unfortunately, it is impossible to answer this question with certainty. As far as I know, no one has published an account, similar to the one given here, of a detailed analysis of tenants and sub-tenants as recorded in a field book. Not that the 1554 Field Book is unique in kind. As Tawney pointed out, "it is not uncommon for the surveyors of the sixteenth century to record the names both of the owners and occupiers in estate and field maps." We do have some impressionistic comments on the incidence of sub-tenancing. Tupling notes of Rossendale that "a quite considerable amount of land was being let to sub-tenants. . ." Mrs Spufford refers to an "army of sub-tenants" in the Cambridgeshire village of Willingham, and Joan Thirsk notes "the widespread practice of sub-letting" in five Holland manors at the beginning of the seventeenth century.²⁴

It is probably no co-incidence that in these manors, as in Cannock, common rights were extensive. At Cannock tenure, too, was important. The majority of tenants held by copyhold of inheritance, and enjoyed both security of tenure and low rents. They were also entitled to sub-let their land without payment of a licence or fee to the lord, and this, too, was the case at Rossendale. (On manors where the copyholder's estate was less advantageous, sub-tenancing was often less easy to contract and probably less profitable.) A high demand for land may have encouraged sub-tenancing. Cannock, situated in the west Midlands, was in an area of some population pressure. The same was true at Willingham which "expanded so rapidly between 1524 and 1664 that its fens supported one of the highest densities of households in the county."²⁵ Such evidence as we have suggests that the situation in Cannock was

²⁴ R. H. Tawney, *The Agrarian Problem in the Sixteenth Century*, 1912, reprinted 1967, p. 70; Tupling, *op. cit.*, p. 84; Spufford, *op. cit.*, p. 144; Thirsk, *Peasant Farming*, p. 42. Mrs Spufford kindly informs me that she has never found a source which notes sub-tenants as such. Her "army of sub-tenants" was deduced from wills alone.

²⁵ Spufford, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

not unique. In those villages where demand for land was high as a result of increasing population, where tenure permitted sub-letting, common rights were extensive, and there is evidence of sub-tenanting, one may reasonably conclude that sub-tenanting was widespread.

Historians have been aware of the existence of sub-letting, and most, when using land surveys, attempt to check this evidence against other sources such as probate inventories, wills, and court rolls, and they usually add a *caveat* about sub-tenanting.²⁶ The question is whether these precautions are sufficient to justify the use of land surveys to establish the structure of village societies, especially in those manors which experienced the conditions noted above. Let me recapitulate some of the serious errors which would have been made about the structure of the manor of Cannock but for the fortuitous survival of the 1554 Field Book. One would have put the proportion of sub-tenanting in Cannock at 15 per cent, in fact it was 64 per cent. One would not have known that a third of all landholders were absentees. Serious mis-identification of rich and poor would have been made.

Land surveys may be reliable evidence on the

²⁶ Thirsk, *Agrarian History*, IV, p. 401, n. 2; *idem*, *Peasant Farming*, pp. 41-3; Spufford, *op. cit.*, pp. 142-4, 166-7.

distribution of landed wealth within a manor, and on the amount and proportion of land in the meadows, common fields, and enclosures. In those manors where one has reason to believe there was more than nominal sub-tenanting, land surveys will not be a reliable indicator of the distribution of land for farming. And, if the distribution of farming land is considered the essential index of structure, as so often it has been, then these surveys may not be used to establish the structure of these village communities. There is no obvious alternative source of the distribution of farming land; therefore, if these villages are not to be consigned to a historical limbo on the grounds that we can say little about their structure, then we shall need to revise our concept of structure. Such revision of necessity would need to be radical, for one would have to abandon the traditional socio-economic model of the village community. If such a revision were made it would apply not only to these villages but to all. We could not have one concept of structure for one group of villages and a different one for the rest. The result would be a new type of local history. There is still an academic need for village histories and these will continue to change our perception of the history of rural communities in early modern England.