

A Suffolk farmer in the fifteenth century^{*}

by Christopher Dyer

Abstract

This article explores the impact of farmers on rural society in the fifteenth century, when they represented a new tendency in agricultural production. The farmer of Chevington in Suffolk was a forceful and dominant figure, who established a close relationship with his lords, the abbots of Bury St Edmunds, and ruled in his village by buying land and promoting his family. This example shows the potential for change that farmers represented, and the shift in initiative from lord to tenants in the fifteenth century. Although the Parman family continued to be prosperous landholders in their village, their founder's towering fortune and powers of manipulation were not perpetuated.

Everyone knows that farmers played a vital part in English agrarian history. The word 'farmer' was originally used to describe a tenant paying a leasehold rent (a farm), often for holding a lord's manorial demesne. The use of the word was eventually extended to mean any tenant or owner of a large holding, though when Gregory King estimated that there were 150,000 farmers in the late seventeenth century he evidently defined them by their tenure, as freeholders were counted separately. Much is known about farmers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and recent research has revealed their tendency to remain on their farms, the acreage under their management, the number of their employees and their distribution over the country, with higher densities of large commercial farms in the south and east.¹ Farmers in general are so well documented in the age of the agricultural revolution that it would be a luxury to devote space to a single individual, but this article explores the life and activities of a farmer of the first generation, when information is usually sparse. The farmers of the period 1380–1500 have been researched in the context of an estate, a county or a region, but often our knowledge of them is limited to a name, a sum paid as rent, and the term of years for which they would hold the land. They participated in a general growth in holding size which

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¹ W.A. Armstrong, 'Labour I: rural population growth, systems of employment and incomes', in G.E. Mingay (ed.), *The agrarian history of England and Wales*, VI, 1750–1850 (1989), p. 669; D.R. Stead, 'The mobility of English tenant farmers, c.1700–1850', *AgHR* 51 (2003), pp. 173–89; L. Shaw-Taylor, 'Family farms and capitalist farms in mid-nineteenth century England', *AgHR* 53 (2005), pp. 158–91.

gave many tenants accumulations of land amounting to 50–90 acres in the fifteenth century, but the farmers of demesnes were not uncommonly acquiring on lease 200, 300 or 400 acres in a single transaction.²

The new breed of farmers became more numerous when the lords, after about 1375, decided to lease out their demesnes in the face of falling grain prices and high production costs. Arable lands tended to go first, and pastures later. Some demesnes were leased in parcels, but many tenants took on large blocks of land, or a single unit. In the long term leasing transferred a substantial proportion of the agricultural land, a fifth in some regions, from the management of lords' officials into the hands of farmers. The social background of the new tenants varied from region to region and from estate to estate: most emerged out of the peasantry, though a fair number came from the gentry, merchants, artisans and clergy. We do not know a great deal about how they used these potentially valuable assets, which challenged them because of the low profit margins which had forced lords to relinquish direct management of the land in the first place. Farmers might specialize in production, for example by converting as much land as possible to pasture. Some were enclosers. We can occasionally glimpse their employment of labour, and the arrangements that they made to market their produce.³

This article will enquire into a farmer's origins, and how he managed his lands. It will also ask how this emergent type of entrepreneur fitted into rural society, in relation to the lord, and to his neighbours and subordinates in the village. Did the pioneers have a lasting impact on their communities and establish future generations of wealthy landholders? A farmer in Suffolk is the subject of this enquiry, and we naturally ask if the county's commercialized environment encouraged production for the market in the fifteenth century as it did in modern times.

The sources available for research into the early farmers cannot be compared with the wealth

² For the general trends in fifteenth-century land-holding, see E. Miller, 'Introduction: land and people'; id., 'Tenant farming and farmers: Yorkshire and Lancashire'; R. H. Britnell, 'Tenant farming and farmers: eastern England'; E. King, 'Tenant farming and farmers: the east Midlands'; P. D. A. Harvey, 'Tenant farming and farmers: the Home Counties'; M. Mate, 'Tenant farming and farmers: Kent and Sussex'; E. Miller, 'Tenant farming and farmers: the southern counties'; H. S. A. Fox, 'Tenant farming and farmers: Devon and Cornwall', all in E. Miller (ed.), *The agrarian history of England and Wales*, III, 1348–1500 (1991), pp. 13–15, 25–6, 601–2, 614–17, 624–31, 662–6, 698–9, 723–5; R. Faith, 'Berkshire: fourteenth and fifteenth centuries'; T. Lomas, 'South-east Durham: late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries', both in P. D. A. Harvey (ed.), *The peasant land market in medieval England* (1984), pp. 121–58, 309–10; J. Whittle, *The development of agrarian capitalism: land and labour in Norfolk 1440–1580* (2000).

³ Works on farmers include F. R. H. Du Boulay, 'Who were farming the English demesnes at the end of the

middle ages?', *ECHR* 17 (1965), pp. 443–55; B. F. Harvey, 'The leasing of the abbot of Westminster's demesnes in the late middle ages', *ECHR* 22 (1969), pp. 17–27; id., *Westminster Abbey and its estates in the middle ages* (1977), pp. 148–63; R. A. Lomas, 'The priory of Durham and its demesnes in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries', *ECHR* 31 (1978), pp. 339–53; C. Dyer, *Lords and peasants in a changing society. The estates of the bishopric of Worcester, 680–1540* (1980), pp. 209–17; J. N. Hare, 'The demesne lessees of fifteenth-century Wiltshire', *AgHR* 29 (1981), pp. 1–15; C. Dyer, *Warwickshire farming. Preparations for agricultural revolution, 1349–1520* (Dugdale Soc. Occ. Paper 27, 1981), pp. 4–5, 16–22; G. Draper, 'The farmers of Canterbury Cathedral Priory and All Souls College on Romney Marsh, c.1443–1545', in J. Eddison, M. Gardiner and A. Long (eds), *Romney Marsh: environmental change and human occupation in a coastal lowland* (Oxford Univ. Committee for Archaeology, monograph, 46, 1998), pp. 109–28; C. Dyer, *An age of transition? Economy and society in England in the later middle ages* (2005), pp. 194–210.

of material available for their successors in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. We have to make do with lists of tenants, manorial accounts and court rolls, but if used in conjunction with leases, wills, deeds and tax records we can begin to reconstruct in outline the lives of individuals. In this case, the survival of a considerable part of the archive of the abbey of Bury St Edmunds, together with will registers, gives us an opportunity to build a fuller picture than is normally possible. This biographical approach serves a wider purpose: one man's story can throw light on general patterns of economic and social change.

I

Robert Parman of Chevington (Suffolk) lived between c.1405 and 1475. He was born a serf on the estate of the abbey of Bury St Edmunds, and became a local administrator for the monastery and farmer of two of its demesnes.

Chevington, and the group of contiguous villages associated with Parman, particularly Ickworth, Great Saxham, Hargrave and Depden, lie a few miles to the south-west of Bury St Edmunds (see Figure 1). This western part of Suffolk, like the centre of the county, was covered with heavy clay soils, and in the fifteenth century had a mixed agrarian economy, judging from the records of the demesne on which wheat, barley, peas and oats were grown, and sheep and cattle were grazed. The tenants, unlike their lords, kept many pigs. Chevington's resources of clay and wood fuel, within easy carting distance of a large town, encouraged some tile and brick making. Suffolk as a whole was an urbanized and commercially developed county compared with other parts of England. In the early sixteenth century near to a quarter of its people lived in towns, and at least a third gained most of their living from non-agricultural activities. The figures would still have been relatively high in the depression of the mid-fifteenth century.⁴ The landholders of Chevington and its neighbourhood would have sent produce to Bury market, and could supply the high levels of demand from the cloth-making centres such as Long Melford ten miles to the south. This advantage is reflected in the value of land, which in the fifteenth century yielded relatively high rents, even in the 'depression' of the 1450s and 1460s (see below, p. 11–12).

For a fifteenth-century visitor the dominant feature of Chevington's landscape would have been the manor house of the abbots of Bury. This establishment, which was called a palace in mid-century, lay to the north of the village, and was in regular use as a summer residence for the successive abbots, where they could enjoy hunting in the park which occupied the north-west corner of the parish. The high status of the house, and its pleasurable function, was evident from its moats and ponds: visitors approached between two pools, which no doubt formed

⁴ For the soils and landscape see D. Dymond and E. Martin (eds), *An historical atlas of Suffolk* (third edn, 1999), pp. 18–21; N. Scarfe, *The Suffolk landscape* (1972). The generalizations about crops and animals are based on Suffolk Records Office (Bury St Edmunds Branch) [hereafter SROB], E3/15.3/2.29; E3/15.3/2.35; E3/15.52/2.1(a). For Suffolk's commercial and industrial economy see A. Betterton and D. Dymond, *Lavenham: industrial town* (1989); R. Smith, 'A periodic market and its impact on a manorial community: Botesdale, Suffolk, and the manor of Redgrave, 1280–1300', in Z. Razi and R. Smith (eds), *Medieval society and the manor court* (1996), pp. 450–81. I have benefited from reading parts of Mark Bailey's forthcoming book on medieval Suffolk.

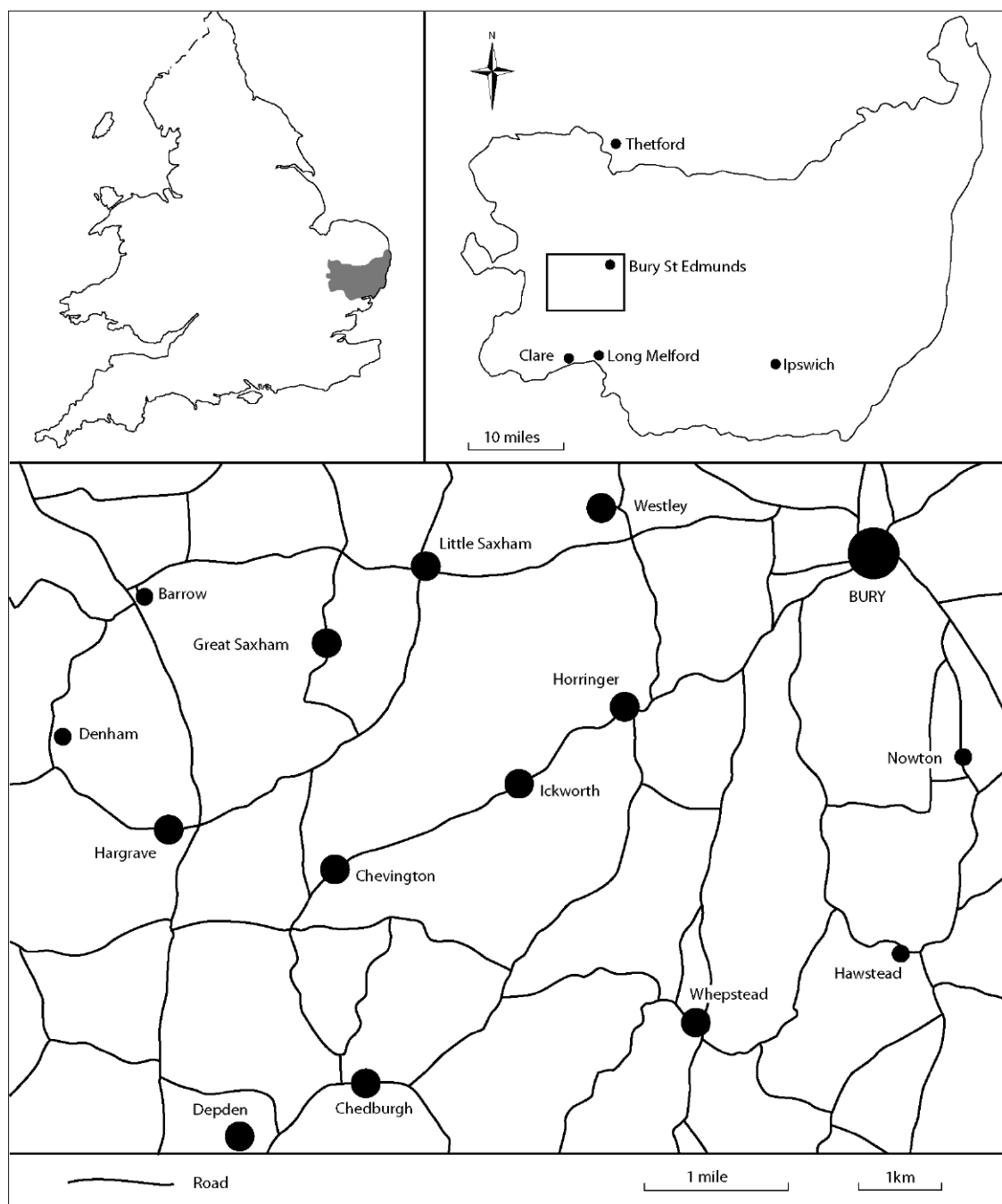


FIGURE 1. The location of Chevington, and nearby villages.

part of an elaborate garden. The water features provided both ornament and more practical functions, as they were stocked with fish for the abbots' table.⁵

With the lord's house and park dominating the north-west of Chevington's territory, and woods growing in the north-east, the agricultural land and the peasant settlements lay to the south and east (see Figure 2). The dispersed settlement pattern meant that the peasant houses were strung out on the edges of greens, such as Little Green and Broad Green. At least four houses in the parish were provided with moats, but on a much smaller scale than the manor house. The buildings which acted as the ceremonial and social foci of the community, the parish church and the guild hall, lay to the south of the manor house.⁶

The arable land was sometimes to be found in numerous enclosed crofts, and also in small pieces of one and two acres (or fractions of an acre) in at least ten 'fields' containing intermixed parcels. Animals were fed from extensive meadows, and grazed the areas of common pasture on the greens, as well as on the stubbles and fallows of the fields. Numerous trees grew in the hedgerows around the crofts and closes, and a few tenants held small groves as part of their tenements. The early modern topographers described the claylands of west and central Suffolk as 'woodland'. The combination of dispersed settlement, moated houses, 'old enclosure', irregular open fields, and relatively abundant pasture and wood accords with the woodlands found in both eastern and western counties.⁷ The modern visitor is struck by the narrow winding lanes, the isolated houses at the roadside, and the banked hedges.

Chevington was not very densely populated. In a large parish of 2,445 acres, 66 holdings were listed in 1389. Of these, 25 exceeded 15 acres, and another 11 had between 5 and 14 acres, so a sizeable but not overwhelming minority contained less than 5 acres. This shows that a middling peasantry dominated landholding in the generation after the Black Death: the manor, even before 1349, had evidently not seen the extreme fragmentation of holdings found in some parts of East Anglia. Inhabitants and tenants declined in number during the fifteenth century, and the population in 1524, on the basis of 35 taxpayers, can be estimated at between 200 and 250.⁸

Villages and parishes were not as separate and distinct in Suffolk as in other parts of England. The inhabitants knew that territorial boundaries existed, but often crossed them. The wealthier tenants acquired land in more than one village, and in the late fifteenth century Parman's neighbours held land in Boyden, Chedburgh, Hargrave, Hessett, Ickworth and Whepstead. These tenurial links may well have originated through migration and marriage. From day to day people from neighbouring villages such as Chedburgh, Depden and Horringer invaded Chevington

⁵ Suffolk County Council, Sites and Monuments Record [hereafter SMR], CHV SF6125; E. Martin, 'The discovery of early gardens in Suffolk', in Anon., *Pastimes of pleasure: a celebration of Suffolk gardens from the seventeenth century to the present* (2000), pp. 11–12. For a parallel see C. Taylor, 'Somersham Palace, Cambridgeshire: a medieval landscape for pleasure?', in M. Bowden, D. Mackay and P. Topping (eds), *From Cornwall to Caithness* (British Archaeological Reports, British Ser., 209, 1989), pp. 211–24. The fish (26 pike and pickerel, 27 tench and 254 roach and perch) are listed in SROB, E3/15.3/2.35.

⁶ Suffolk CC, SMR, CHV 007, SF 10497; SF 18036, SF 6155, SF 61511; F. Cooper, *Chevington: a social chronicle of a Suffolk village* (1984), p. 14.

⁷ SROB, E3/15.3/3.2 is a list of leaseholdings compiled in 1478, which is rich in topographical detail about greens, crofts, fields, meadows and lanes. On the general character of woodlands throughout England see various authors in J. Thirsk (ed.), *The English rural landscape* (2000), pp. 106–12, 123–31, 224–7, 269–72.

⁸ SROB, E3/15.3/3.1; S. H. A. H[ervey] (ed.), *Suffolk in 1524, being the return for a subsidy granted in 1523* (Suffolk Green Books, 10, 1910), pp. 343–4.

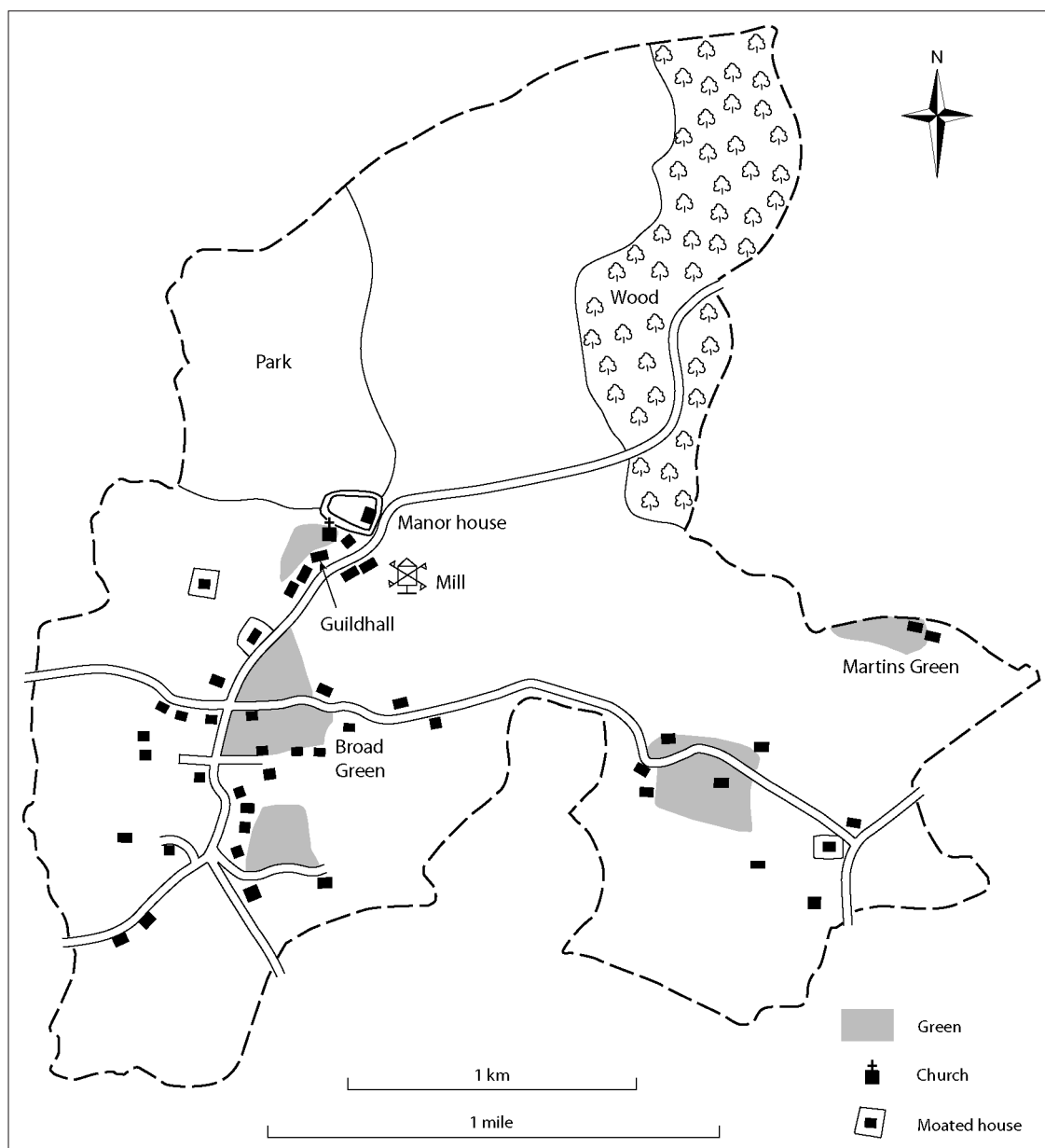


FIGURE 2. Chevington parish, showing main topographical features, and houses built before 1839, many of which occupied the sites of messuages and cottages standing in Parman's day.

Source: Chevington tithe map, SROB, T112/1 and 2.

by putting their animals to graze on the common pastures, 'making unjust roads' (driving carts over the fields) and hunting small game. The inhabitants of Chevington also encroached across their borders in the other direction.⁹

Chevington lay on the estate of the monks of Bury, renowned as exceptionally wealthy and assertive lords. They protected their rights and privileges, and their hand was strengthened by the compact nature of the estate and their extensive powers of jurisdiction. At Chevington the weight of lordship is reflected in the numbers of customary tenants, who made up two-thirds of the total. Labour service survived as late as 1427, and the word *neif* (servile) was being used to describe tenures in 1480.¹⁰ The hundreds of tenants who held land in the concentration of manors around the monastery in west Suffolk felt themselves to be under the constant surveillance of their lord, and none more so than those at Chevington, where the abbots were regular visitors to a favoured residence. All Bury manors were subject to the efficient and almost obsessive record keeping of the monks, who as well as the routine annual accounts and court rolls, compiled a series of registers which preserved the texts of surveys, deeds, leases, court records and other materials. The abbey's archive disadvantaged the tenants, whose obligations were never forgotten, but they give much help to the historian.¹¹

II

Robert Parman migrated (like so many of his contemporaries) and moved into Chevington in the late 1430s. Described as the son of the serf John Parman in 1435, he was living at Great Saxham, a manor of the abbey of Bury, and he was himself a serf of the abbey by birth, from which condition he was granted manumission in that year.¹² Two years later he appears as bailiff of Chevington manor.¹³ He was then probably in his thirties, putting his birth in c.1405, as in 1458 he had two sons old enough to acquire land, which (assuming that many tenants began their landholding and married lives around the age of twenty-five) might date his marriage to c.1430.¹⁴ He had probably gained experience of agricultural management at Great Saxham, if only on his own or his father's holding, and there is a hint that he was literate and capable of keeping accounts. He must have attracted the attention of the abbey's officials, who judged that he was a safe pair of hands to serve as bailiff of Chevington. This was a responsible job, as the manor generated annual income for the abbey in excess of £30 per annum, and the rewards of office reflected its value, with a wage of 52s. per annum, and an annual livery of clothing.¹⁵ He

⁹ SROB, IC500/2/9, fos. 64, 288 (wills of Robert Somerton, 1444, and John Cok, 1462), and E3/15.3/1.36 for trespasses etc.

¹⁰ SROB, E3/15.3/1.35 (a tenant amerced for failing to do a boon work); E3/15.3/1.36 records in May 1480 a surrender by Robert Parman, parson of the church, of a croft of *terre native* (servile land).

¹¹ R.M. Thomson, *The archives of the abbey of Bury St Edmunds* (Suffolk Records Soc., 21, 1980), pp.16–40.

¹² On rural migration in this period, see C.Dyer, 'Were late medieval English villages "self-contained?"', and J.Whittle, 'Population mobility in rural Norfolk

among landholders and others, c.1440–c.1600', in C.Dyer (ed.), *The self-contained village? The social history of rural communities, 1250–1900* (2007), pp.6–27; 28–45. On Parman's origins, BL, Add. MS. 14,848, fo.173r.

¹³ SROB, E3/15.3/2.34.

¹⁴ SROB, E3/15.3/1.35 (Henry and Robert Parman, sons of Robert Parman senior, acquired land). Age at marriage at this time is a knotty problem: L.Poos, *A rural society after the Black Death. Essex, 1350–1525* (1991), pp.141–58.

¹⁵ SROB, E3/15.3/2.34; E3/15.3/2.35. The 'profit' in 1419–20 was calculated as £30: E3/15.3/2.29.

evidently decided to live in Chevington soon after being appointed bailiff, as he acquired two holdings of land there in 1440, and his wife Joan makes her appearance in that year in the court records for brewing and selling ale.¹⁶

One imagines Robert and Joan and their growing family occupying a house larger than those of the other villagers towards the north of the settlement, a conveniently short distance from the manorial buildings where his work as bailiff was based, but accessible for neighbours wishing to buy Joan's ale. Parman had moved from one village to another, but unlike many other country dwellers of the period, did not move on again, and members of his family remained in Chevington long after his death.¹⁷

In the 1430s the bailiff's role at Chevington as manager of the lord's demesne was coming to an end. The main profit of the manor came from rents, so the rent collector, who worked alongside the bailiff, was responsible for gathering the bulk of the manorial income.¹⁸ The principal problem for the abbot, as for all other lords around this time, lay in making a profit from the demesne. The abbey had been moving away from direct management and towards the leasing out of its demesnes, but hesitantly. In the case of Chevington large sections had been let piecemeal to tenants, and by Parman's time as bailiff the original 667 arable acres recorded in 1389 had been reduced to a core of little more than 200 acres, 141 of which were planted in 1438–9, with the rest lying fallow that year.¹⁹ This truncated demesne had been leased in 1428 to Robert Preston for five years. The shortness of the term suggests that the abbot was reluctant to let go, and the demesne had been brought back under the direct control of the bailiff by 1437. The sale of corn and livestock, and the revenue from the dairy brought in £15 11s. 11d. in 1437–8, and some corn and fleeces went to the abbot, but the bill for regular wages came near to £7, harvest and threshing costs amounted to more than £6, and the lord paid £3 for repairs to buildings and equipment. The purchase of livestock for £3 13s. 6d. must have come near to pushing the whole husbandry operation into loss. The contract with Robert Preston for 1428–33 produced a rent of £8 6s. 8d. per annum (with some items in kind) which must have dissatisfied the administration, and when they came to negotiate a new lease with Robert Parman in 1443 they agreed with him an annual rent of £10, with 96 doves.²⁰

Parman therefore was changing roles from bailiff to farmer. Instead of being a mere employee, he was managing the land, labour and livestock on his own account. From the late fourteenth century thousands of individuals throughout England had taken on leases of demesnes, and a significant minority had previously served as reeve or bailiff.²¹ Parman was not alone, therefore, but he was still exposing himself to a risk by taking responsibility for a potentially loss-making operation. He must have calculated that he could make enough money to pay the rent to Bury, and to earn a surplus for himself. The abbot had the advantage that one of his demesnes was being put in the hands of someone he knew and trusted. From his experience as bailiff Parman was fully aware of the opportunities and problems, and he must have entered into the negotiation for the lease with open eyes. We know from letters in the Paston collection about the

¹⁶ SROB, E3/15.3/1.35.

¹⁷ Cooper, *Chevington*, p. 13; below p. 21.

¹⁸ In 1438–9 John Parker, the rent collector, was responsible for at least £34 out of the £46 accounted as income in that year: SROB, E3/15.3/2.35.

¹⁹ SROB, E3/15.3/3.1; E3/15.3/2.35.

²⁰ BL, Add. MS. 14,848, fos. 56r–v (lease to Preston); BL, Add. MS 7096, fos. 144v–5v (lease to Parman).

²¹ Hare, 'Demesne lessees', pp. 4–6.

bargaining that led to a lease being agreed, in which farmers drew attention to the poor state of the land or buildings, and pleaded their own commitments elsewhere, while the landlords painted a glowing picture of the profits that might be made.²² In the case of Chevington our evidence comes mainly from the lease itself, which was, in keeping with Bury's bureaucratic practice, longer and more detailed than most documents of this type.

The 1443 lease gives a strong impression that the abbot and his advisers prevailed in the negotiation.²³ Admittedly Parman retained some benefits of office, as he was to serve throughout his term as reeve (a continuation of his previous office as bailiff), with a wage of 13s. 4d. and the livery of clothing appropriate for a yeoman (a high ranking servant), worth 10s. So the abbot was returning to him more than a tenth of his rent, and was removing the possibility that the new farmer would be exposed to the critical scrutiny of a reeve. In addition the lease was extended a little, from five years to seven, suggesting that the abbot was beginning to accept that the farming out of demesnes was to continue in the long term. The farmer was receiving very substantial assets, including a farmyard well provided with buildings, such as barns, a shippen, a stable and a dairy, which the abbot would maintain, together with about 200 acres of arable and extensive grazing land.²⁴ Unlike many farmers at this time he did not need to raise a great deal of capital at the beginning of the lease, as the lord provided him with livestock, including five cart horses, six plough horses (stotts), a bull, 20 cows, four rams and 120 ewes. The deadstock included a cart, three ploughs, a pair of harrows and many smaller items.

On the other hand, the farmer may not have welcomed taking on the troublesome office of reeve, which involved such chores as collecting from his neighbours the sums of money imposed on them as amercements in the manor court. The abbot's grants of animals and equipment acted as a constraint, because the farmer was expected to return them or the equivalent at the end of his term, so he was committed to regular expenditure to replace old and diseased livestock, and to maintain carts and ploughs. The inventory of stock also bound him to keep to the same pattern of mixed farming previously followed by the monastic estate. This was reinforced by a clause requiring him to return at the end of the term 65½ acres in tillage in *Tylhousfeld*, all of which should have been ploughed twice, and with 19 acres manured, four 'by the cart' and fifteen 'by the fold'. Although the abbot agreed to repair farm buildings, Robert would carry the materials (timber, straw, stubble and clay) to the site. He was also expected to cart firewood every year to the abbot's palace. All of the manure produced on the manor was to be put on the demesne land. The lease prevented him from subletting land without the abbot's permission and he was not allowed to take timber or firewood. If timber was needed for repairs to ploughs, carts or harrows, it could only be obtained after consultation with a high ranking estate official. The farmer was forbidden to hunt on the manor. A final clause, suggesting the abbot's underlying lack of trust, required Parman to enter into a bond of £40 to keep the agreement.

The lease constrained Parman in so many ways that he had little opportunity for initiatives or changes in agricultural methods, and he could not profit from all of the resources of the

²² C. Richmond, 'Landlord and tenant: the Paston evidence', in J. Kermode (ed.), *Enterprise and individuals in fifteenth-century England* (1991), pp. 32–6; Dyer, *Age of*

transition, p. 200.

²³ BL, Add. MS 7096, fos. 144v–5v.

²⁴ SROB, E3/15.3/2.34; E3/15.3/2.37(b).

manor, such as the woods and park. One might expect that he would have given up this restrictive lease when the term was completed in 1450, but he continued to farm Chevington: he was still leasing it in 1461, and probably went on into the 1470s. Between 1449 and 1461 he was also farmer of Great Saxham, the neighbouring manor where he had once lived, but that was a different type of bargain where, for a rent that varied between £20 and £22 per annum, he received the tenants' rents as well as the profits of the demesne.²⁵ Perhaps the later Chevington leases (the texts of which have not survived) permitted him more freedom, or the abbots turned a blind eye if he ran the demesne in his own way. We know that the rent rose to £11 by 1460.²⁶ We can imagine that he would have shifted the balance of husbandry from arable toward pasture, like so many agricultural managers, to benefit from the better prices and lower wage costs. In 1449–50, perhaps because of the difficulties of selling grain, the abbot allowed Parman to pay part of his rent with five quarters of wheat. When the efficient William Curteys became abbot in 1429 he had surveyed the potential of Chevington for improvement, and estimated that 134 cattle and between 200 and 300 sheep could be kept on the enclosed pastures, on the fallows and in the park.²⁷ Parman was excluded from the park, but he may have expanded the pastoral side of the demesne. The villagers complained in the year of his first lease that he was overburdening the commons with cattle, and the severity of the amercement (3s. 4d.) suggests the large scale of the offence.²⁸ Parman, like other farmers, must have constantly considered ways of reducing costs and raising returns. By 1458 he was leasing out the dairy cattle to Reginald Ostyler.²⁹ We know that he was familiar with towns at some distance from Chevington, such as Clare and Thetford, so he may have pursued a more adventurous marketing strategy than simply disposing of his surplus grain, wool and livestock in Bury.³⁰ A clue to the careful management of his business affairs comes from his will, where he refers to 'a certain book of debts', which would have revealed so much about his dealings had it survived. This implies that Parman was literate: he may have received at least some schooling at Bury.³¹

He diversified his operations in the late 1440s when he took over the lease of the Chevington tile kiln, in partnership with John Parker (who had served as rent collector when Parman had been bailiff in the late 1430s), but this may not have been very profitable and the venture was short-lived.³²

He was able to pay his rent on time and balance his accounts: he had no arrears in 1449–50, and his arrears of £7 in 1457–8 were entirely due to the failure of the tenant of the tile kiln (no longer held by Parman) to produce its rent. At this time manorial officials and farmers throughout England were commonly falling behind in payments and accumulating arrears to the tune

²⁵ SROB, E3/15.3/2.37(a); E3/15.3/2.37(b); E3/15.3/2.42.

²⁶ SROB, E3/15.3/2.42.

²⁷ Cooper, *Chevington*, p. 7

²⁸ SROB, E3/15.3/1.35.

²⁹ SROB, E3/15.3/1.36 (Ostyler is recorded as the lessee of the cows because the miller and his wife were breaking the close of the manor, milking the cows, and carrying the milk outside the manor).

³⁰ These more distant towns are mentioned in his will: SROB, IC500/2/11, fos. 92–3; on the tendency of farmers of demesnes to visit more distant markets, Dyer, *Age of transition*, p. 203.

³¹ N. Orme, *English schools in the middle ages* (1973), p. 248 shows that the school at Bury was quite large, and that the tuition was partly free.

³² SROB, E3/15.3/2.37(a).

of £20 and more.³³ His long tenure of the Chevington demesne, and his acquisition of Great Saxham suggests both Parman's own confidence in his ability to manage his affairs as a farmer, and his lord's recognition that he was doing a good job.

III

The leaseholds of the demesnes were Parman's largest units of land, but he acquired many additional holdings through the land market. His accumulations must be seen against a background of economic depression in Chevington and its district. Chevington had its tax assessment for the king's lay subsidy in 1449 reduced more than the county as a whole, by 40 per cent rather than by 16 per cent, and it was exceeded in decline amongst its neighbours only by Great Saxham, the other manor in which Parman was most active.³⁴

Many houses in Chevington had fallen into ruin: when holdings on customary tenure were conveyed in the court rolls, those called 'tofts' or 'vacant' were almost as numerous as those described as 'built'. In 1478, when a list of holdings held on lease was compiled, 12 were said to be built, and 10 empty.³⁵ The lord was aware of the problem, and was anxious to maintain or renew the stock of buildings as holdings would be more attractive to tenants if there were houses on them. New tenants were required to carry out repairs. In 1468 two holdings were so decayed that their tenants were ordered to put them right or face a swingeing penalty for each holding of 40s. In 1462 the lord offered to supply timber to a tenant, and to let him off 10s. rent if he rebuilt.³⁶ The lord spent 35s. 4½*d.* on repairs to tenant buildings – barns and a cart 'shedde' as well as dwellings – at Chevington in 1437–8, and at Great Saxham £6 in 1449–50 and £4 in 1457–8.³⁷

The deterioration of houses should not be seen in wholly negative terms. The population of the whole country, and at Chevington also, had halved since 1348, and many messuages and cottages were no longer needed. The great majority of Chevington's holdings had tenants, but were held alongside other lands, as individuals accumulated two or more previously separate tenements. Tenants with multiple holdings maintained and rebuilt the house in which they lived, and the adjacent barn and animal houses that they needed, and left the buildings on their other acquisitions to fall into disrepair. Sometimes they moved buildings from one holding to another, like the barn in 1446 which was taken from Chevington to be re-erected at Great Saxham. Two fifteenth-century houses now survive in the village, which show that the story was not entirely one of decay.³⁸ The rents paid at Chevington suggest that demand for land was not falling as much as elsewhere. Leasehold land between 1440 and 1476 was usually being rented

³³ The tenant of the tile kiln who failed to pay his rent was Thomas Warde: SROB, E3/15.52/2.1(a); on the problem of arrears, M. Bailey, *A marginal economy? East Anglian Breckland in the later middle ages* (1989), pp. 269–76.

³⁴ D. Dymond and R. Virgoe, 'The reduced population and wealth of early fifteenth-century Suffolk', *Proc. Suffolk Institute of History and Archaeology* 36 (1988), pp. 73–100.

³⁵ SROB, E3/15.3/3.2.

³⁶ SROB, E3/15.3/1.36.

³⁷ SROB, E3/15.3/2.34; E3/15.3/2.37(a); E3/15.52/2.1(a).

³⁸ On the mobile barn, SROB, E3/15.3/1.35; on the general problem of dilapidations, P. Hargreaves, 'Seignorial reaction and peasant responses: Worcester Priory and its peasants after the Black Death', *Midland Hist.* 24 (1999), pp. 63–71; the medieval houses are recorded in the English Heritage listed buildings register.

for between 8*d.* and 18*d.* per acre, with a median of 10*d.*–12*d.* per acre. This is higher than is recorded in the breckland of north-west Suffolk, and considerably higher than the 6*d.* per acre or even less found in other regions. Similarly entry fines on customary land elsewhere often fell below 6*d.* per acre, while in Chevington fines of 2*s.* per acre were still being paid in the 1450s and 1460s, which often marked a low point in the land market. The sale price paid by one tenant to another for a messuage and acre of 26*s.* 8*d.* in 1428 was comparable with sums paid for land in prosperous parts of Norfolk in the early fifteenth century.³⁹

Evidently the problems of making a profit from the land was not sufficient to depress rents and fines at Chevington, and Parman saw the advantage of expanding the size of his operation by acquiring an unusual number of tenements. In the incomplete series of court rolls he can be observed gaining a series of holdings between 1440 and 1471. He had six separate leaseholds in 1457. Just before he died in 1475 he held 11 tenements in Chevington, and seven in other villages, including Great Saxham and Hargrave.⁴⁰ His tenements exceeded 100 acres in total by a large margin. Added to Parman's 200 acres on lease, over 300 acres were in his tenancy by the mid-1470s.

As is commonly found among late medieval engrossers, Parman picked up land as it became available, and was willing to take it on a variety of tenures, so simultaneously he was a freeholder, customary tenant and lessee. One of his customary tenements was converted to leasehold in 1450, suggesting his preference for that form of tenure.⁴¹

How he made use of his collection of land is not known. He allowed the house attached to one of his Chevington holdings to fall into ruin, which could mean that he was managing some of the land directly, perhaps alongside the demesne. In his will he left money to three churches of parishes adjoining Chevington, 'for tithes forgotten', which implies that at some stage he had his holdings in those parishes in cultivation.⁴² He is likely to have sublet some of the holdings in more distant villages, such as Westley (see Figure 1). His motives for acquiring this impressive array of holdings was not simply to increase his wealth by maximizing his acreage, or collecting rents to add to his profits from agriculture. From the perspective of his standing in society, and the durability of his wealth, his leased demesne lands, though profitable, were temporary acquisitions on fixed terms. The other tenements, even those held on customary tenure, were heritable possessions. The holdings' other great advantage was that they could be used to provide for his numerous children, and leave future generations of the Parman family with secure landed endowments.

³⁹ Bailey, *Marginal economy*, pp.268–9. On entry fines, see C. Dyer, 'Seigniorial profits on the landmarket in late medieval England', in L. Feller and C. Wickham (eds), *Le marché de la terre au moyen âge* (Collection de l'Ecole Française de Rome 350, 2005), pp.219–36. For the sale price, SROB, E3/15.3/1.35, and for comparison see Whittle, *Agrarian capitalism*, p.112, and Dyer, *Age of transition*, pp.182–3.

⁴⁰ SROB, E3/15.3/1.35; SROB, E3/15.3/1.36; E3/15.52/2.1(a); SROB, IC500/2/11, fos. 92–3.

⁴¹ The combination of land held by different tenures is often reported, e.g. M. Mate, 'The east Sussex land market and agrarian class structure in the late middle ages', *Past and Present* 139 (1993), pp.55–6; for the conversion to leasehold, SROB, E3/15.3/1.35.

⁴² SROB, IC500/2/11, fos. 92–3.

IV

Robert Parman, in his roles of farmer and tenant of multiple holdings, can be regarded as typical of his age. As the paterfamilias, promoting the interests of his children, he seems to be out of tune with many contemporaries because the fifteenth century saw a loosening of family bonds and a reduction in the inheritance of land.⁴³ Robert looked after his family, and they appear to have reciprocated by supporting him, for example, in his remarkable domination of the affairs of Chevington. This family solidarity can be noted on his first arrival in Chevington as bailiff in 1438, when Simon Parman was employed as a ploughman on the demesne, and Thomas Parman threshed grain for wages.⁴⁴ Their precise relationship to Robert is not known but they may well have been a cousin or nephew. The scarcity of labour at this time made it advantageous to be able to call on relatives to help.

During the next three decades members of the family were acquiring land in Chevington. Simon (perhaps the same person who had worked as a ploughman in 1438) took a holding in 1446, and Henry and Robert, who were almost certainly Robert senior's sons, received the reversion of a lease in 1458. By the late 1460s tenants called Henry, John, Robert junior, Simon and William Parman were established in the village, and at least three of these were the older Robert's sons.⁴⁵ Such a concentration of land holders from the same family in one village is so unusual at this time that it probably reflects Robert's encouragement and help to the next generation to buy land at Chevington. His will of 1475 certainly supports that supposition in its careful allocation of his own land among his three sons then living, Robert junior, Henry and William.⁴⁶

At the time of the writing of his will on 15 September 1475, shortly before his death, Parman had recently lost his wife, Joan. Just before he died he used a device widespread in eastern England to surrender 18 acres of land 'on his mortal bed' to be divided among his three sons.⁴⁷ In his will he distributed most of his land among the same three heirs, with two holdings going to Henry, five (and additional parcels) to Robert, and two holdings and various pieces to William. Katherine Motte his daughter and John Parman his brother both received some land. He also left cash for his two daughters, Margery and Margaret, and to two grandchildren, Robert and Robert [sic], the sons of Henry. They were also his godchildren, clearly named after him, and the fact that both were given their grandfather's name shows that the family were determined to keep the name Robert Parman alive in the next generation. The bequests of land were burdened with various financial responsibilities, as Robert senior expected a sizeable proportion of their profits to be used to pay for 'a suitable priest' to say masses for his soul and that of his wife, parents and relatives for ten years at a stipend of £5 6s. 8d. Another chantry priest was also to be supported from Parman's lands in four villages adjacent to Chevington, and in Bury. Two of the daughters received money rather than land, Margery £5 as a lump sum, and 33s. 4d. per annum for five years, and Margaret £13 6s. 8d. for her marriage. These bequests helped to ensure

⁴³ Z. Razi, 'The myth of the immutable English family', *Past and Present* 140 (1993), pp. 27–42; Whittle, *Agrarian capitalism*, pp. 120–77.

⁴⁴ SROB, E3/15.3/2.35.

⁴⁵ SROB, E3/15.3/1.35; E3/15.3/1.36.

⁴⁶ SROB, IC500/2/11, fos. 92–3.

⁴⁷ SROB, E3/15.3/1.36; on these transfers see L. Bonfield and L. R. Poos, 'The development of the deathbed transfer in medieval English manorial courts', *Cambridge Law J.* 47 (1988), pp. 403–27.

that the family remained active in the village. For example, a holding which Robert senior had bought from John Somerton was left to his son William in 1475. William in turn sold it to his brother Henry, whose heir on his death in 1500 was his son John.⁴⁸

The most remarkable example of advancement among the Parman family is provided by the farmer's son, Robert junior, a clergyman. He was probably younger than his brother Henry, and must have been sent to school at Bury, and from there to Cambridge, where he had gained his MA by 1468/9.⁴⁹ He was ordained a priest in 1469, and had become rector of Chevington by 1475, when he was given a licence to receive two benefices.⁵⁰ The second benefice was the rectory of neighbouring Ickworth, to which he was instituted in 1477.⁵¹ In spite of his considerable wealth from these two sources, which together were worth £24 per annum, and his inevitable lack of heirs, Robert senior left him substantial quantities of land in his will, and indeed he had acquired land in Chevington long before in 1458.⁵² Before he became rector he was known as Robert Parman the clerk and seems to have functioned as a landholding villager, but no doubt having some employment in his clerical capacity elsewhere. He died in 1503.⁵³

Robert Parman junior's career was advanced through the support of the successive abbots of Bury St Edmunds, and particularly John Boone (1453–69), Robert Ickworth (1469–74) and Richard of Hengham (1474–9) who presented him for ordination, used their patronage of the living at Chevington, and presumably wielded influence over the layman who held the patronage of Ickworth. Robert Parman senior was able to help his son also, by paying for his education, and perhaps by putting in a good word for him when the living at Chevington became vacant.

V

The relationship between Robert Parman and the monks of Bury is well documented in the formal sense, but how did they regard one another? Robert's life developed within a framework created by the abbey: he was born a serf, and received his manumission in 1435.⁵⁴ The grant was preparatory to his move to become bailiff of Chevington, but we do not know if he paid for his freedom. He would never have forgotten his servile birth, which was generally resented.⁵⁵ He still had unfree relatives at Great Saxham, where in 1461 we find a reference to another Robert Parman, 'son of Richard Parman, the lord's serf by blood', and a John Parman received his manumission there in 1472.⁵⁶

Robert Parman of Chevington, as bailiff, and then as farmer and major tenant of the abbots, stood at the very apex of village society; he was probably known as a yeoman. He was however subject to the lord's jurisdiction in the court of Chevington, and in the other manors where he held land. His lease restricted him in many ways. His lord prohibited him from hunting even

⁴⁸ SROB, IC500/2/13, fo. 218.

⁴⁹ A. B. Emden, *A biographical register of the University of Cambridge to 1500* (1963), p. 245.

⁵⁰ Norfolk Record Office [hereafter NRO], DN/REG/6/book 11, fo. 172r; *Calendar of Papal Registers, Papal Letters, 1471–84* (1955), p. 405.

⁵¹ NRO, DN/REG/7, book 12, fo. 56r.

⁵² Record Commission, *Valor Ecclesiasticus* (7 Vols, 1810–34), III, pp. 467, 468; SROB, E3/15.3/1.35.

⁵³ NRO, DN/REG/8, book 13, fos. 21v–22r.

⁵⁴ BL, Add. MS. 14,848, fo. 173r.

⁵⁵ R. H. Hilton, *The decline of serfdom in medieval England* (1969), pp. 50–6.

⁵⁶ SROB, E3/15.3/1.36; Thomson, *Archives*, p. 57.

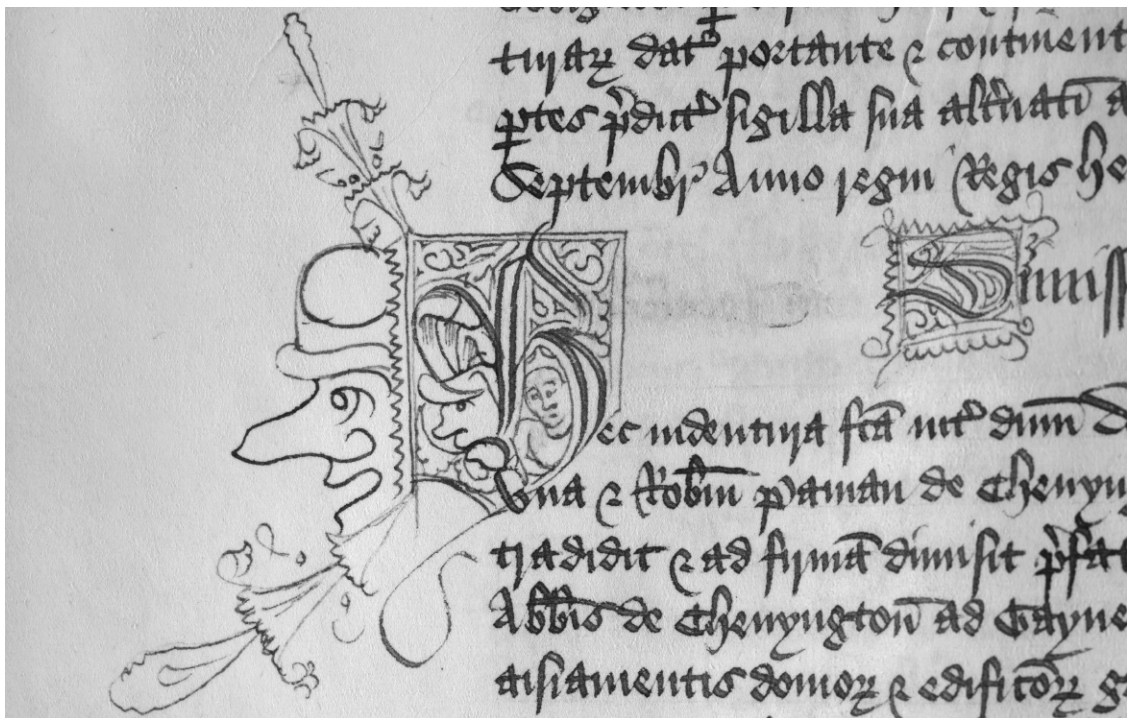


FIGURE 3. The entry of Robert Parman's lease of 1443 in the register of Abbot Curteys, with an elaborate initial which apparently caricatures peasants or farmers. The balloon crown hat was popular in 1430–60.

Source: BL, Add. Ms 7096, fo. 144v. Reproduced with the permission of the British Library.

hares and partridges on the demesne, reminding him of his non-gentle status.⁵⁷ The abbot gave him each year a yeoman's livery, that worn by the abbey's high ranking servants, such as the cook and the porter.⁵⁸ In an age acutely attuned to status, and its outward signs, his neighbours and associates would have known the meaning of this. When the clerk entered the Cheyngton lease into Abbot Curteys's register, he drew a caricature on the initial letter (Figure 3). Recent studies have shown that marginal drawings, even in such functional documents as registers, had a meaning closely related to the text.⁵⁹ This did not represent Parman himself, but was probably intended to show the characteristics of a social type, and reflected the attitude of a monastic administrator towards inferior laymen. The big nose and cunning eyes, and the general coarseness of the features accord with known prejudices about peasants.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ BL, Add. MS. 7096, fos 144v–5v. The lower orders had been prohibited from hunting even small game by a statute of 1390: A.J. Pollard, *Imagining Robin Hood* (2004), pp. 88–9.

⁵⁸ C.M. Woolgar, *The great household in late medieval England* (1999), pp. 20, 189; B. Harvey, *Living and dying in England, 1100–1540. The monastic experience* (1993), pp. 148–78.

⁵⁹ M. Camille, 'At the edge of the law: an illustrated register of writs in the Pierpoint Morgan Library', in N. Rogers (ed.), *England in the fourteenth century. Proceedings of the 1991 Harlaxton Symposium* (Harlaxton Medieval Studies, III, 1993), pp. 1–14; BL, Add. MS. 7096, fo. 144v.

⁶⁰ P. Freedman, *Images of the medieval peasant* (1999), pp. 139–41, 157–8.

The abbey could not be too dismissive. Farmers like Parman were needed and appreciated, because both lord and farmer had a common goal of running the demesne profitably, to give the lord a flow of rent, and the farmer a surplus. The abbot's officials' appreciation of his qualities shows in the account for 1457–8 when his debt to the abbot for 8s. 8½*d.* was cancelled 'for his good service'.⁶¹ Farmers who failed to perform well were sometimes disciplined in the lord's court, like John atte Hill, who was amerced £18 12s. *od.* in 1406–7 in the Hargrave manor court for 'waste and other trespasses'.⁶² There was no danger that Parman would encounter such sanctions. He showed his gratitude to his lord by leaving 10 marks (£6 13s. 4*d.*) in his will to the monastery, which was an unusually generous sum at a time when large Benedictine monasteries did not feature high on laymen's list of deserving causes.⁶³

Was this a simple case of the lord's patronage being reciprocated by the tenant's deference? The recognition fines reveal a more complicated story. These occasional payments were owed by the tenants of all of the monastic manors to each new abbot on his election, and were heartily disliked by the peasants, who saw them as an unpredictable and degrading imposition.⁶⁴ The 'whole homage of the vill of Chevington' were supposed to pay a collective fine of 40s., and the tenants were expected to assess each other and collect the sum. In 1446, when abbot William Babington was elected, three assessors were appointed, but the jury refused to make the collection. The bailiff (presumably Robert Parman), was ordered to collect the money by distraint, which would have involved seizing goods and causing general ill-feeling.⁶⁵ In 1470, after Robert Ickworth became abbot, 'the whole homage, with one voice, said that they refused to elect the collectors'. This was done 'before the steward, receiver and surveyor ... in grave contempt of the lord'. The bailiff was again ordered to raise the money by seizing goods and chattels, but had not done so a year later.⁶⁶ Parman must have been torn between the two sides. As a major tenant he should have made a large contribution to the payment, and as a former serf he understood the objection to this imposition. At the same time he felt a duty to the lord. His compromise was to delay action, and perhaps to hope that the payment would be forgotten.⁶⁷ Other manors on the Bury estate were also refusing to pay the recognition fine and it lapsed on many estates around this time.

In other ways Parman did not entirely play the role of the model tenant, as in 1460 he was detected secretly buying a customary holding from Cristiana Lely, which meant that no record of the transfer was made in the court roll, and no entry fine paid.⁶⁸ The discovery of his wrongdoing shows that the cunning farmer could not always manipulate the manor court in his own favour, but one suspects that other self-interested activities (for example, piecemeal enclosure) escaped the notice of the court.

⁶¹ SROB, E3/15.52/2.1(a).

⁶² SROB, E3/15.10/2.21.

⁶³ N.P.Tanner, *The church in late medieval Norwich, 1370–1532* (Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, Toronto, Studies and Texts 66, 1984), pp.120–1.

⁶⁴ C.Dyer, 'A redistribution of incomes in fifteenth-century England?', *Past and Present* 39 (1968), pp.19–20, 31–2.

⁶⁵ SROB, E3/15.3/1.35.

⁶⁶ SROB, E3/15.3/1.36.

⁶⁷ On the dilemma of manorial officials see C.Dyer, 'The social and economic background to the rural revolt of 1381', in id., *Everyday life in medieval England* (1994), pp.211–12. The tenants of Hargrave refused payment in 1446: SROB, E3/15.10/1.24.

⁶⁸ SROB, E3/15.3/1.36.

VI

Robert Parman's relationship with his Chevington neighbours throws into focus the general tendency in late medieval villages for the gap between rich and poor to widen, and for peasant communities to change their character. Usually fifteenth-century villages might contain a handful of wealthy tenants with holdings of perhaps 60 acres, whereas before 1349 very few had more than 30 acres. Chevington experienced the peculiar phenomenon of a farmer who held, not just the demesne of more than 200 acres, but also about a fifth of the tenant holdings amounting to at least 100 acres. Five of his relatives had acquired another substantial share of the land in the village, and towards the end of his life, Robert Parman junior became rector, and profited from the glebe land and the tithes.

The Parman family had a strong influence in the manor court through their occupation of the office of chief pledge. Robert Parman himself appears as chief pledge in 1445, a few years after his arrival. After 1453 he was being put consistently at the head of the list in the court roll. He appeared repeatedly in that position until his death. Gradually other members of the family joined the group of chief pledges, Simon in 1460, Henry in 1468 and Robert junior in 1474, so in the last year of Robert the farmer's life there were four of them.⁶⁹

In addition a group of Parman allies can be detected, notably John Motte, whose son Robert married Katherine Parman, and Nicholas Cok and John Gooday, who served as chief pledges and were trusted sufficiently to act as witnesses of Robert Parman's will. In 1472, of 12 chief pledges, three were members of the Parman family, and four were their friends.⁷⁰

We must suspect that the court might not notice much wrongdoing by the Parman family, and that if they did come before the court their punishment would be influenced by the custom that the chief pledges acted as affeerors who helped to fix the level of the amercements. Robert Parman senior as bailiff performed a number of functions in the court, including acting as pledge when those who owed suit of court were essoined, or gave excuses for non-attendance. We have noted the custom by which land was surrendered on a tenant's deathbed, which avoided restrictions on inheritance. As bailiff, Robert Parman officiated at these 'mortal bed' procedures, and sometimes acted as witness when tenants who were not dying wished to make land transfers out of court.⁷¹

A considerable section of the village economy was in the hands of Robert Parman and his family. In the late fourteenth century four brewers were commonly amerced in the court for offences against the assize of ale, which regulated price and quality.⁷² As was often the case by the mid-fifteenth century, brewing was concentrated in fewer hands, and of the two most frequent brewers, one was Joan Parman, Robert's wife. She appears in the court records breaking the assize of ale continuously between 1440 and 1467. Robert and other members of the family acted as ale tasters, with the duty of reporting offenders to the court, including Joan. After 1467 Robert paid the fines, but one supposes that she managed the ale house until her death

⁶⁹ SROB, E3/15.3/1.35; E3/15.3/1.36.

⁷⁰ SROB, E3/15.3/1.36.

⁷¹ For example in 1473 Robert Parman represented William Brown, who surrendered out of court an acre,

messuage and curtilage for the benefit of Robert Parman junior: SROB, E3/15.3/1.36.

⁷² SROB/E15.3/1.19.

in 1474.⁷³ She was disposing of some of her husband's surplus of grain, cartloads of which otherwise went to market in Bury and other towns. As Parman was responsible for a sizeable proportion of Chevington's output of corn, smaller producers must have felt themselves at a disadvantage when they came to sell their crops.

The Parman family would have employed a high proportion of the labour in the village, and many of the smallholders and other labourers would have been hired by them at seasonal peaks such as the harvest. Some of the labourers may have been subtenants on the numerous holdings engrossed by Robert Parman, and therefore under some obligation to work for him.⁷⁴ Robert Parman needed regular workers on the demesne and his wife required help in brewing, and in consequence their house would have contained a good number of both male and female servants. The large pot and pan that he mentioned in his will were essential equipment for feeding a crowd of household members, both family and servants. In the harvest season, before the demesne was leased, in 1419–20, the lord paid for meals for 424 man (and woman) days of work spread over four weeks and three days, which required (among much else) at least 300 gallons of ale and the meat of nine sheep.⁷⁵ Such large-scale feeding of harvest workers would have continued on the demesne when it was held on lease.

We know about Parman's great pot and pan (and also a spit) because he bequeathed them to the parish fraternity of St John the Baptist for use in preparing the feasts and ales which were held in the guild hall.⁷⁶ In the wording of his will he reveals that he identified the fraternity very closely with the village community, as he prefaced the bequest with the phrase 'for the common profit of the vill of Chevington'. In the early sixteenth century, when the fraternity contained 47 brothers and sisters, or a third of the adult population of the village, the Parman family played a prominent role in its management, and it would be surprising if Robert had not served as alderman, or 'held the guild' to use the local phrase.⁷⁷ His other contribution to the well-being of the village was to leave £5 to mend 'Newe Lane'. He was clearly an enthusiastic supporter of the parish church, leaving £20 for three new bells, £5 for a window and buttress, and £5 for a missal. He remembered other churches and clergy too, with cash for the friars, and 'for tithes forgotten' at four parish churches beside his home parish, and cows to fund lights in six churches, but his first commitment was to Chevington, where he expected to be buried in the privileged space of the chancel. By this time his son was installed as rector, and again Robert senior is likely to have served as churchwarden, as his descendants were to do in the early sixteenth century.⁷⁸

In his will, in conventional style, Robert Parman senior left grain to the needy and poor of Chevington and Great Saxham, but the quantity was not very great, two quarters of wheat and

⁷³ On the general tendency for brewing to become more professionalized, see J. Bennett, *Ale, beer and brewers in England. Women's work in a changing world, 1300–1600* (1996), pp. 49–51. The same source (p. 103) notes the tendency for men to pay the brewing fines even when women were doing the work or managing the business.

⁷⁴ H. S. A. Fox, 'Servants, cottagers and tied cottages during the later middle ages: towards a regional dimension', *Rural Hist.* 6 (1995), pp. 125–54 suggests that tenants of large multiple holdings sublet cottages in order to gain

guarantees of wage labour.

⁷⁵ SROB, E3/15.3/2.29.

⁷⁶ SROB, IC500/2/11, fos. 92–3. On the role of fraternities in eastern England, see V. Bainbridge, *Gilds in the medieval countryside. Social and religious change in Cambridgeshire, c.1350–1558* (1996); K. Farnhill, *Guilds and the parish community in late medieval East Anglia, c.1470–1550* (2001).

⁷⁷ Cambridge University Library [hereafter CUL], Hengrave MSS, 17(1) Thingoe Hundred.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

two quarters of malt, with a total cash value of below 20s. It was sufficient to keep no more than two individuals in bread and ale for a year. His only other nod to charity was to pay 1*d.* to every pauper attending his funeral. If his daughter Margaret died before marrying, half of the money set aside for her marriage, a sum of £6 13*s.* 4*d.*, was to be divided among the poor – not the neediest in the village, but his poor relatives. He looked after his own to the very end. Parman must have had considerable influence over the informal arrangements for poor relief in his village, just as he would have had a large say in the distribution of the village's payments to the lay subsidy.⁷⁹ In his private finances one supposes that he, and members of the family, would have lent money to less wealthy villagers, and credit arrangements may lie behind the sale of land to members of the Parman family, like a deathbed transfer to Robert Parman junior in 1473 by William Brown.⁸⁰ It is often remarked that bequests in wills contain only the last charitable acts at the end of a long life of giving, but one fears that Parman's lack of enthusiasm for charity on his deathbed may well indicate a lifetime's niggardliness towards the village poor.

The only evidence that Parman's domination of his village caused friction with his neighbours emerges from a court case in 1472, when John Trolle assaulted Robert and drew blood, and Robert (then aged about 70) reciprocated. The occasion for the violent quarrel may have been a dispute over an illicit land transfer, in which Trolle had bought a *neif* (servile) holding without permission. The court had ordered that the land be seized.⁸¹

VII

How can we sum up the life of this remarkable man? Robert Parman seems at first sight to have lived a rather narrow, local existence, as most of his land lay within a three-mile radius of his home, and his landlord and the principal market for his produce, were located at Bury St Edmunds, within walking distance. He was very closely attached to the community life of Chevington, which he dominated, and to its parish church, through which he expressed his conventional piety. We should not, however, underestimate his breadth of contacts. He was probably literate; he sent his son to Cambridge; he left provision in his will for a priest to go on pilgrimage to Rome; he knew two Dutchmen (or Flemings), Johannes Arnold and Herman Reymond, who made bricks in Chevington in 1439–42.⁸² Just as fourteenth-century Suffolk peasants were informed about national political events – and took sides and even tried (in 1381) to intervene – we can be confident that Parman was well aware of the later phases of the Hundred Years War, and the factional rivalries that led to the Wars of the Roses.⁸³

He made himself wealthy. We have no inventory, so we can only glimpse the possessions he mentioned in his will: his large brass pot, pan and spit, his best table cloth (suitable to place

⁷⁹ On the functions and influence of the village elite, see C. Dyer, 'The political life of the fifteenth-century English village', *The Fifteenth Century* 4 (2004), pp. 135–57.

⁸⁰ SROB, E3/15.3/1.36.

⁸¹ SROB, E3/15.3/1.36.

⁸² BL, Add. MS 14,848, fos. 345v–346r; Add. MS 7096, fos. 150v–151r.

⁸³ Fourteenth-century Suffolk peasants' political consciousness is discussed in P. Schofield, *Peasant and community in medieval England, 1200–1500* (2003), pp. 207–8, 213–14, and C. Dyer, 'The rising of 1381 in Suffolk: its origins and participants' in id., *Everyday life*, pp. 230–2. For an overview of popular politics in the fifteenth century, see J. Watts, 'The pressure of the public on later medieval politics', *The Fifteenth Century* 4 (2004), pp. 159–80.

on the high altar of his parish church), two large candle sticks, and eight cows. We can be sure that there were many more goods and livestock than these in his house, yard and fields. We can attempt to calculate his income. People like Parman would not usually have large accumulations of cash, but would be involved in a network of credit, in which they owed a great deal, and were owed as much. The annual income from the sale of produce and rents supported a whole edifice of loans. His bequests of sums as great as £20 to pay for church bells were based on the assumption that his executors would be able to borrow the sum initially, and sell livestock or other assets. He could not bequeath £53 6s. 8d. to pay a priest for ten years, but he could expect that income from his lands would produce £5 6s. 8d. per annum for that purpose. The same group of holdings would enable his grandchildren to receive a total of £8 over twenty years, or 8s. per annum, and his daughter Margery was to be given 33s. 4d. each year for five years. Another group of lands would apparently support another priest for ten years, and he expected their subsequent sale to fetch at least £27. It would be reasonable to set the annual expenditure that he planned immediately after his death at about £13, which therefore indicates the minimum amount he received from the land before 1475. Most likely his income exceeded that sum by a considerable margin, as it is highly unlikely that he burdened his land so heavily in his will that it would yield no revenue for his relatives receiving the bequests. If Parman was worth about £20 per annum at the end of his life, which seems a reasonable deduction, this would make him the financial equal of the lowest rank of esquires among the landed gentry.⁸⁴ The difference between a farmer and an esquire lay in the latter's secure income from rents, at least part of which came to him as a manorial lord, while Parman depended on making profits from the sale of produce in the market. Contemporaries made an equation sometimes between the income of an esquire and that of a merchant of modest rank, and an urban trader, with his precarious living, would make a more appropriate comparison with our prosperous farmer.⁸⁵

The barrier that separated farmers and yeomen from the gentry was a commonplace of the time. When a clerk was writing the accounts of the Chevington fraternity in the early sixteenth century he tried out his pen by writing four lines of unpretentious verse:

The hare love the harde waye
 The harte love the hyll
 A gentyllman lovet a good brown sword
 A yeman lovet a byll.⁸⁶

This ditty refers to the differences in military roles, as yeomen foot soldiers were equipped with bills and bows. The characteristic of Parman's life, especially compared with the rent collecting and consequent leisure of the gentry, must have been the necessity for sheer hard work and skill. To turn the husbandry of a demesne from meagre profit to an operation capable of yielding £10 in rent and an income for the farmer required an acute business mind, as did the welding of

⁸⁴ C. Dyer, *Standards of living in the later middle ages. Social change in England, c.1200–1520* (revised edn, 1998), p. 31.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 14, 193.

⁸⁶ CUL, Hengrave MSS, 17(1) Thingoe Hundred; a

similar verse is in L. Toulmin Smith (ed.), *A commonplace book of the fifteenth century* (1886), p. 11 which is a Suffolk compilation, perhaps by another farmer. This verse compares the knight and the carl.

⁸⁷ [Hervey] (ed.), *Suffolk in 1524*, pp. 343–4.

an accumulation of peasant holdings into an effective generator of income. This achievement would have been impossible without a tough, single-minded purpose, which can be detected in Parman's will. In its more distrustful passages this instructed his executors to enfeof his daughter's bequest of land so that her husband could not sell it, and he also arranged that if his brother failed to maintain buildings on a holding, his grandson should take it over.

In planning the future of his own family, Robert evidently decided not to favour one son over the others, but gave all three a chance to succeed by assigning to each of them a substantial share of his many holdings. Neither his sons, nor their subsequent descendants, reconstructed Robert's dominant position, and none of them is known to have acted as farmer of the demesne, but depended on the land traditionally held by tenants. The family, however, remained a strong presence in Chevington for almost two centuries after 1475. A number of households at any one time were headed by a Parman, and among them in each generation an individual often stood out by owning a good deal of wealth and land. The 1524 lay subsidy tells us that nine members of the family were living at Chevington, and the richest, Robert Parman (probably the original Robert's grandson) was assessed on goods worth £25.⁸⁷ A rental of 1551–2 records five Parman tenants, among whom Harry Parman had eight holdings. Three of the twelve Chevington taxpayers in 1568 belonged to the Parman family, and they provided five out of fourteen in 1575–6. In 1593 a third of the village's subsidy assessment was paid by six contributors called Parman. The rental of c.1590 reveals the prominence of Clement Parman among nine tenants bearing the name, with his eleven holdings.⁸⁸ Another Robert Parman was known in the early seventeenth century as gentleman and esquire, and his son Henry (1623–95) embarked on an academic career at Cambridge, becoming a fellow of St John's College, Professor of Physic at Gresham College in London, and in 1679 he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society.⁸⁹ Back in Chevington the last member of the family with a land holding of any substance seems to have been William, a yeoman, who died in 1662 with an inventory worth £100. By 1674 the family had disappeared from Chevington, and indeed no-one bearing the name appears anywhere in the Suffolk hearth tax of that year.⁹⁰

The life of the farmer Robert Parman teaches us general lessons about the opportunities, and some of the problems, in operating as a major landholder in the fifteenth century. Seen in long-term perspective, the main story is not that of the rise of one man, but the transformation of a section of the English rural economy. Like many other village territories, Chevington was cultivated at the end of the fourteenth century by a magnate landlord and many peasants. During Parman's lifetime the monastic lord retreated into the background, and the former subordinates rose to prominence, until most of the land was in the hands of a handful of tenants, including one super-tenant. Parman's life shows the farmer becoming increasingly independent of his lord, and the village reordering its relationships as the lord weakened and tenants accumulated

⁸⁸ SROB, E3/15.3/3.4; S.H.A.H[ervey] (ed.), *Suffolk in 1568, being the return to a subsidy granted in 1566* (Suffolk Green Books, 12, 1909), p. 256; SROB, 449/7/17; E3/15.3/3.5.

⁸⁹ S.H.A.H[ervey], *Biographical list of boys educated at King Edward VI Free Grammar School, Bury St*

Edmunds (Suffolk Green Books, 13, 1908), pp. 292–3; Cooper, *Chevington*, pp. 24–5; *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, sub Paman [sic], Henry.

⁹⁰ Cooper, *Chevington*, p. 135; S.H.A.H[ervey] (ed.), *Suffolk in 1674, being the Hearth Tax return* (Suffolk Green Books, 11, 1905), p. 73.

more land. Parman's lands were divided on his death, a common occurrence. Yeomen elsewhere often lasted for only one generation.⁹¹ The Parman dynasty continued to play a prominent role in Chevington, though the richest members tended to be yeomen with accumulations of tenant holdings rather than farmers of the demesne. More important than lines of heredity, however, the demesne lessees of the fifteenth century as a social and economic phenomenon can be regarded as the antecedents of the tenant farmers of later centuries. Parman's acquisitions of land, presumably financed from agricultural profits, with the aim of expanding his income, may have been especially characteristic of the eastern and southern counties in England, where 'capitalist agriculture took root earliest and developed furthest'.⁹²

⁹¹ Faith, 'Berkshire', pp.165-8; 173-4.

⁹² Shaw-Taylor, 'Family farms', p.191.