

The Social Structure of Manorial Freeholders: An Analysis of the Hundred Rolls of 1279

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Abstract

This study reassesses the evidence of the Hundred Rolls of 1279 to investigate the social structure and socio-economic identity of the freeholders, significantly revising the classic analysis of E A Kosminsky. Careful linkage of the personal names of freeholders within and between manors and vills reveals four groups within this broad category: clergy; gentry; craftsmen; and tradesmen. The investigation suggests that more than half the freehold land of the counties surveyed was not in the hands of their direct cultivators: manorial freehold was of major importance, and subtenancy and rent relationships already widespread at the time of the compilation of the Hundred Rolls.

WHEN medieval freeholders became the subject of special historical research, the problem became the centre of sharp polemical debate, which to this day has not been satisfactorily concluded. The course of this lively discussion, and particular phases within it, deserve a special study. For my purpose here, however, it is enough to recall the main features of three of those phases. The first is associated with the name of P Vinogradoff. For him, the problem lay in discovering the tenemental significance of manorial freehold. His investigation led him to the view that it was a relic of Anglo-Saxon freedom.¹ In short, the social and economic questions which interest us did not exist for him at all. The second phase of the debate is associated with the names of F M Stenton, D C Douglas, and others, who extended the area of observation into the north-east and eastern England.² The centre of their historical interests, however, remained on the whole the same as that formulated by Vinogradoff.

Finally, in the third phase, as is well known, the classical theory of the English manor was demolished as a result of the studies of E A Kosminsky.³ He investigated the proportion of freehold land in the tenemental structure of the manor, and the numbers and proportion of freehold compared with villein tenants. To me, however, the core of the problem lies not in the formal counting of the numbers of manorial freeholders, but more particularly in discovering their socio-economic identity. To what class of people did such freehold land belong?⁴

I

Answering this question, of course, is among the most arduous tasks of any connected with the problem of freehold. Moreover, despite all the toil and care given to the investigation, the results will always leave a residue of insoluble problems or doubtful hypotheses. Nevertheless, that is no reason for omitting the attempt. In order

¹ P Vinogradoff, *Villainage in England*, Oxford, 1892, 178–210.

² F M Stenton, *Types of Manorial Structure in the Northern Danelaw*, Oxford, 1910; D C Douglas, *The Social Structure of Medieval East Anglia*, Oxford, 1927.

³ E A Kosminsky, *Studies in the Agrarian History of England in the Thirteenth Century*, Oxford, 1956.

⁴ For an earlier discussion of this question, in English, see M A Barg, 'The Genesis of Peasant Freehold in the Midlands', in *Produttività e Tecnologie*, Firenze, 1981, 123–49.

to make such an analysis, two preconditions are necessary: first, it is necessary to have a large quantity of data; and secondly one must have information on the social status of those holding peasant-sized freeholds. The first of these preconditions is met by the printed Hundred Rolls of 1279. The second is satisfactorily met only in the case of ecclesiastical holdings. On the holdings of laymen, the Hundred Rolls seldom give any clue to the social status of tenants. Moreover, if a manorial lord appeared as a smallholder in a neighbouring manor, the survey generally neglected to add his correct title of *dominus*, which would have been of great value for our purpose. Very rarely, and only in exceptional cases, do we find in our sources indications of the social function of small freeholders that would permit any judgement about their social status. Rare examples are *senescallus*, *ballivus*, *attornatus*, *armigerus*, and *forestarius* (steward, bailiff, attorney, esquire, and forester).⁵

In consequence, the only possible way of gauging the social status of freeholders is by identifying by name and surname (or nickname) all the freeholders listed in both volumes of the Hundred Rolls, including those appearing in the first volume which are taken from surveys of earlier years. In this way, we may establish the social status of peasant freeholders by the only criterion available to us, namely the quantity of land in their possession. We can then assign an individual freeholder to a particular social class according to the aggregate size of his holding, not in one manor, but in all the manors recorded in the Hundred Rolls.

It is, of course, clear that in going beyond the confines of one manor or hundred, one meets complications and runs the risk of making many mistakes. The accuracy of this kind of research depends primarily on the stability of personal names and nicknames at this period. Regrettably, it

must be said that this stability is very low. The surname or nickname (*cognomen*) of the freeholder, which is our principal aid in identifying persons precisely, proves very often to be fickle, changeable, or, not uncommonly, is absent altogether. In the last named case, the survey says 'John, son of John', which almost totally rules out the possibility of comparing this manorial tenant with others recorded in the same terms on other estates. The same difficulty recurs in cases where the survey states *Petrus Faber*, *Pistor*, or *Taylor*, in which cases the occupations of smith, baker, or tailor are too common to allow positive identification. Equally poorly identified are the female tenants listed as: *Margeria relicta* [widow], *Christina uxor* [wife], *soror* [sister], etc.⁶ But the most important obstacle is the fact that surnames in the thirteenth century were far from settled; father and son, and brothers too, very often had different surnames. Thus on one page we find *William Scriptor*, and on a nearby page *William Cancellarius*.⁷ In another example, the father is recorded as *Robertus Witham*, but his son as *Robertus de Swaleclive*.⁸ Finally, the number of potential mistakes in the identification of personal names increases through the negligence of the compilers of the surveys; in writing the same surname they indulged in the most unexpected variations. Thus, for example, the surname of Phillip Mimecan could be written *Mincan* and *Minecan*.⁹ *John Flexleye* could also be spelled as *Flexneye*.¹⁰ Robert Freman could be both *Fiman*, and *Franke-lin*.¹¹ Examples of such inconsistencies on the part of the surveys in spelling surnames could be multiplied many times, and to these must be added the errors and mistranscriptions of the editors of the printed volumes.

⁶ RH, II, 937-1101.

⁷ RH, II, 868, 870.

⁸ RH, II, 708.

⁹ RH, II, 720-1.

¹⁰ RH, II, 703.

¹¹ RH, II, 709.

⁵ *Rotuli Hundredorum* (hereafter RH), 2 vols., Record Commission, 1810-1818, II, 723, 431, 348, 707-08, 723.

It should also be pointed out, however, that although by broadening the territorial extent of these observations and the time span, we increase the possibility of some errors, we may help to avoid others. To demonstrate this, a few examples will serve. William Burton, a freeholder in a vill of the same name, could easily be taken for a peasant as he had two holdings of 0.5 virgates each. But in the survey of 1275-6 we read the following: *Willhelmus de Burton, ballivus comitis Warren* [bailiff of the Earl Warenne].¹² Richard de Lodelawe, if we judge by the size of his freehold in the vill of Fifield, was a peasant, for he held there one virgate of land. But in the inquisition of 1254-5 he is mentioned as *Ricardus, canonicus de Lodelowe* (canon of Ludlow).¹³ The social status of John Levernon, who is recorded in the manor of Abbots Ripton as a tenant of 22 acres of freehold land, would also be regarded as that of a peasant if we did not consult the inquisition of 1254-5, where we read *Johannes de Vernon quondam vicecomes* [formerly sheriff].¹⁴ Similarly, William Passelewe, seemingly a modest freeholder in Cambridgeshire and Oxfordshire, emerges in a new light if we identify him with William Passelewe in Buckinghamshire, and with the person named in an inquisition of 1274-5 in Northamptonshire, where we read of *Willelmus Passeleu, senescallus comitis Gloucestrie* [steward of the Earl of Gloucester].¹⁵

As a result of comparing the personal names of all the manorial freeholders recorded in the Hundred Rolls of 1279, some general principles were elaborated, on which the present study is based.

1 If a particular surname (nickname) was found to be geographically widespread, as, for example, in the case of Parker, Page, Russell, and so on, in the absence of

additional information, the area in which that name was regarded as belonging to one and the same person was defined more narrowly. And in reverse, if a personal name was rare and picturesque, more latitude was given, when the name recurred in places comparatively remote from one another, for regarding its bearers as one and the same person.

2 In cases where the surname was derived from the name of a vill or manor, its bearers were considered to be one and the same person only if the name of the vill or manor was not repeated within the area described in the printed Hundred Rolls of 1279.

3 A surname or nickname derived from a trade gave no grounds (unless complemented by additional data) for going beyond the confines of one manor and claiming two identical names as belonging to the same person.

4 Finally, a surname or nickname was considered as belonging to one and the same person if, in different hundreds and counties, it featured in company with the same associates, such as subtenants, family members, etc. Thus, Ralph Passelewe, a tenant of a knight's fee in the vill of Biddenham, Beds., was identified with a small freeholder of the same name and surname in the vill of Stevington, Beds., on the grounds that in both cases he was accompanied by one and the same person, namely Nicolas Passelewe.¹⁶ In the Hundred Rolls of 1279 many such pairs appear.

II

As the result of prolonged study, not only of the two volumes of the Hundred Rolls but also of more or less contemporary records, namely, *Placita de Quo Warranto*, *Testa de Nevill*, and printed rolls of royal and manorial courts, it has been possible to

¹² RH, II, 695, 698, 29, and cf. 28.

¹³ RH, II, 69.

¹⁴ RH, II, 600, 264.

¹⁵ RH, II, 472, 750, 12.

¹⁶ RH, II, 327, 331.

subdivide the socially faceless mass of manorial freeholders into four groups: gentry, ecclesiastics, craftsmen and tradesmen, and peasants. It should be stressed that in fixing the borderline between peasants and gentry, if it could not be defined in any other way, I followed the rule laid down by Kosminsky in his statistics, namely, that the holder of one hide (four times thirty acres) represented a member of the gentry. Only in Cambridgeshire was the borderline modified to half a hide (60 acres) in view of the degree of fragmentation shown to have occurred to peasant holdings in that county. Even in this case, however, 60 acres proved to be four times larger than the typical peasant holding in this area.

The results of these calculations are given in Table I. The criteria used to arrive at them means that the resulting numbers are minima. But even so, the figures tend to indicate that in three counties, Oxfordshire, Huntingdonshire, and Buckinghamshire, more than half the freehold land contained in the Hundred Rolls was in the possession of men and women who were not peasants. In Bedfordshire freehold land thus held amounted to one-third of the total area, in Cambridgeshire it amounted to 28 per cent. Altogether within the area comprised in the printed Hundred Rolls, almost half of manorial freehold land was in the tenure of non-peasants.

In general, the tabulated analysis reveals a major feature of the social distribution of peasant freehold: the more highly manorialized the region, the less such freehold had in common with recognizable peasant landholdings. Of considerable interest is the distribution of the non-peasant share of manorial freehold land. The lion's portion belonged to laymen, but its exact size varied greatly between counties; it fluctuated between two-thirds of the whole in Oxfordshire, and two-fifths in Buckinghamshire on the one hand, and a fifth in Bedfordshire, and less than one-sixth in Cambridgeshire on the other. Taking all the data together,

the layman's share was close to 30 per cent of all freehold land described in the Hundred Rolls, and close to 55 per cent of the freehold land held by the non-peasant classes. The church's share was greatest in Buckinghamshire, where it amounted to 41 per cent of all non-peasant freehold, in Huntingdonshire where it represented about 33 per cent, and in Oxfordshire, Cambridgeshire, and Bedfordshire, where it occupied nearly 30 per cent. On the whole, within the area studied, laymen held nearly one-third of all the freehold land belonging to non-peasants.

Finally, it is worth noting that urban elements (artisans and merchants) and rural craftsmen and traders among manorial freeholders have hitherto been underestimated. It has to be stressed, of course, that in these calculations they represent a much smaller percentage than in actuality, since in many cases small freeholders with surnames like Smith, Faber, Taylor, etc., were not counted as 'urban' elements. Nevertheless, in Oxfordshire 12 per cent of the share of peasant freehold belonged to this group, in Buckinghamshire and Cambridgeshire nearly a fifth, and in Bedfordshire and Huntingdonshire it fluctuated around a tenth. The central significance of this social fact lies not so much in the penetration into the village of tradesmen and craftsmen from neighbouring towns as in the crystallization of this group inside the village community. In this connection, suffice it to say that the truly peasant type of freehold offered the most favourable arena for displaying the process of the social division of labour.

No matter how critical an attitude we adopt to the calculations made above concerning the distribution of manorial freehold between different social groups, the figures reveal a pattern which is strongly correlated with the degree of manorialization in each given area.

III

We may now turn to the results of our calculations, approaching the questions posed here from a somewhat different angle.

TABLE 1
The social distribution of manorial freehold
(the RH 1279 data)

County/Hundred	Registered freehold, virgates	Including ones not in the possession of peasants		as property of temporal lords		Of which as church property		as property of trade and craft elements	
		Virgates	%	Virgates	%	Virgates	%	Virgates	%
Buckinghamshire									
Bunstown	137.3	60.3	43.7	20.5	33.9	23.8	39.6	16.0	26.5
Muta	50.7	22.0	43.3	5.5	25.0	11.5	52.3	5.0	22.7
Mursley	114.2	66.8	58.4	32.3	48.4	24.0	35.9	10.5	15.7
Stodfold	131.8	70.8	53.4	31.0	44.2	32.3	45.3	7.5	10.5
Total	434.0	219.9	50.6	89.3	40.6	91.6	41.6	39.0	17.8
Cambridgeshire									
Whittlesford	80.8	31.8	39.3	10.5	33.0	18.0	56.9	3.3	10.1
Wetherley	158.0	39.4	24.9	23.0	58.4	11.0	27.9	5.4	13.7
Longstow	152.0	41.0	26.9	19.1	46.7	8.6	20.9	13.3	32.7
Thriplow	76.6	37.8	49.3	23.3	61.6	6.0	15.8	8.5	22.6
Chilford	140.4	35.7	25.0	20.0	56.1	9.7	57.1	6.0	16.8
Papworth	96.5	22.0	22.9	11.0	50.1	10.0	45.4	1.0	4.5
Flendish	60.4	7.0	11.5	6.5	92.8	0.5	7.2	—	—
Stowe	74.3	11.5	15.4	9.0	78.2	2.5	21.8	—	—
Staine	69.0	24.5	35.5	12.5	51.1	10.0	40.8	2.0	8.1
Staploe	96.0	33.3	34.6	20.0	60.2	7.3	21.9	6.0	17.9
Total	1004.0	284.0	28.2	154.9	54.5	83.6	29.5	45.5	16.0
Oxfordshire									
Wootton	284.5	196.4	69.0	112.6	57.3	57.0	29.1	26.8	13.6
Chadlington	317.7	186.7	58.8	120.7	64.7	37.0	19.8	29.0	15.5
Banbury	150.0	98.6	65.6	59.0	60.0	32.6	33.0	7.0	7.0
Bullington	174.0	112.5	64.6	66.5	59.2	33.3	29.6	12.7	11.2
Langtree	116.0	84.0	72.4	46.0	54.8	23.0	27.3	15.0	17.9
Lewknor	122.5	60.5	49.1	44.0	72.8	6.0	9.9	10.5	17.3
Pyrton	144.5	51.3	35.4	32.7	63.9	10.3	20.0	8.3	16.1
Thame	61.0	29.5	48.3	23.5	79.8	5.0	16.9	1.0	3.3
Ploughley	279.5	121.1	43.3	58.0	47.8	52.5	43.4	10.6	8.8
Dorchester	85.2	53.0	62.3	36.0	67.9	15.0	28.2	2.0	3.9
Bampton	236.5	112.0	47.2	91.5	81.7	10.5	9.4	10.0	8.9
Ewelme	169.3	81.4	48.0	42.3	5.9	30.4	37.5	8.7	10.6
Total	2140.7	1187.0	55.4	732.8	61.7	312.6	26.2	141.6	12.1
Bedfordshire									
Stodden	44.5	15.7	35.0	10.0	63.8	3.7	23.5	2.0	12.7
Willey	285.0	107.0	37.5	62.0	57.9	32.9	30.7	12.1	11.4
Total	329.5	122.7	37.0	72.0	59.0	36.6	29.6	14.1	11.4
Huntingdonshire									
Toseland	150.0	69.0	46.0	28.7	41.5	36.3	52.8	4.0	5.7
Normancross	186.0	86.7	46.6	42.3	48.7	34.7	40.2	9.7	11.1
Hirstingdon	64.5	55.5	85.9	46.3	83.3	7.0	12.6	2.2	4.1
Leightonstone	178.5	107.5	60.1	69.5	64.6	26.0	24.0	12.0	11.4
Total	579.0	318.7	55.0	186.8	58.4	104.0	32.7	27.9	8.9

What pattern of manorial freehold emerges if we rank all manors possessing such tenure in descending order according to the share held by non-peasants (see Table II)? Among 545 manors surveyed in four counties, no peasant-sized freeholds proved to be held by peasants in 118 manors, or about one-fifth of the total. If we consider the manors in which the share of non-peasants in peasant-sized freeholds exceeded 50 per cent, their number amounted to 318 or a little less than two-thirds of all the manors counted in Table II. On the other hand, the number of manors in which truly peasant freehold predominated (i.e. reached three-quarters of the area of manorial freehold) constituted 27.6 per cent of all the manors under review. Also the regularity already mentioned recurs: the higher the level of manorialization in each particular region, the less often do true peasants prove to be the freeholders, and, in consequence, the greater was the share of non-peasants. Thus, the proportion of manors in which all peasant-sized freehold was in the hands of non-peasants was at a maximum in Huntingdonshire with 30.5 per cent. Correspondingly, the proportion of manors in the same county in which all peasant-sized freehold was in the possession of true peasant holders represented the minimum of 13.7 per cent.

Cambridgeshire is not included in this Table because manorial freehold was here so complicated in its structure, that trying to arrange the relevant data under individual manors becomes an impossible exercise, giving unreliable statistical results. In Bedfordshire the results are the reverse of those in Huntingdonshire, namely, 1.4 per cent of manors showed all freehold land in the possession of non-peasants, and 20.4 per cent of manors showed it in the possession of true peasants.

The fact established above that almost half the area of manorial freehold described in the Hundred Rolls of 1279 was held by non-peasants demands that we answer the further question, as important as it is

difficult. In what way did these landholders, who were not as a rule cultivators of their land, make economic use of their freehold tenements? Often they were dispersed over many manors, but the surveys generally do not tell us the names of the under-tenants, who were the direct tillers of the land. Nevertheless the presence of subtenants is confirmed by the fact that, in many cases, manorial freehold is described in whole virgates, i.e. rounded blocks of land which look highly artificial when compared with the other cases where the surveyor recorded not the legal holders of freehold but the actual cultivator. We may compare two examples:

*Vill of Mongewell, Oxon.*¹⁷

Galfridus Engleys	1 virgate
Johannes de la Denne	1 virgate
Walterus de Esthall	1 virgate
Iohanes Burwefeld	2.5 virgate
Rector ecclesie	2 virgate
Thomas de Wyc	1 carucate

*Vill of Little Paxton, Hunts.*¹⁸

Prior de Bissemede	10a. <i>libere</i> [freely]
2 subtenants hold	10a. <i>in villenagio</i> [in villeinage]
Caterina Fin	7a. <i>libere</i>
1 subtenant	7a. <i>in villenagio</i>
Willelmus le Parkere	7a. <i>libere</i>
1 subtenant	7a. <i>in villenagio</i>
Rob. de Bedeford	7a. <i>libere</i>
1 subtenant	7a. <i>in villenagio</i>
Ric. de Alkmundebir	10a. <i>libere</i>
1 subtenant	10a. <i>in villenagio</i>

Similar examples are abundant in the Hundred Rolls. Let us note only one further entry: *Petronilla de la Le habet . . . 4v. . . dictas quatuor virgatas terre tenentur de eadem Petronilla in villenagio.*¹⁹ Many more such

¹⁷ RH, II, 774.

¹⁸ RH, II, 673.

¹⁹ RH, II, 709. Petronilla de la Le has . . . 4 virgates . . . the said 4 virgates are held of the same Petronilla in villeinage.

TABLE II

Distribution of manorial estates by the share of non-peasant social groups in the 'peasant-like' freehold

County/Hundred	The total number of manors	The number of manors where the non-peasant social elements possess 100% of the intra-manorial freehold	over 80%	80-60%	60-50%	50-30%	30-20%	less than 20%	All the freehold in possession of peasants
Oxfordshire									
Wootton	47	15	2	13	2	3	4	1	10
Chadlington	42	4	4	9	8	5	2	—	10
Banbury	17	5	2	3	2	2	2	—	1
Bullington	29	8	4	3	2	6	2	—	4
Langtree	14	2	2	5	3	—	1	—	1
Lewknor	16	2	1	4	1	2	1	—	5
Pyrton	15	1	—	2	5	2	2	2	1
Thame	10	1	—	4	2	—	2	—	1
Ploughley	41	10	1	5	11	5	2	4	3
Bampton	48	7	8	6	3	9	3	3	9
Dorchester	7	3	—	—	2	—	—	1	1
Ewelme	30	5	2	5	4	2	2	3	7
Total	316	63	26	59	45	36	20	14	53
		(20.0%)	(8.2%)	(18.6%)	(14.2%)	(11.4%)	(6.3%)	(4.4%)	(16.9%)
Bedfordshire									
Stodden	12	3	—	1	1	2	2	—	3
Willey	58	9	1	5	12	10	4	6	11
Total	70	12	1	6	13	12	6	6	14
		(17.1%)	(1.4%)	(8.5%)	(18.5%)	(17.1%)	(8.5%)	(8.5%)	(20.4%)
Huntingdonshire									
Toseland	30	6	2	9	1	—	2	3	7
Normancross	31	9	4	4	—	4	2	2	6
Hirstingdon	12	5	3	1	1	1	1	—	—
Leightonstone	25	10	1	8	2	3	—	1	—
Total	98	30	10	22	4	8	5	6	13
		(30.5%)	(10.2%)	(22.4%)	(4.0%)	(8.0%)	(5.1%)	(6.1%)	(13.7%)
Buckinghamshire									
Bunstown	12	—	—	5	2	3	—	—	2
Muta	8	1	1	1	1	1	—	1	2
Mursley	22	6	3	3	4	2	1	1	2
Stodfold	19	6	3	—	1	4	—	2	3
Total	61	13	7	9	8	10	1	4	9
		(21.3%)	(11.4%)	(14.7%)	(13.1%)	(16.4%)	(1.6%)	(6.8%)	(14.7%)
For all the material	545	118	44	96	70	66	32	30	89
		(21.6%)	(8.6%)	(17.8%)	(12.8%)	(11.7%)	(5.8%)	(5.5%)	(16.2%)

examples exist in this material of the leasing of parcels of freehold (mainly for a term of years) and of tenements let at the will of the freeholder.

IV

From all this we arrive at two conclusions. First, the small amount of manorial freehold, emerging in the regions, where a relatively high degree of manorialization had been attained, reflected the disintegration of the old feudal landed estates,²⁰ and constituted at the time that the Hundred Rolls were being compiled in 1279 the building blocks for feudal estates of a new type – estates

which were dispersed, heterogeneous in their tenemental and economic structure, more mobile and fluid in their boundaries, and, for these reasons, difficult to identify. We are witnessing here a process that was under way at the very heart of the old Anglo-Norman feudal estate, the results of which would duly appear in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in the structure of feudal estates of a new generation, promoting new rent relations in the English village. Secondly, it does not follow from this that manorial freehold, as an important element in the English village, disappeared. On the contrary, it deserves more attentive study, and a more sensitive assessment.

²⁰ See note 4 above.