

The material world of English peasants, 1200–1540: archaeological perspectives on rural economy and welfare^{*}

by Christopher Dyer

Abstract

Archaeology provides valuable insights into the later medieval peasant economy. This evidence gives some support for the view that around 1300 there was widespread rural misery, but the main finding is that peasant material culture was always varied and complex, and that peasants were able to make choices, take initiatives, and on occasion enjoy some modest prosperity.

This article examines the later medieval peasant economy through archaeological evidence. Archaeologists who read this may find that material known to them is being used in ways which are alien to their way of thinking. Readers who are used to investigating the countryside through written sources will hopefully find new things, which are hidden in unfamiliar literature. The article is written not just out of zeal for interdisciplinary communication, but also as a contribution to the long-running debate on the medieval peasantry. Peasants were once portrayed as sunk in unrelieved poverty, as victims of their environment, both natural and social. The thesis which blamed widespread poverty around 1300 on processes of ecological degradation has been set aside, and now emphasis is placed on disasters of famine and plague, and on the analysis of statistical series of grain prices, land sales and other measurable trends, which often reveal deprivation. Modifying this gloomy view, a body of historical opinion now recognizes that peasants might have behaved rationally, and could have been resourceful and enterprising.¹

In enquiring into the well-being of peasants, and their management of resources, historians have used manorial records, tax lists and other written sources which can be made to yield

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¹ On deprivation, see M. Bailey, 'Peasant welfare in England, 1290–1348', *EcHR*, 51 (1998), pp. 223–51; for more upbeat analyses, B. Dodds, *Peasants and production in the medieval north-east. The evidence of tithes, 1270–1536* (2007); C. Briggs, *Credit and village society in fourteenth-century England* (2009).

information about land, cultivation, productivity and longevity. Archaeologists have a different vocabulary: 'peasant' is largely absent from their formal writing. Their view of the past tends to assign importance to culture: for example, they explain the distribution of goods away from their place of origin not as the result of trade, but through travel or gift giving. There is no shortage of material remains and their interpretation, as studies of rural settlements and landscapes have played a central role in medieval archaeology.² The first section of this inquiry will begin with some evidence for a low standard of peasant welfare. Indications of a more complex and varied interpretation will then be assembled under the headings of landscape, agriculture, industrial occupations, houses and households and finally individuals. The concluding section will highlight changes during the period.

I

The most striking indications of the difficulties and hazards facing the medieval peasantry come from their bones. A number of churchyards have been partially excavated, but Wharram Percy's has yielded the largest sample with 687 burials. The burials, though not closely dated, mostly belong to the period before 1400.³ At first sight the statistics of the age of death suggest that the population was quite long-lived, as 40 per cent of the adult dead were buried after they reached the age of 50 (adult refers to those aged 18 and above). This shows that people could reach a good age in significant numbers, but a full picture of mortality must include the whole population. Babies and infants are underrepresented because of the difficulty of recovering the bones of the very young, especially as at least a few of these were buried not in the churchyard but in or near houses. Even so 45 per cent of all burials were of those aged below 16, and 15 per cent were infants (that is, under one year old). Chemical analysis of infant bones showed that breast feeding continued for a year or two, which potentially gave babies a good start in life, and contributed to intervals between births.⁴ The good quality of nutrition did not subsequently persist, as adolescents grew slowly on the basis of a mainly vegetarian diet, attaining at 14 years the stature of a modern ten-year-old. Young medieval peasants, because of inadequate nutrition, were still growing into their 20s.⁵ The mean height for adult males was 1.69m, and for females 1.58m, which was a little higher than the urban working class in the nineteenth century, but below people buried in the city of York between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries.⁶ Various bone conditions such as reduced cortical thickness provide further evidence of a deficient diet, and pitting of the eye sockets (cribra orbitalis) associated with porotic hyperostosis (125 cases), and the presence of Harris lines, indicate that many Wharram peasants experienced episodes of stress in their early lives, caused by hunger or infectious diseases such as dysentery. Such crises account for cases of periostosis (58 cases), the

² C. Gerrard, *Medieval archaeology. Understanding traditions and contemporary approaches* (2003), pp. 99–107, 128–32, 138–42, 151–5, 186–8; N. Christie and P. Stampfer (eds), *Medieval rural settlement. Britain and Ireland, AD 800–1600* (2012); R. Gilchrist, *Medieval life. Archaeology and the life course* (2012), pp. 29, 118–23, 232–4.

³ S. Mays, C. Harding and C. Heighway, *Wharram. A study of settlement on the Yorkshire Wolds*, XI, *The churchyard* (University of York Archaeological Publications 13, 2007), pp. 77–192.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 93–4.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 95–100.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 118–20.

formation of new bone after an interruption to growth. The Wharram villagers were not as prone to infections as their contemporaries living in the poor urban parish of St Helen on the Walls in York, and their health was not damaged by smoke pollution as was that of the town dwellers.⁷ Instead they experienced the characteristic strains of rural labour. The men were accustomed to lifting heavy weights, and women had developed strong right arms through work in the fields. The women's bones bear traces of the squatting position and bent backs adopted when they performed domestic tasks without seating. Men and women were prone to osteoarthritis.⁸ The main conclusion of the Wharram bone study must be the extent of episodes of deprivation, of which one may have been the famine of 1315–17. A piece of evidence for the consumption of 'famine foods' comes from the hamlet of West Cotton, where a horse bone had not just butchery marks, which might have been preparatory to feeding the meat to dogs, but also the breaking of the bone to extract marrow for human consumption.⁹

In addition to bone evidence, we can cite the existence of small thirteenth-century houses which resemble in their construction buildings of the previous three centuries, with post holes for vertical timbers sunk into the ground (earth fast), or occasionally horizontal timbers were either buried in slots or rested on the ground surface. Such buildings have been recorded at Long Marston in North Yorkshire, Tatton in Cheshire, Coton in Warwickshire, Hatch Warren in Hampshire and in settlements near Lydd on Romney Marsh, so in a variety of terrains and regions. Sometimes there are no signs of timbers at all, suggesting that the houses rested on the ground or were founded on mud walls. Only floors (which were usually insubstantial) or eaves drip trenches mark the outline of the buildings. These meagre traces of habitation mark the former existence of houses in the twelfth- and thirteenth-century phases of the village of Caldecote in Hertfordshire.¹⁰ Some of these houses were notably smaller than the standard 6m-by-15m rural late medieval house, particularly those at Coton, which in the mid-late thirteenth century phase measured 8–12 m long and 4–4.5 m wide.

These are the types of material evidence which would support a picture of an immiserated peasantry, yet these indications of ill health and houses of poor quality and restricted size should not dominate our overall interpretation. Among the Wharram Percy burials it should be noted that, shocking as the incidence of bone conditions associated with traumatic experiences of disease and hunger may be, the majority did not show signs of hyperostosis and periostosis. Coton (on the Wolds) was a very unusual settlement which was abandoned in about 1300: as the name (meaning cottages) implies, its inhabitants consisted entirely of

⁷ Ibid., pp. 101–2, 166–70, 172–4, 191–2.

⁸ Ibid., pp. 118, 125–7, 154–8, 190–1.

⁹ A. Chapman, *West Cotton, Raunds. A study of medieval settlement dynamics AD 450–1450* (2010), p. 528.

¹⁰ G. Beresford, *Caldecote. The development and desertion of a Hertfordshire village* (Society for Medieval Archaeology monograph series 28, 2009), pp. 81–9; L. Barber and G. Priestley-Bell, *Medieval adaptation, settlement and economy of a coastal wetland. The evidence around Lydd, Romney Marsh, Kent* (2008), pp. 62–6, 75, 80; Northamptonshire Archaeology,

'Excavations of the deserted medieval village of Coton at Coton Park, Rugby, Warwickshire' (1998); S.J. Sherlock, 'Excavations at the Well House, Long Marston, North Yorkshire', *Yorkshire Archaeological J.* 76 (2004), pp. 113–33; P. J. Fasham, J. G. Keevill and D. Coe, *Brighton Hill South (Hatch Warren): an Iron Age farmstead and deserted medieval village in Hampshire* (Wessex Archaeology Report 7, 1995), pp. 77–151; N. J. Higham, 'The Tatton Park project, part 2. The medieval estates, settlement and hall', *J. Chester Archaeological Soc.* 75 (1998–9), pp. 79–101.

smallholders, suggesting a socially imbalanced community, sited on a bleak upland. Finally the West Cotton horse bone was unusual. Horses were not normally eaten by people in late medieval England, even as famine food.

II

Historical and geographical approaches to landscape once separated the good-quality arable lands from the hills, forests, moors and marshes, which it was believed had a secondary role. These marginal lands would only be occupied and cultivated in times of high pressure from population, and extending corn growing on to poor soils has been perceived as contributing to the crisis of the early fourteenth century, and particularly the Great Famine of 1315–17.¹¹

The archaeological approach takes the longer view, and puts more emphasis on sustainability. Open fields predominated in the ‘central province’ running down through eastern and midland England to the chalk country of the South, from Northumberland to Dorset. Finds of pottery on the surface of fields suggest that the extensive ploughland of the open fields had been cultivated before the Norman Conquest, in one view before 850, and in another soon after that date.¹² As crops were grown on parts of the same open fields into the eighteenth century, many generations of cultivators were evidently practising an agrarian routine which gave an acceptable return from the land. From pottery scatters, air photographs of former fields, and occasional continuities of field boundaries, we know that much of the land cultivated in the middle ages had also been exploited between the first and fourth centuries AD, and indeed since prehistory. Pollen samples suggest that land sometimes continued in use as arable across the divide of AD 400, perpetuating elements of the Roman countryside into the middle ages.¹³ The shortfalls in production around 1300 look like a very temporary episode in a long-term story.

Much historical thinking about the rural economy slips easily into references to villages and villagers, implying that the normal settlement was a nucleated village linked with common arable fields. Study of both existing settlements and abandoned sites shows that in many regions small hamlets or single farmsteads predominated, and that most people at any time between 1200 and 1540 did not live in nucleated villages. The implications of this from the point of view of the wealth and well-being of the inhabitants are still debated. Documentary evidence (confirmed by topographical studies) suggests that the people occupying dispersed settlements, compared with the nucleated villagers, had more options open to them in terms of the balance between arable and pasture, because a lower proportion of their holdings lay in

¹¹ The population-resources model and its deficiencies is discussed in the context of a topographical study in H. M. Dunsford and S. J. Harris, ‘Colonization of the wasteland in County Durham, 1100–1400’, *EcHR* 56 (2003), pp. 34–56.

¹² B. K. Roberts and S. Wrathmell, *An atlas of rural settlement in England* (2000) ; T. Williamson, *Shaping medieval landscapes. Settlement, society, environment* (2003), pp. 67, 89 ; S. Parry, *Raunds area survey. An archaeological study of the landscape of Raunds,*

Northamptonshire, 1985–94 (2006), pp. 91–8, 126–35, T. Williamson, *Environment, society and landscape in early medieval England. Time and topography* (2013), pp. 177–82.

¹³ R. Jones and M. Page, *Medieval villages in an English landscape* (2006), pp. 31–57; S. Upex, ‘Landscape continuity and fossilization of Roman fields’, *Archaeological J.*, 159 (2002), pp. 77–108; P. Dark, *The environment of Britain in the first millennium A.D.* (2000), pp. 130–56.

open fields, and they were more likely to hold crofts and closes under their own control. They would often devote some of their enclosures to the grazing of animals, and those living in woodland and upland landscapes might have had access to large common pastures.¹⁴

The traditional emphasis on cultivation leads to a neglect of the more pastoral economy of the uplands and wetlands. In these sometimes thinly settled environments archaeologists are presented with opportunities, because the land was less intensively managed in modern times and elements of older landscapes have been preserved.

In the coastal salt marshes Roman drainage had a large impact, notably on the Severn estuary. The sea walls and gutters were neglected in the post-Roman retreat, requiring restoration of the drainage system in the tenth century, and a new campaign of reclamation in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.¹⁵ Although changes in wetlands have traditionally been represented as decisive drainage schemes, organized by great lords, various phases of human intervention with incremental effects can be observed. The wetlands could have been exploited in their natural state, for summer grazing for example; then they could be modified to make the pasture more accessible; and finally drained, settled and ploughed. Drainage channels and earlier watercourses on the Norfolk coast and on Romney Marsh show the successive stages of management and improvement. Creeks were straightened, some of the boundaries were marked by ditches, and the salt marsh was provided with drove ways with bridges over old streams and new dykes which enabled stock to be managed in the summer grazing season. Such improvements did not require great reserves of capital or political power, and could be accomplished by individuals or by peasant communities.¹⁶ Excavations of a very large area on Romney Marsh reveal roads and small rectangular fields defined by ditch digging and the siting of fences and hedges, and subsequently walls were built to protect the agricultural land from inundations. Lords throughout the country with interests in the wetlands, such as the Benedictine monasteries, played a part in the building of sea defences, but so did peasants, who contributed to drainage works and developed agricultural holdings based on scattered houses and cottages.¹⁷ Fenland lords, such as monks of Ely priory, wrote eloquently about the rich environment, which could be celebrated as a *locus amoenus*, an ideal place, but peasants also appreciated the resources – not just the lush pastures and the potentially productive arable land once drainage work was completed, but also the turf, sedge, rushes, reeds, fish and fowl of the watery fen and marsh, all of which had their uses and a value in the market. The scale of coastal salt making in Lincolnshire, and of peat extraction in Norfolk, is apparent from abundant physical remains.¹⁸ This is relevant to the theme of sustainability, as the settlement of

¹⁴ C. Dyer, 'Dispersed settlements in medieval England. A case study of Pendock, Worcestershire', *Medieval Archaeology*, 34 (1990), pp. 97–12; S. V. Smith 'Houses and communities: archaeological evidence for variation in medieval peasant experience', in C. Dyer and R. Jones (eds), *Deserted medieval villages revisited* (2009), pp. 66–75.

¹⁵ S. Rippon, *The Severn Estuary. Landscape evolution and wetland reclamation* (1997), pp. 104–219.

¹⁶ M. Gardiner, 'Archaeological evidence for the exploitation, reclamation and flooding of salt marshes',

in J. Klapste (ed.), *Water management in medieval rural economy* (2005), pp. 73–83.

¹⁷ Barber and Priestley-Bell, *Medieval adaptation*, pp. 29–112; S. Rippon, *Landscape, community and colonization. The North Somerset Levels during the first to second millennia* (CBA Research Report 152, 2006), pp. 277–9.

¹⁸ C. A. M. Clarke, *Literary landscapes and the idea of England, 700–1400* (2006), pp. 79–89. Archaeological insights into fenland resources include F. McAvoy, 'Marine salt extraction: the excavation of salterns at

the fenlands and marshlands, far from indicating the desperate search for new lands among an impoverished population, gave opportunities to many people who congregated in some large settlements, like those in south Lincolnshire and eastern Cambridgeshire, or who occupied hamlets and farmsteads scattered over the reclaimed land. The settlements often persisted through the fourteenth-century crisis, and there is little sign in the fenland of the desertion of villages that occurred on nearby dry land.

Some of the hamlets on moorlands, notably on much-studied Bodmin Moor in Cornwall and Dartmoor in Devon, conformed to the expectation of those who regard marginal lands as outlets for surplus people in times of demographic pressure, as they were established in the age of expansion in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and abandoned in the fourteenth.¹⁹ The advance and retreat is apparent not just from the excavated houses and their associated field systems that bear witness to cultivation on some high and exposed hill sides, but also from the analysis of pollen deposits preserved in peat bogs, which show fluctuations in the proportion of land supporting cereals and the weeds associated with cultivation.²⁰ The main function of the moors, however, was not to provide space for permanent settlements but for grazing livestock brought from the villages and hamlets on lower ground in the summer season. To facilitate the management of cattle and sheep, boundaries were marked by walls and ditches designed to keep the animals from entering private land. Droveways gave the livestock access to the moors, and pounds were maintained for assembling animals and establishing ownership.²¹ Bodmin Moor was dotted with shieling huts where herdsmen sheltered during the grazing season, though they may belong to the early middle ages.²² These temporary dwellings are a prominent feature of the northern uplands of Cumbria and Northumberland where some date from the thirteenth century.²³ Industry sometimes covered the moorland landscape with diggings and waste heaps, notably from tinning in the South West, lead mining in Derbyshire and widespread iron ore mining and quarrying. Pastoral and industrial activities enabled some uplands to support a considerable population at the right season, and permanent settlements

Note 18 *continued*

Wainfleet St Mary, Lincolnshire', *Medieval Archaeology*, 38 (1994), pp. 134–63; G. Lucas, 'A medieval fishery on Whittlesea Mere, Cambridgeshire', *Medieval Archaeology*, 42 (1998), pp. 19–44; T. Williamson, *The Norfolk Broads. A landscape history* (1997), pp. 80–7.

¹⁹ N. Johnson and P. Rose, *Bodmin Moor. An archaeological survey, I, the human landscape to c.1800* (1994), pp. 83–93; G. Beresford, 'Three deserted settlements on Dartmoor: a report on E. Marie Minter's excavations', *Medieval Archaeology*, 23 (1979), pp. 98–158; D. Austin, 'Excavations in Okehampton deer park, Devon, 1976–1978', *Proc. Devon Arch. Soc.*, 36 (1978), 191–239; on the redating of the last phase of the sites from the early fourteenth century to c.1400, see R. Sylvester, 'Abandoning the uplands: depopulation among dispersed settlements in western Britain', in Dyer and Jones (eds), *Deserted villages revisited*, pp. 145–6.

²⁰ D. Austin and M. J. C. Walker, 'A new landscape

context for Hound Tor, Devon', *Medieval Archaeology*, 29 (1985), pp. 147–52.

²¹ A. Fleming and N. Ralph, 'Medieval settlement and land use on Holme Moor, Dartmoor: the landscape evidence', *Medieval Archaeology*, 36 (1982), pp. 101–37; H. Fox, *Dartmoor's alluring uplands: transhumance and pastoral management in the middle ages* (2012), pp. 66–7; 191–209.

²² P. Herring, 'Shadows of ghosts: early medieval transhumants in Cornwall', in S. Turner and R. Sylvester (eds), *Life in medieval landscapes. People and places in the middle ages* (2012), pp. 89–105.

²³ H. G. Ramm, R. W. McDowall and E. Mercer, *Shielings and bastles* (1970), pp. 9–43; M. Hair and R. Newman, 'Excavation of medieval settlement remains at Crosedale in Howgill', *Trans. Cumberland and Westmorland Archaeological Soc.*, 99 (1999), pp. 141–58.

could be sustained, such as farms on Exmoor (Somerset) which have survived into modern times.²⁴

We can humanize our approach to landscape by attempting an imaginative reconstruction of the experiences of those who lived in the past. It is legitimate to ask 'how did the landscape look, smell, sound?' When this inquiry into the perceptions is applied to moorlands, they do not seem as dangerous and threatening as they appear to modern observers.²⁵ Dartmoor, to those who lived and worked on it, was a beneficial, useful asset, covered with tracks and landmarks that were familiar and helpful. The common experience of inhabiting a distinctive environment would give the people of the moors the basis for a shared identity. The implications for sustainability are two-fold: those who lived in the habitable and even hospitable moorland environment had developed a way of life which made rational use of the local resources; the peasants of lowland villages around the moors benefited from the uplands for feeding their animals.

Woodland management was not an exclusively seigniorial practice, as peasants on occasion could have either collective or individual control of woods. Both timber and wood were being produced systematically long before the first detailed written records. Species such as hazel were cropped in coppices, or in the underwood which grew beneath larger trees. The people who wove hurdles, basket work, or wattle panels, all of which are found when wet deposits are excavated, had access to quantities of rods and twigs which had grown for a few years before they were cut and then allowed to grow again.²⁶

Exploitation of natural resources has left its mark in the organic material excavated in towns. Wild fruits and nuts, but also rushes, reeds, heather, bracken, broom and gorse were gathered on commons, heaths, moors and fens partly for peasants' own use, and partly for transport to towns where they are found preserved in the bottom of damp rubbish pits, or in carbonized form after they had been burnt deliberately or by accident.²⁷ Hunting is often linked with gathering, but the very limited number of bones from game, such as deer, from village or hamlet sites (with one exception) suggests that peasants had little opportunity for hunting. Fishing, however, brought to coastal communities both food for households, and income from fish sales, judging from the heaps of shells, and paraphernalia of lead weights and iron fishhooks from sites such as Denge West in Sussex in the fifteenth century.²⁸ Garden produce, represented by pips and stones of berries and fruits (raspberries, strawberries, plums, damsons, apples and so on) would have been supplied to urban householders by peasants practising horticulture.²⁹

²⁴ H. Riley and R. Wilson-North, *The field archaeology of Exmoor* (2001), pp. 92–7.

²⁵ K. Altenberg, *Experiencing landscapes; a study of space and identity in three marginal areas of medieval Britain and Scandinavia* (2003).

²⁶ C. Treen and M. Atkin (eds), *Wharram. A study of settlement on the Yorkshire Wolds, X Water resources and their management* (York University Archaeological Publications 12, 2005), pp. 200–10.

²⁷ G. Hughes, 'Excavations within a medieval and post-medieval tenement at Stone, 1993', *Trans. South Staffs. Archaeological and Historical Soc.* 37 (1995–6), pp. 58–104.

²⁸ Deer bones, many of them in a single deposit, in J. M. Steane and G. F. Bryant, 'Excavations at the deserted medieval settlement of Lyveden, Northamptonshire', *Northampton Borough Council Museums and Art Gallery J.* 12 (1975), pp. 152–7; Barber and Priestley-Bell, *Medieval adaptation*, pp. 183–7, 189–90, 224–7, 228–39; another site with abundant shell evidence: T. Allen, 'Swine, salt and seafood: a case study of Anglo-Saxon and early medieval settlement in north-east Kent', *Archaeologia Cantiana* 124 (2004), pp. 117–35.

²⁹ J. Greig, 'The investigation of a medieval barrel-latrine from Worcester', *J. Archaeological Science*, 8 (1981), pp. 265–82.

To sum up this discussion of landscape, archaeologists encourage us to have some confidence in the wisdom of the cultivators of the past, and to respect their skill, experience and organizational ability. In particular, much can be learnt from studies of moors and marshes, and from environmental evidence, about the productive management of land beyond the arable fields.

III

The themes of archaeological analysis of agricultural production include choice, flexibility and change. In the central province the distinctive earthworks of cultivation, ridge and furrow, show how much adaptation occurred within open-field farming. Changes are almost impossible to date, but many are likely to be pre-modern. Ridges were extended over land that had previously been unploughed, such as meadow. Ridges were divided, or adjacent ridges amalgamated. Ridge and furrow was laid out over former houses when villages were declining, and fainter earthworks on the edge of the field system suggest a retreat from cultivation.³⁰ In the case of meadow land, ditches of unknown date could have belonged to the 'catchwork' systems which were designed to channel and spill overflow water from rivers and streams over grassland to encourage early and abundant growth of grass, before the introduction of elaborate floated water meadows in the seventeenth century.³¹ These observations reinforce historical impressions of the flexibility of husbandry, and they demonstrate changes scarcely recorded in the written sources.

The identification of varieties of wheat, barley and other crops from botanical remains has come as a revelation, and we now know more about breeds of livestock. Cereal grains, and also pieces of straw and other parts of the cereal plant, are most commonly preserved when they were charred, and are often recovered from settlement sites in the vicinity of hearths, ovens and kilns. Both bread wheat and rivet wheat are encountered, and are sometimes found intermingled in the same deposits.³² In the fifteenth century both types were being grown in the same year in close proximity, judging from the presence of straw with ears attached, in thatched roofs blackened (and preserved) by smoke from an open hearth.³³ The spikes (awns) on the ears of rivet wheat deterred birds, and rivet wheat was more resistant to some diseases. On the other hand bread wheat thrives in heavy soils and rivet wheat was apparently not so well suited to the climate of northern England. Peasants had to make choices of which variety suited their needs, though the presence of both suggests that they might have been avoiding risk, in the same way that they could opt for maslin, a mixture of wheat and rye. Barley came in different varieties, two-row, four-row and six-row, but although in modern experience two-row barley yields better and is well suited for malting and brewing, medieval peasants

³⁰ D. R. Wilson, 'Alterations to ridge and furrow: some examples illustrated', in M. Aston and others (eds), *The rural settlements of medieval England* (1989), pp. 183–90; D. Hall, *The open fields of Northamptonshire* (Northamptonshire Rec. Soc. 38, 1992), pp. 125–39. S. Upex, 'A classification of ridge and furrow by an analysis of cross profiles', *Landscape History*, 26 (2004), pp. 59–75. The sites of village houses bearing the marks of later cultivation can be seen at Stretton Baskerville, Warwickshire, and Sulby, Northamptonshire.

³¹ H. Cook and others, 'The origins of water meadows in England', *AgHR* 51 (2003), pp. 155–62; G. Brown, 'Irrigation of water meadows in England', in Klapste (ed.), *Water management*, pp. 84–92.

³² L. Moffett, 'The archaeology of medieval plant foods', in C. M. Woolgar and others (eds), *Food in medieval England. Diet and nutrition* (2006), pp. 47–9.

³³ J. B. Letts, *Smoke blackened thatch. A unique source of late medieval plant remains from southern England* (1991), pp. 18–21.

preferred the six-row variety.³⁴ Cultivators, both individuals and collectively, seem therefore to have faced a complex range of decisions, not just how much land to devote to winter-sown or spring-sown crops; whether to grow wheat, rye, barley or other crops; what value they would gain from growing legumes (peas, beans or vetch) rather than grain; and whether to select single crops such as barley instead of a mixture such as dredge consisting of barley and oats. They also needed to select the best varieties of cereals or legumes. Regional variations in the soil and climate presumably influenced the decision-making.

In the case of livestock the documents occasionally hint at different breeds: an estate might send for a ram from another county to improve the flock, or oxen mentioned in court records were said to be black or red.³⁵ Animal bones which accumulated as rubbish on urban sites originated in the country, where more livestock in total were kept by peasants than on the estates of their lords. The marked differences in the size and shape of bones in these large samples show, for example, that in the county of Norfolk the beef consumed in the town of Thetford came from a breed of cattle more 'slender' than those encountered in Norwich.³⁶ Breeds of sheep, with their wool, which varied in length and fineness, can be distinguished using the fibres still adhering to parchment.³⁷ Perhaps peasants tended to keep the breeds which were predominant in their neighbourhood, but those living on a frontier between locally distinct breeds must again have been able to exercise a choice.

Peasants had to weigh the utility of the products for their own households and also assess their value in the market. One type of barley might have made better bread, and therefore would contribute to the subsistence of the peasant family, but another variety might have been more suited for brewing and would fetch a higher price if sold. Sale of barley in malted form is thought to have figured in the peasant economy of West Cotton in Northamptonshire, because malt kilns were built with a capacity beyond the needs of a single household.³⁸ Younger cattle tended to be sent to the towns for the butchers, while peasant households consumed the meat from old beasts which had completed their useful lives as dairy cows or plough oxen. Similarly young pigs went to market, and the peasants ate meat from the slaughtered sows only after they had produced a series of litters.³⁹

Samples of grain preserved by burning can be compared with written records of crops, especially tithes which reflect the grain and legumes harvested by peasants (Table 1). They can be broadly similar, as in the case of a sample from Wharram Percy and the tithes from nearby Bishop Wilton, but they can differ markedly, as at Bishop's Cleeve, Gloucestershire.⁴⁰ Those who believe in the superiority of documentary evidence would say that the material evidence

³⁴ Moffett, 'Plant foods', pp. 49–50.

³⁵ R. Trow-Smith, *A history of British livestock husbandry to 1700* (1957), pp. 111–12, 160–2.

³⁶ U. Albarella, 'Meat production and consumption in town and country', in K. Giles and C. Dyer (eds), *Town and country in the middle ages. Contrasts, contacts and interconnections, 1100–1500* (Society for Medieval Archaeology monograph series 22, 2005), pp. 143–4.

³⁷ M. L. Ryder, *Sheep and man* (1983), pp. 472–4.

³⁸ Chapman, *West Cotton*, pp. 225–9.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 522, 524–5; U. Albarella, 'The mystery

of husbandry": medieval animals and the problem of integrating historical and archaeological evidence', *Antiquity* 73 (1999), p. 871.

⁴⁰ S. Wrathmell (ed.), *Wharram. A study of settlement on the Yorkshire Wolds, XIII, A history of Wharram Percy and its neighbours* (York University Archaeological Publications 15, 2012), pp. 319, 332; D. Enright and M. Watts, *A Romano-British and medieval settlement site at Stoke Road, Bishop's Cleeve, Gloucestershire* (Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Report 1, 2002), pp. 53–5, 72.

TABLE 1. Samples from two late medieval settlement sites of burnt grain/legumes, compared with tithe receipts from a similar period (percentages). There are more similarities between the archaeological and documentary evidence in the Wharram Percy figures than in those from Bishop's Cleeve, which may be caused by the local circumstances in which straw was burnt or grain dried.

(a) Wharram Percy, Yorks

<i>Crops</i>	<i>Wheat</i>	<i>Barley</i>	<i>Dredge</i>	<i>Oats</i>	<i>Legumes</i>	<i>Unknown</i>	<i>Total</i>
Sample of burnt grain	44	25	–	11	present	20	100
Tithes (from the nearby parish of Bishop's Wilton) 1298	45	26	22		7	–	100

(b) Bishop's Cleeve, Glos

<i>Crops</i>	<i>Wheat</i>	<i>Rye</i>	<i>Barley</i>	<i>Oats</i>	<i>Legumes</i>	<i>Total</i>
Sample of burnt grain	73	1	9	7	10	100
Tithes 1396–7	36	0	55	1	8	100

is unrepresentative, but the tithe figures reflect the cumulative total for all of the producers in a parish, while the burnt grain arises from specific episodes in the use of crops in an individual household, such as the drying of a consignment of grain, or the burning of bundles of straw as fuel or after the removal of a thatched roof.

A primary peasant concern was to obtain decent yields, which could be helped by manuring, and one of the sources of nutrients came from the individual dung heaps maintained by peasant households. Locations of these middens have been tentatively identified near houses.⁴¹ Here animal dung, soiled litter from stalls and stables, household refuse and other organic material accumulated. There is some uncertainty about the collection of human ordure, as not many latrines or cesspits have been identified near peasant houses, but this valuable source of fertilizer was surely not neglected. At Shapwick in Somerset rubbish pits were dug in the yard behind a house in the village in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, but not after 1300, as if the waste matter was then going on to the fields.⁴² The household rubbish lay exposed to the elements (and to scavengers) for many months, as is shown in some villages by the number of animal bones much gnawed by dogs.⁴³ The carting and spreading of manure is well attested because the household refuse included broken pots, and modern field walking locates a thin spread of potsherds over the medieval arable fields. Open-field furlongs were manured by the cart more than land held in severalty or assarts. The evidence tends to be more abundant on fields nearer the settlements, because the cultivators wished to economize on cart journeys,

⁴¹ S. Wrathmell, *Wharram. A study of settlement on the Yorkshire Wolds*, VI, *Domestic settlement 2: medieval peasant farmsteads* (York University Archaeological Publications 8, 1989), p. 33; Barber and Priestley-Bell, *Medieval adaptation*, pp. 75, 77.

⁴² Latrine pits have been identified at two east midland villages: G. Beresford, *The medieval clay-land*

village (Society for Medieval Archaeology monograph series 6, 1975), pp. 13–18; C. Gerrard with M. Aston, *The Shapwick project, Somerset. A rural landscape explored* (Society for Medieval Archaeology monograph series 25, 2007), pp. 987–90.

⁴³ Chapman, *West Cotton*, p. 520.

and could manure the outer furlongs by folding sheep on them.⁴⁴ They would concentrate (we suppose) their more valuable cereals, such as wheat, on the land with most manure, and select that same land for more intensive cropping. As the pottery can be dated, the extent of manuring at different periods can be established. At Whittlewood on the wooded Northamptonshire/Buckinghamshire border the area of manured land expanded after 1100, partly because more land was being brought into cultivation, and partly because more manure was being applied to raise productivity. In the champion arable farming township of Bingham in Nottinghamshire thirteenth- and fourteenth-century pottery was abundant, mainly because of an intensification of cultivation.⁴⁵ Marling was another method of improving the soil for cultivation, but it is a practice that appears only patchily in the documents. The pits are now visible in the fields, but are usually undateable. At Compton Verney in Warwickshire, where 11 are still visible in a parish of 1668 acres, cultivation effectively ceased in the mid-fifteenth century, and was only resumed on a large scale after 1950, so the pits probably belong to the medieval period.⁴⁶

Attention turned after planting to nurturing the growing crops. Weed infestation is revealed whenever botanical evidence from corn fields is analysed, whether from pollen, grains and seeds, plant material preserved in wet conditions, or whole plants included in thatch. The species which grew on cultivated ground included charlock, corn cockle, cornflower, poppy, dock, knotgrass and stinking chamomile.⁴⁷ Weed growth was most effectively counteracted by ploughing thoroughly and repeatedly before sowing, which would destroy the roots of the unwanted plants before harrowing and sowing: coulter and shares of plough are not found in excavations because these large pieces of iron would be taken back to the smith to be reworked. The iron parts of smaller tools that were used for weeding, spuds and weeding hooks, were more likely to be lost and therefore available for discovery in excavation.⁴⁸ The spuds and hooks, fitted to long wooden hafts, were designed to cut the stems of individual weeds at ground level, which was slow and laborious work, and required deftness to avoid damage to the crops. Hoes did not figure prominently among implements on peasant sites, presumably because corn was not grown in rows, though beans, which were dibbled, might have been arranged to allow hoeing.

The evidence for weeds is not quantifiable, in that we can count the number of seeds or pollen grains, but cannot know how densely the weeds grew in the cornfield, nor can the damage that they caused to cereal crops be measured. It is not known if peasant crops were more or less affected than those of the demesne, though documents suggest that peasant holdings in the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries would have been able to muster good quantities of labour for weeding, including women and children.

The storage of crops contributed to the efficiency of arable farming. When a toft is excavated, or the foundations of buildings planned on well-preserved deserted sites, it is commonly found

⁴⁴ R. Jones, 'Signatures in the soil: the use of pottery in the identification of medieval farming regimes', *Archaeological J.* 161 (2004), pp. 159–88.

⁴⁵ Ibid., pp. 166–9, 184–5; P. Allen, 'Settlement patterns in the parish of Bingham, Nottinghamshire, from the mesolithic to modern times', *Trans. Thoroton Soc.* 115 (2011), pp. 33–62.

⁴⁶ C. Dyer, 'Compton Verney: landscape and people

in the middle ages', in R. Bearman (ed.), *Compton Verney. A history of the house and its owners* (2000), pp. 67–8.

⁴⁷ Letts, *Smoke blackened thatch*, pp. 39–41; Enright and Watts, *Bishop's Cleeve, Gloucestershire*, pp. 49–61.

⁴⁸ I. H. Goodall, *Ironwork in medieval Britain. An archaeological study* (Society for Medieval Archaeology monograph series 31, 2011), pp. 79–83, 92–3, 102–3.

that the peasant house was accompanied by one or two buildings for agricultural use. One of these would be a barn: if it consisted of two or three bays (a length of 10–15m) it would have had space for the storage of 30 or 40 quarters of grain in straw, which would have been sufficient to keep under cover all of the crops of a standard yardland, or two-oxgang holding.⁴⁹ They would no doubt suffer from the depredations of rats and mice, and there is evidence of insect damage on preserved cereal grains.⁵⁰ Effective storage contributed to the well-being of the peasant family, as their food supplies would be protected, but it could also enable crops to be held back from the market until prices rose in the spring.

At every stage of the cultivation process haulage was needed for ploughing and harrowing, for carting the crops in from the fields, and for carrying threshed grain to market. Finds of horseshoes, and of harness buckles and other items of horse furniture, are sometimes concentrated in buildings which can be identified as stables. High proportions of horse bones are also recovered from some sites.⁵¹ These strands of material evidence, taken together, point to the adoption by peasants of horses for agriculture in particular regions, such as the Yorkshire wolds.

Horticulture on peasant sites can be detected from seeds, pollen and other botanical residues deriving from vegetables and fruits such as cabbage and apples, and also from flax and hemp, important industrial crops.⁵² Peasant poultry keeping should be reflected in the bones of fowls and geese, and even by the recovery of egg shells, but both bones and eggs are too fragile to survive in great numbers.⁵³

Animal bones from village sites show that animals were kept for a number of years for the sake of their long-term economic contribution. Housing (byres, stables and sheephouses) was provided for at least part of the flocks and herds. This was regarded as unnecessary in east midland villages where apparently cattle were kept at night and in bad weather in yards.⁵⁴ High-quality welfare provision could not be afforded, and there are a number of pointers to the hard life of peasant animals. Poor feeding (as well as the breed), may account for their small stature. Sheep in Yorkshire attained a withers height of 531mm, while cattle stood at 1120mm. Chickens were no larger than modern bantams.⁵⁵ Specimens of pitted animal teeth have been interpreted as evidence for poor nutrition. The lower limb bones of cattle and horses sometimes bear the signs of hard labour.⁵⁶

To sum up, perspectives on peasant agriculture from archaeology make us more aware of the

⁴⁹ Wrathmell (ed.), *Wharram Percy*, p. 321.

⁵⁰ Treen and Atkin, *Water resources*, p. 189.

⁵¹ Steane and Bryant, 'Excavations at Lyveden', pp. 152–7; M. Ponsford, 'Excavations at a Saxo-Norman settlement, Bickley, Cleeve, 1982–89', *Somerset Archaeology and Natural History* 146 (2003), pp. 60, 66.

⁵² Chapman, *West Cotton*, pp. 485–90, 495–6.

⁵³ R. Ivens, P. Busby and N. Shepherd, *Tattenhoe and Westbury* (Buckinghamshire Archaeology Society monograph series 8, 1995), pp. 436–43.

⁵⁴ Beresford, *Clay-land village*, pp. 13–18.

⁵⁵ P. A. Stamper and R. A. Croft, *Wharram. A study of settlement on the Yorkshire Wolds*, VIII, *The south manor area* (York University Archaeological Publications 10, 2000), pp. 179, 182. The heights means that in

relation to the author of this article (who is of average height), a sheep's back would have reached his knees, and a cow his mid-chest.

⁵⁶ M. L. Ryder, 'Animal remains from Wharram Percy', *Yorkshire Archaeological J.* 46 (1974), p. 45; P. Rahtz and L. Watts, *Wharram. A study of settlement on the Yorkshire Wolds*, IX, *The north manor area and north-west enclosure* (York University Archaeological Publications 11, 2004), p. 271; R. Thomas, 'Diachronic trends in lower limb pathologies in later medieval and post-medieval cattle from Britain', in G. Grupe, G. McGlynn and J. Peters (eds), *Limping together through the ages: joint afflictions and bone infections* (Documenta Archaeobiologiae 6, 2008), pp. 187–201.

choices available (the variety of crops and animal breeds, for example), and provide insights into husbandry practices such as manuring, weeding and storage.

Industrial processes, even in settlements with an apparently entirely agricultural economy, leave tell-tale traces, such as fragments of slag or other metal-working residues: occasionally peasants may have done work for themselves, or alternatively itinerant metal workers repaired a cooking pot or a plough and left traces of their visit.⁵⁷ Sometimes a tool with a specialized craft use is found on a peasant site, such as a single example of a chisel found at Barton Blount (Derbyshire) and another at Upton (Gloucestershire).⁵⁸ Had a tool been lost by a visiting mason engaged on building in the village, or did a villager work part-time in stone cutting? Rural butchery was either practised by peasants who slaughtered animals occasionally and sold joints to their neighbours, or by specialists who bought animals and retailed meat. These activities are known from bones on rural sites normally encountered in butchers' wastes, such as pieces of skull and jaws. Some country butchers did not use the same methods as their specialist urban contemporaries, in that they did not begin work on the carcasses by splitting them down the backbone.⁵⁹

Smiths could leave a striking material signature. The building in which iron was worked, like that at Goltho in Lincolnshire, is marked by an abundance of ash, coal and slag, and contains such specialist structures as hearths bearing signs of intense burning, and water pits for cooling hot iron. Such workshops are not found in excavations in every village, because a smith would tend to work not just for his own community, but served a wider area: the smith's workshop at Great Barford in Bedfordshire was sited on the edge of the straggling village, which was convenient for travellers and for neighbouring settlements.⁶⁰

In some places, however, industry, combined with farming, employed a number of households, and enabled smallholders to survive, or better-off peasants to increase their incomes. Communities in the North West were able to prepare flax and hemp fibres by retting the plants in purpose-made ponds. Peasant spinning with a distaff everywhere leads to the discovery of spindle whorls, often themselves home-made from stone, fired clay or reused potsherds. Also connected with the preparation of yarn, were iron teeth from heckles for separating fibres. At the Buckinghamshire sites of Westbury and Tattenhoe finds included 15 whorls and 11 heckle teeth.⁶¹ Distaff spinning, mostly by women, could be combined with other work in house, yard and field. The yarn (both woollen and linen) need not have been intended for weaving in the village, but in many cases was probably supplied to looms in a town or in a village with a cloth-making specialism.

Like many industries, iron smelting was practised in woodland landscapes, and peasants worked part-time, not just at the bloomeries where the iron was made, but also on preparing the charcoal for fuel. In Rockingham Forest in Northamptonshire 600 charcoal burning sites

⁵⁷ R. H. Hilton and P. A. Rahtz, 'Upton, Gloucestershire, 1959-1964', *Trans. Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Soc.* 85 (1966), pp. 112, 117.

⁵⁸ Goodall, *Ironwork*, pp. 45, 52-3.

⁵⁹ Treen and Atkin, *Water resources*, pp. 164-7.

⁶⁰ Beresford, *Clay-land village*, pp. 46, 90-1; J. Timby et al., *Settlement on the Bedfordshire claylands. Archaeology along the A421 Great Barford bypass* (Bedfordshire

Archaeological Monograph 8, 2007), pp. 188-95, 207-10.

⁶¹ M. C. Higham, 'Some evidence for 12th and 13th century linen and woollen textile processing', *Medieval Archaeology* 33 (1989), pp. 38-52 (the ponds described here were attributed to seigniorial investment, but there is no evidence for this); Ivens and others, *Tattenhoe and Westbury*, pp. 359-61, 378, 380.

have been identified, and they are only part of the original total. Lyveden in the same area was located near sources of clay, iron ore and wood fuel, from which tiles were made and iron worked, but pottery manufacture was the major activity in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Similar wares were produced at the same time at nearby Stanion. Rural potting can sometimes be located through documents, but only archaeology reveals the number of pots and the distances over which they were carried, because the fabric of pots from each place of manufacture can be identified from geological analysis. Wares from Lyveden and Stanion predominated in the large urban market of Northampton and were used by many thousands of households in towns and villages within 30 miles. Excavation at Lyveden reveals the transience of industry: one household apparently gave up potting and lived entirely from farming between 1350 and 1450. A proportion of centres of pot making throughout the country ceased to operate after a prolific period around 1300, leading to the suspicion that in hard times poor peasants turned to a craft which offered an income, but as conditions improved gave up the hard work and meagre rewards. The craft, like many in the period, drew on the labour of the whole household. At Olney Hyde in Buckinghamshire small finger marks made when the clay was soft show that children aged between 9 and 11 were helping to make pots in the fourteenth century.⁶²

Some rural industries are known mainly from their widely scattered products. The cutting of limestone grave covers flourished around the quarries of Barnack in Northamptonshire in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. They were carried for more than 50 miles, but ceased to dominate their region around 1300. In the next two centuries the rural craftsmen on the border between Derbyshire and Staffordshire supplied the demand for alabaster grave stones.⁶³ We cannot know if some industries were being practised part-time by peasants, or by full-time specialists. The tin industry of Cornwall and Devon, for example, has left us with a landscape scarred with heaps of prospecting pits and spoil from workings, and excavations and field survey have revealed the foundations of mills used to crush and smelt ore. These remains bring home to us the scale of the industry, the complexity of its extraction methods, and its mechanization with water-power. No doubt peasants with land and livestock invested in tin works, and smallholders who needed extra earnings migrated to the moors for employment in the summer, but there were also specialist tanners financed by urban merchants who did not necessarily form part of the peasant economy. A close connection between a peasant household and mining in the Derbyshire lead industry is suggested by finds of lead ore and a small amount of smelted lead in excavations of an upland farmstead near Brassington.⁶⁴

⁶² G. Foard, 'Medieval woodland, agriculture and industry in Rockingham Forest, Northamptonshire', *Medieval Archaeology* 45 (2001), pp. 65–95; Steane and Bryant, 'Lyveden, Northamptonshire', pp. 4–53; P. Chapman, P. Blinkhorn and A. Chapman, 'A medieval potters' tenement at Corby Road, Stanion, Northamptonshire', *Northamptonshire Archaeology* 35 (2008), pp. 215–70; M. R. McCarthy and C. M. Brooks, *Medieval pottery in Britain, AD 900–1600* (1988), pp. 285–90, 432–3; D. C. Mynard, 'A medieval pottery industry at Olney Hyde', *Records of Bucks.* 26 (1984), pp. 73–4.

⁶³ L. A. S. Butler, 'Minor medieval monumental sculpture in the east midlands', *Archaeological J.* 121 (1964), pp. 118–25, 147–9; S. Badham, 'Evidence for the minor funerary monument industry, 1100–1500', in Giles and Dyer, *Town and country*, pp. 174–6, 181–4.

⁶⁴ S. Gerrard, *The early British tin industry* (2000); D. Austin, G. A. M. Gerrard and T. A. P. Greeves, 'Tin and agriculture in the middle ages and beyond: landscape archaeology in St Neot's parish, Cornwall', *Cornish Archaeology* 28 (1989), pp. 5–25; G. A. Makepeace, 'Report on the excavations of a medieval farm at Hill Top Farm, Aldwark, near Brassington,

To conclude, the material evidence can lend support to written sources, by demonstrating the tendency of industry to be concentrated in particular regions or villages. Archaeology reveals a greater variety of crafts, a higher level of participation, a larger scale of output and a wider field of distribution than has generally been realized.

V

Up to the 1980s archaeologists excavated the foundations of buildings (mainly dwelling houses) and the architectural historians surveyed and analysed standing structures, such as the cruck-framed houses of the West and the Wealdens of the South East. The great discovery of recent years is that those engaged in both disciplines were studying the same types of buildings, some of which fell down or were dismantled (making them available for excavation), while others survived. One factor in establishing the connection was the advent of radio carbon dates, and then the more precise tree ring method which has been applied to hundreds of standing structures. In spite of the technical factors which restrict the application of the method, by the year 2001 a useful sample of 712 late medieval buildings had been dated. In the countryside, excluding houses of aristocrats and gentry, 27 were assigned dates before 1366, including a peasant house at Cottingham in Northamptonshire which was built from timbers felled in 1262. Another 40 belong to the period 1367–1433, and then comes a notable increase to 126 houses between 1434 and 1533. A recently published sample of midland houses, identified as belonging to peasants (Figure 1), confirms the importance of the building activity in the fifteenth century and especially in 1440–1500.⁶⁵

Peasant houses of the period 1250–1350 do not survive as standing structures in large numbers, but that is not necessarily the result of the poor standard of their materials or workmanship, but because of the remorseless attrition of the centuries: we should wonder that any such structures still exist.⁶⁶ Excavation has produced hundreds of ground plans of buildings of the period 1250–1500, most of them between 10 and 15m in length (30 to 45 feet) with foundations of various local materials: flint, chalk, granite, limestone or sandstone. In regions with limited supplies of stone the foundations consisted of padstones on which timbers could be rested, and sometimes the walls were of cob or earth, which was a long-lasting material if protected from rain and flood. The foundations are thought to have supported timber superstructures, for which evidence sometimes survives in the form of sockets or padstones set in a wall.⁶⁷ From surviving buildings, the skill with which joints were designed compels us to think they were constructed by specialist carpenters. A high proportion of these excavated buildings have been dated to 1250–1350, and therefore belong to the period of agrarian crises. Even then

Note 64 *continued*

Derbyshire, 1992–5', *Derbyshire Archaeological J.* 121 (2001), pp. 162–89.

⁶⁵ S. Pearson, 'The chronological distribution of tree-ring dates, 1980–2001: an update', *Vernacular Architecture* 32 (2001), pp. 68–9; N. Alcock and D. Miles, *The medieval peasant house in the midlands* (2012), pp. 15–20; in Kent many houses are dated to 1440–1519,

with a peak in the 1480s: S. Pearson, *Medieval houses in Kent* (Royal Commission on Historical Monuments, England, 1994), p. 68.

⁶⁶ C. Currie, 'Time and chance: modelling the attrition of old houses', *Vernacular Architecture* 19 (1988), pp. 1–9.

⁶⁷ Christie and Stamper (eds), *Medieval rural settlement*, pp. 15–16, 129–30, 139–40, 142, 256–61.

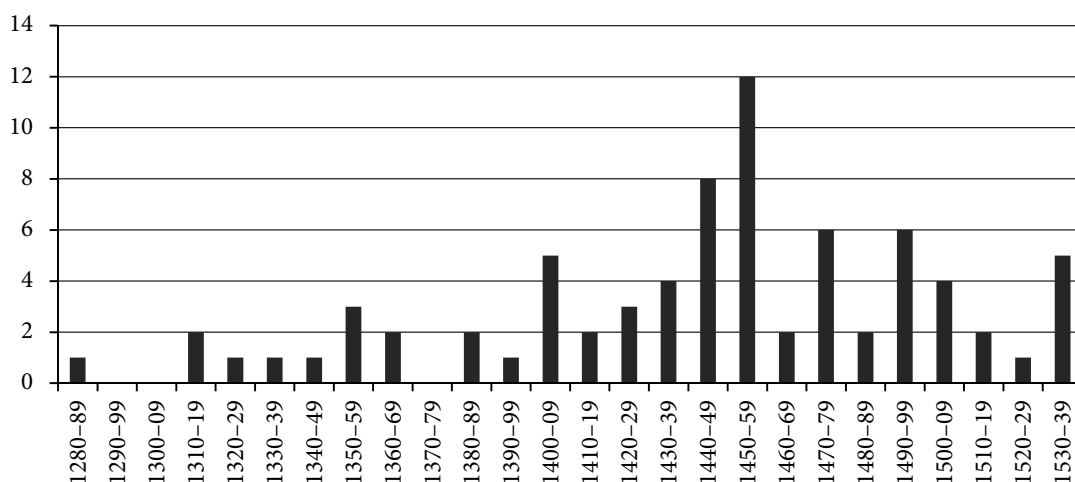


FIGURE 1. Dated peasant houses from the midlands, selected by Alcock and Miles.

Total number of houses in the sample = 78.

some peasants deployed resources to build houses of some size and substance, and in addition provided their holdings with agricultural buildings, especially barns but also accommodation for livestock. Cattle were usually housed separately from people, as the long house that combined dwelling space and a byre under the same roof was most frequently found in particular regions, such as the South West.

A major part of the investment in buildings of the whole period 1250–1550 arose from the cutting, transport and fitting of the timber. A house of standard three-bay dimensions from Mapledurham in Oxfordshire, dated to 1335, was constructed with timber from 111 trees.⁶⁸ Features of excavated houses include iron hinges, latches and locks, and large-headed iron nails serving as door studs, which must have been purchased. It should be said, though, that common finds on village sites are the socketed stones which enabled a door to be hinged without the expense of ironwork.⁶⁹ Late medieval houses, often of one storey, were heated by a single open hearth, and the hole through which smoke escaped was surrounded by tiles or slates to protect the thatched roof from sparks. These generalizations are not just based on the houses of a wealthy minority of peasants, as the same type of house is found repetitively across settlements which have been excavated on a large scale, such as Great Linford in Buckinghamshire and West Whelpington in Northumberland, and their foundations can be seen in rows along the village streets of well-preserved abandoned settlements such as Firsby in Lincolnshire.⁷⁰ Houses that belonged to cottagers have survived and have been surveyed by

⁶⁸ Alcock and Miles, *Peasant house*, pp. 80–1.

⁶⁹ Chapman, *West Cotton*, pp. 361–5.

⁷⁰ D. C. Mynard and R. J. Zeepvat, *Excavations at Great Linford, 1974–80* (Buckingham Archaeological Soc. monograph ser. 3, 1991); D. H. Evans and M. G. Jarrett, 'The deserted village of West Whelpington, Northumberland', 3rd report, part 1, *Archaeologia*

Aeliana, 5th ser. 15 (1987), pp. 199–308; D. H. Evans, M. G. Jarrett and S. Wrathmell, 'The deserted village of West Whelpington, Northumberland', 3rd report, part 2, *Archaeologia Aeliana*, 5th ser. 16 (1988), pp. 139–92; P. Everson, C. C. Taylor and C. J. Dunn, *Change and continuity. Rural settlement in north-west Lincolnshire* (1991), pp. 211–13.

architectural historians, and a few have been excavated, so the dwellings of smallholders are under-represented, but not hidden from view.⁷¹

Although a substratum of poor quality and old-fashioned housing is found in the medieval countryside in the thirteenth century, of a sort which was singled out as evidence for peasant poverty at the beginning of this article, the majority of excavated houses reflect a 'great rebuilding' beginning in the mid-thirteenth century, that featured some form of foundation and timber frames. The methods of construction, based on crucks or box-framing, became standard techniques until the spread of brick in the early modern period.

The houses reveal their inhabitants' way of life, and this has a wider significance for understanding the peasant mentality. Peasants belonged to communities, represented in the material evidence by village plans with greens, and by buildings such as chapels, parish churches, church houses (especially in the South West) and guild halls (most often in the East). However the ditches, banks, hedges, fences and walls around individual plots or tofts suggest a strong sense of private space and individual property, which is confirmed by the relatively frequent finds of locks and keys. Within the houses, the inner rooms, the chambers, with their restricted access, provided more privacy than the hall where meals were served and a hearth lit, in which signs can be detected of a domestic hierarchy. In the South East, in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, jettied upper floors increased the number of private rooms, and it became more common to floor over at least a single bay of houses in other parts of the country.⁷² Perhaps these domestic arrangements hint at the adoption among peasants of an attachment to property and ambitions for self-advancement?

The contents of the houses should tell us something about the wealth of the inhabitants, and pottery, being the most plentiful find, can lead to judgements about a village's or household's economic status. Pottery is usually recovered in quantities, because each household owned a number of vessels, and breakage required regular replacement. In general the amount of pottery of the thirteenth century was more plentiful on rural sites than that of the previous two centuries. Exceptions to this abundance suggest pockets of relative poverty, and these were not just in remote uplands, as pottery can be scarce on thirteenth-century sites in the Sussex weald, for example.⁷³ An alternative explanation for small amounts of pottery could be a cultural preference for vessels for preparing and consuming food and drink made of perishable wood and leather, or of metal which could be recycled. On sites with plenty of pottery a sign of relative poverty might be the overwhelming predominance of local wares, such as the large amounts found at Wharram Percy from the kilns of Staxton only 15 miles away. This rather drab and functional ware had the advantage of being readily available.⁷⁴ The proportion of ordinary cooking pots and bowls tended to be higher on poorer sites. At Coton, for example, a community of smallholders with a poor standard of housing, only 4 per cent of the sherds came from jugs.⁷⁵ By contrast, a site in a village such as Brighthampton in

⁷¹ C. Dyer, 'History and vernacular architecture', *Vernacular Architecture* 28 (1997), pp. 2–3; Beresford, *Caldecote*, p. 101.

⁷² M. Johnson, *English houses, 1300–1800. Vernacular architecture, social life* (2010), pp. 65–86.

⁷³ M. Gardiner, 'The characterization of medieval

Wealden settlements: excavations at Ivenden, Combe Farm, Mayfield, East Sussex', *Sussex Archaeological Collections* 136 (1998), pp. 95–110.

⁷⁴ Stamper and Croft, *South manor area*, p. 74.

⁷⁵ Northamptonshire Archaeology, 'Coton', p. 113.

Oxfordshire is probably more typical of southern England. Between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries the inhabitants acquired pottery that had been made at 12 different (mostly rural) centres of manufacture, with perhaps three or four producing their wares at any one time, within a radius of 40 miles.⁷⁶ One gains the impression that peasants, and particularly the wives who bought the pottery, were discriminating consumers, who were presented when they visited their local market towns with a range of pots of varied design from which to choose. On other peasant sites relative affluence is suggested by decorated or specialized pots, such as chafing dishes for keeping food warm, or other dishes for fish or for collecting dripping. These tend to be less plentiful than on urban or aristocratic sites, and the colourful Saintonge ware jugs from south-western France are usually absent.⁷⁷ The pottery may tell us about varied standards of diet, as a shortage of jugs might suggest infrequent drinking of ale, while the dripping pans would be used by relatively affluent households, which were accustomed to roasting meat.

Finally, to concentrate on the material evidence for diet and food culture, which provides much qualitative information, but cannot tell us if peasants were well-nourished. The charred grains which are found on rural settlement sites confirm that barley and wheat figured prominently among their crops, but provide no precise guide to the cereals eaten.⁷⁸ Animal bones are a better indication of consumption, showing the predominance of beef over mutton, when the size of the animals are taken into account, even though the sheep bones can outnumber those from cattle.⁷⁹ Small and fragile bones which tend to decay, for example from poultry, are underrepresented. Bone evidence does not allow a calculation of the frequency with which meat was eaten, or the overall quantity.

Not all grain was carried to mechanical mills for grinding, as handmill stones or querns (or rather pieces of broken stones) are commonly found in or near to peasant houses. They may have ground all of their own flour in defiance of the lord's monopoly, or more likely kept handmills for occasional convenience, and for milling malt. The basic food is often thought to have been bread, but baking arrangements are not always easily discovered. Most houses were not provided with bread ovens built into a wall, but buildings can be identified as specialist bakehouses, some of which may have served as seigniorial ovens used by the whole community. Households in the North and West may not have baked in ovens but used iron plates or bakestones.⁸⁰ Peasants seem often to have boiled their food, judging from the number of ceramic and metal cooking pots, and this would have economized on fuel, making pottage the universal peasant dish. A few peasants in their kitchens followed aristocratic models of food preparation, because occasional finds of stone mortars point to

⁷⁶ S. Ford and S. Preston, 'Medieval occupation at the Orchard, Brighthampton', *Oxoniensia* 67 (2002), pp. 287–312; D. Hinton, 'Deserted medieval villages and the objects from them', in Dyer and Jones (eds), *Deserted villages revisited*, pp. 101–4.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 103; D. H. Brown, 'Pots from houses', *Medieval Ceramics* 21 (1997), pp. 83–94.

⁷⁸ Moffett, 'Plant foods', pp. 41–2, 49–50.

⁷⁹ N. Sykes, 'From *cu* and *sceap* to *beffe* and *motton*', in Woolgar and others (eds), *Food*, pp. 60–3; Stamper

and Croft, *South manor*, p. 172.

⁸⁰ S. Smith, 'Towards a social archaeology of the late medieval peasantry: power and resistance at Wharram Percy', *J. Social Archaeology* 9 (2009), pp. 391–416; P. Rahtz, 'Upton, Gloucestershire, 1964–1968', *Trans. Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Soc.* 88 (1969), pp. 86–7; J. G. and D. G. Hurst, 'Excavations at the deserted medieval village of Hangleton, part 2', *Sussex Archaeological Collections* 102 (1964), pp. 104–5; Wrathmell (ed.), *Wharram Percy*, pp. 332–3, 354.

the crushing, pounding and mixing of food, following the commonplace practices among aristocratic cooks.⁸¹

Not all food came from the locality, and in particular sea fish was consumed in inland communities. Shellfish, such as oysters, were brought in small quantities to sites in Buckinghamshire located 70 miles from the sea. At Wharram Percy fish bones have been recovered, including cod, which can be shown by stable isotope analysis to have come from the North Atlantic. This would probably have reached the Yorkshire wolds from a port such as Hull as dried stockfish. Stable isotope analysis of human bone from Wharram's churchyard has suggested that part of the diet had a marine source.⁸²

The archaeology of houses and households impress upon us the importance of regional variety as well as social and cultural differences. A standard of comparison comes from the houses excavated in the north Buckinghamshire village of Great Linford, houses often 5m wide and 8, 12 or 16m long (between 25 and 50 feet) were built with stone foundations and timber frames. They were accompanied by agricultural buildings of similar construction. Pottery of many forms and functions, with a variety of objects including four spurs, four pieces of stone mortar and a metal harness fitting with an enamel design of a lion or leopard lead us to regard them as well-equipped and even pretentious households. At the other extreme at Coton small cramped houses were inhabited by people using a limited range of mainly locally made pottery. The Great Linford model, to generalize on the basis of dozens of excavations, is probably representative of the majority of peasant households in southern, midland and north-eastern England, which had some spending power and acquired a mentality of individual improvement.

VI

Individual lives can be glimpsed from surviving traces of peasant clothing. Shoes can be preserved in wet conditions, such as the child's shoe from the pond at Wharram Percy. As it was originally made of goat skin, it was likely to have been made by an urban cordwainer, either in the nearby market town of Malton, or in York itself. This relatively sophisticated and costly item had its life prolonged by its not very affluent owners by no less than four separate patchings with inferior leather.⁸³ Remnants of clothing occur on low status rural sites in the form of metal fastenings and ornaments, above all buckles, belt ends or chapes, brooches, points (metal ends of leather fastenings) mostly made of alloys of copper (bronze or brass) rather than the inferior lead- and tin-based alloys. Some of them were harness fittings presumably for horses used for riding rather than field work. Copper-alloy objects can be numerous, more than 500 of them having been recovered from excavations at Tattenhoe and

⁸¹ C. Dyer, 'Did peasants need markets and towns? The experience of late medieval England', in M. Davies and J. Galloway (eds), *London and beyond* (2012), p. 32.

⁸² Ivens, Busby and Shepherd, *Tattenhoe and Westbury*, p. 436; J. H. Barrett, 'The fish bone', in Treen and Atkin, *Water resources*, 169–75; J. H. Barrett *et al.*, 'Detecting the medieval cod trade: a new method and first results', *J. Archaeological Science* 35 (2008),

pp. 850–61; Mays, Harding and Heighway, *Churchyard*, pp. 94–5.

⁸³ Treen and Atkin, *Water resources*, pp. 145–8. Patched shoes were also found at Lydd quarry on Romney Marsh, and at Wainfleet, Lincolnshire: Barber and Priestley-Bell, *Medieval adaptation*, pp. 198–200; McAvoy, 'Marine salt extraction', pp. 152–8.

Westbury in Buckinghamshire. These pieces of cast metal were made in towns, many of them in London, and the cost of the materials is reflected in their small size which was often less than 3cm across. They were useful, but more than half of those in one large sample had some form of decoration, with various common motifs such as floral and leaf designs, animal and bird heads, geometric patterns, and occasionally a heraldic device; a few have traces of gilt. It has been argued that these possessions reflected the superior status of their wearers within village society.⁸⁴ Objects with religious significance include a paternoster bead from Wharram Percy, and from a number of rural sites pewter or lead badges and *ampullae* (miniature flasks originally containing holy water), which peasants who had been on pilgrimage had brought back from shrines such as Walsingham in Norfolk.⁸⁵

Many peasants, particularly in eastern England, owned seals with which they could authenticate documents – usually grants of free land. The metal matrices, incised with simple designs with which wax was impressed, are found by the hundred, often not in settlements but in the fields where they were lost, discarded or scattered with other domestic debris from the manure heap. These are recovered along with many other metal objects of our period, the abundance of which in eastern England are likely to reflect the relative wealth of the region.⁸⁶ Of course documents tell us that most households owned a brass cooking pot or pan, and the wealthier ones had a basin and ewer for washing hands in a fashion normally associated with the refined manners of the aristocracy, but these relatively large objects are not found because they were recycled when they were broken or worn.⁸⁷ The scarcity of more valuable objects in the archaeological record is well illustrated by coins, which are found in small numbers, or not at all, on peasant sites. We know that they used money, but they were careful not to lose their silver pennies and groats. The types of coin tell us something about the peasant economy: only one gold coin has been found in a peasant house, but many of the silver coins that have been recovered were halfpennies and farthings.⁸⁸

Peasants acquired non-essential, showy and even pretentious metalwork, though that discovery has to be qualified by their cautious and thrifty tendency to make do, mend and recycle. Shoes were patched; objects of copper alloy, if broken or worn, especially the brass pots which were owned by almost every household, were sent for recasting; ceramic pots of low value sometimes had holes plugged by metal patches.⁸⁹ Finally evidence must be mentioned for games and pastimes, such as nine-mens'-moris boards incised on stones, bone dice, buzz bones (bones from pigs' feet with holes through which a string or thong was twisted to make a satisfying sound when allowed to unwind), pipes or flutes made again from bones, and metal 'jews' harps'.⁹⁰ Time

⁸⁴ Ivens, Busby and Shepherd, *Tattenhoe and Westbury*, pp. 305–6, 336–6; A. Graham, 'Evidence for the medieval hamlets of Pykesash and Ash Boulogne: archaeological excavations at Ash', *Somerset Archaeology and Natural History* 148 (2005), p. 27; S. Smith, 'Materializing resistant identities among the English peasantry. An examination of dress accessories from English rural settlement sites', *J. Material Culture* 14 (2009), pp. 309–32.

⁸⁵ Gilchrist, *Medieval life*, pp. 158, 159, 160.

⁸⁶ A. Rogerson and S. Ashley, 'Medieval seal matrices

from Norfolk, 2007', *Norfolk Archaeology* 45 (2008), pp. 422–8; A. Bevan, 'Spatial methods for analysing large-scale artefact inventories', *Antiquity* 86 (2012), pp. 492–506.

⁸⁷ C. Dyer, 'Living in peasant houses in late medieval England', *Vernacular Architecture* 44 (2013), pp. 21–2.

⁸⁸ C. Dyer, 'Peasants and coins: the uses of money in the middle ages', *British Numismatic J.* 67 (1998), pp. 30–47.

⁸⁹ Wrathmell, *Domestic settlement*, p. 39.

⁹⁰ D. Dudley and E.M. Minter, 'The excavation of a

was available for such frivolous pursuits, but no expenditure was required because the items (except for the last mentioned jews' harps), were made cheaply from materials of no value.

VII

In conclusion no simple story can be told from the material evidence. We can make some assessment of the peasant economy both in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and in the period 1350–1540. All generalizations must be qualified by reference to regional variety in culture and the economy.

The conventional historical view of expansion in the two centuries after 1100 is matched by many settlements which have a first phase dated by pottery to the twelfth or thirteenth centuries, perhaps the consequence of new land being colonized, or the reorganization of settlement. An expansion in the area of cultivation is indicated by landscape evidence for the laying out of fields, pottery scatters originating from manuring, and the appearance in botanical samples of pollen deriving from crops and weeds which grew in cornfields. Rural industries seem more abundant in the thirteenth century than in earlier centuries, and growth in general may have quickened after c.1200.

In the midst of this expansion, the deprivation within peasant society is brought home to us by material evidence. The human bones in the churchyard reveal the low nutritional status and poor health of the Wharram Percy population. Cost cutting and economizing could have harmed peasant capacity for effective production. Livestock had access to only limited quantities of fodder, which contributed to their stunted growth: the potential fodder crops, such as peas and beans, were needed for human consumption. Peasants could only buy goods on a limited scale, and depended on recycling and mending to prolong the life of their possessions. They ate the meat obtained from elderly cattle and sheep, because they sent younger animals to market. Their food was often prepared by boiling, reflecting the scarcity of fuel, and they saved on mill tolls by grinding corn, or at least malt, by hand. They can be portrayed as industrious, working hard to earn a little extra, by cutting vegetation both for use in the home and farm, and for sale. They were prepared to do tedious tasks, such as weeding, and to engage in distaff spinning for a small return.

In the thirteenth century we are aware of a marked divergence within peasant society, in which some show symptoms of poverty, while others were bettering themselves. Signs of the first category were the construction in different regions of timber houses, which tended to be small and insubstantial. Possible indices of deprivation included settlements with little metalwork or pottery, or those with dull and functional ceramics of local manufacture. In the second group we can discern peasants with hopes of material improvement. The best available benchmark of economic well-being, the dwelling house, was subject to a 'great rebuilding' with

Note 90 *continued*

medieval settlement at Treworld, Lesnewth, 1963', *Cornish Archaeology* 5 (1966), pp. 56–7; Stamper and Croft, *South manor*, pp. 151, 153; Treen and Atkin, *Water resources*, pp. 123–4, 143–5; D. Andrews and G. Milne, *Wharram. A study of settlement on the Yorkshire Wolds*, I, *Domestic settlement, 1: areas 10 and 6* (Society for Medieval Archaeology monograph 8, 1979), pp. 120–1, 128–9; M. A. Hall and P. B. Pettitt, 'A pair of merels boards on a stone block from Church Hole Cave, Creswell Crags, Nottinghamshire, England', *Trans. Thoroton Society* 112 (2008), pp. 135–42.

foundations and durable timber frames. Such structures were affordable presumably because a range of commodities were sent to market. In some localities the products of part-time crafts made a significant contribution to household incomes. Production was helped by making choices in the variety of crops to be sown and breeds of animals to be kept. The exploitation of new lands in the wetlands, uplands and woodlands speak of confident projections of future benefits, and care was taken to organize manuring and crop storage. Items of consumption included modest but unnecessary luxuries such as copper-alloy dress accessories, sea fish, meals prepared with mortars and decorated pottery jugs for serving ale.

The 'crisis' of the early fourteenth century can be detected in abandoned houses both in hamlets and villages, and field and environmental evidence for a retreat from cultivation in the last years of the thirteenth century and the early fourteenth. Some shrinkage in towns reflects the general malaise. Building activity associated with lordly wealth, such as work on monasteries and cathedrals, was reduced presumably because the elites were receiving lower incomes, especially from peasant rents.⁹¹

In the century or two after 1350 the number of abandoned settlements rose, the amount of land manured by dung carts declined, and proportions of grass and tree pollen (preserved in peat deposits) increased. Pastoral husbandry grew in quality as well as quantity: bone evidence shows that the size of animals was rising, perhaps because of an improvement in nutrition as grazing land became more plentiful and more field crops were used as fodder.⁹² The decline in the number of houses and acreage of corn was accompanied by a rise in individual spending power demonstrated by the number of houses started after about 1400, rising to peaks (depending on the region) between the 1440s and the 1480s, which are decades conventionally associated with economic depression. Two-storey houses were becoming more common outside the South East. A growing number of houses were provided with roofs of stone slates, hearths were more likely to be equipped with some form of chimney, and finds include the occasional stone mullion and glazed window.⁹³ At Caldecote in Hertfordshire the well-built dwellings were accompanied by substantial farm buildings such as barns.⁹⁴ At Wharram Percy some imported pottery was bought by peasants, and everywhere locally made wares improved in quality. The numbers of churches rebuilt and adorned in the fifteenth century (which we know from written sources were often funded by the parochial community) suggest that peasants had money to support good causes.

Some of these generalizations about peasant England from an archaeological perspective confirm and reinforce views deriving from documentary evidence, but much data and many insights are only available from archaeology. The material evidence is not always consistent or decisive, but it contributes helpfully to debates about the peasant economy, and enriches our understanding of the peasant past.

⁹¹ C. Dyer, 'The crisis of the early fourteenth century. Some material evidence from Britain', in D. Boisseuil, P. Chastang, L. Feller and J. Morsel (eds), *Écriture de l'espace social. Mélanges d'histoire médiévale offerts à Monique Bourin* (2010), pp. 491–506.

⁹² R. Thomas, 'Zooarchaeology, improvement and the British agricultural revolution', *International J. Historical Archaeology* 9 (2005), pp. 71–88.

⁹³ Andrews and Milne, *Domestic settlement*, p. 73; P. Thompson and S. C. Palmer, 'Iron Age, Romano-British and medieval settlements excavated on the Transco Newbold Pacey to Honeybourne gas pipeline in 2000', *Trans. Birmingham and Warwickshire Archaeological Soc.* 116 (2012), pp. 81–3, 120–1.

⁹⁴ Beresford, *Caldecote*, pp. 95–137.