

Peasants eating and drinking*

by Jean Birrell

Abstract

This article explores the peasant experience of eating and drinking through the descriptions in manorial customals of the meals provided at boon works. It seeks to show that the peasant recipients were well able to discriminate between good quality and bad in the food and drink they were given. Further, they valued an element of orderliness in the way the meals were served and consumed, that is, they had a sense of 'dining'. They wished, in the provision of these meals, to be treated with respect – though some expected more respect than others: they were well aware that food and the way it was served could be indicators of status within the household and the peasant community, and in relationships with their manorial lords. They were ready, consequently, to bargain and negotiate with these lords in an attempt to get what they wanted and felt they deserved.

Medieval historians have long appreciated how food and meals had a significance extending beyond their more obvious material manifestations.¹ Chris Dyer has shown how the consumption and production of freshwater fish could be both an assertion of the social exclusiveness of the aristocracy and an indicator of distinctions within it; Peter Coss, emphasizing the importance attached to meals in gentry households, has drawn attention to the role of 'dining rights', or *bouche à court*.² It is attitudes to food, 'dining', and dining rights lower down the social scale that will be discussed here, however. Though there have been excellent studies of peasant diet, these other aspects of the peasant experience have received little attention. This is no doubt due, in part, to the shortage of sources. Archaeology has recently been used to throw light on peasant dining practices, suggesting the presence of 'elements of ceremony', and undoubtedly has more to contribute.³ Meanwhile, the descriptions in manorial customals of the meals

* I wish to thank Professor Christopher Dyer, Dr Rosamond Faith and Dr Sally Harvey for helpful comments on the first draft of this article.

¹ For one very influential general approach to food and cooking – 'a study in comparative sociology' – see Jack Goody, *Cooking, cuisine and class* (1982).

² Christopher Dyer, *Everyday life in medieval England* (1994), pp. 110–11; more generally, referring to the work of social anthropologists, he evokes 'complexities of social behaviour and social psychology far removed from the mere satisfaction of nutritional needs'; Peter Coss, *The foundations of gentry life. The Multons of Frampton and their world, 1270–1370* (2010),

pp. 5, 65.

³ Christopher Dyer, 'Living in peasant houses in late medieval England', *Vernacular Architecture* 44 (2013), esp. p. 26; Christopher Dyer, 'The material world of English peasants, 1200–1540: archaeological perspectives on rural economy and welfare', *AgHR* 62 (2014), pp. 1–22. See also M. Johnson, *English houses, 1300–1800. Vernacular architecture, social life* (2010), pp. 65–86.

provided to peasants performing labour services, and in particular boon works, provide another possible approach.

The customals vary greatly in the way they describe these meals. At their fullest, in the second half of the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, they may specify not only the quantity and type of food the meals were to contain, but also the quality of the ingredients and the circumstances in which the meals were to be eaten. It quickly emerges, sometimes in unexpected ways, that more was at stake than simply the filling of empty bellies. Of course, quantity mattered to the men and women who ate these meals. Many peasants may have been relatively prosperous, but many others struggled, and even hard-won prosperity might be precarious; hunger or memories of hunger must have been present in the consciousness of many peasants.⁴

But the customals make plain that these men and women had wider concerns. They wished, indeed felt entitled, to be treated generously in return for their labours, and resented any attempt to cut back on what was provided; but they also wanted to be treated with respect – they were well aware that food, meals and the way they were served could be indicators of status, within the household, within the peasant community, and in relations with manorial lords. Proper treatment thus meant not only the maintenance of old standards (or what were claimed as such) and ample quantities, but also good quality and an element of orderliness in the way the meals were provided. The customals show these peasants as constantly vigilant for any shortfall in what they saw as their proper entitlement in all these spheres. They are also revealed as being prepared to argue and negotiate with manorial administrations, seeking to get the best deal they could. Of course, their bargaining power was limited and their success inevitably relative, but the direct and indirect record of these exchanges offers valuable evidence about their attitudes to food, meals and ‘dining’. Before enlarging on these statements, I need to say a little both about the records in which the meals are described and about the labour services with which they were associated.

Manorial customals are documents whose purpose, as the name suggests, was to record the customs of the manor; which, in this context, meant primarily the obligations, that is, the ‘customs and services’, owed by the peasant tenants to their lords. Customals have a long history, the earliest predating the Norman Conquest,⁵ but this article will concentrate on those that survive from the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. It was at this period that customals proliferated, in association with the expansion of direct demesne farming, and the labour services owed by the unfree tenants loom large in these documents. Customals survive for every type of estate, small and large, lay and ecclesiastical, and for all parts of the country; this article will draw on a wide cross section.

Customals survive in a variety of forms, sometimes as autonomous documents, sometimes contained within extents and surveys; in which case, the customs are generally recorded by

⁴ It was only in the second half of the fourteenth century that ‘the era of hunger-driven mortality ... ended’: Christopher Dyer, ‘Did the peasants really starve in medieval England?’, in M. Carlin and J. Rosenthal (eds), *Food and eating in medieval Europe* (1998), p. 7. For evidence of ‘low nutritional status and poor health’,

see also Dyer, ‘Material world’, p. 21.

⁵ The best introductions remain P. D. A. Harvey (ed.), *Manorial records of Cuxham, Oxfordshire circa 1200–1359* (Oxfordshire Record Soc., 1, 1976), pp. 72–8; id, *Manorial records* (1999), pp. 15–24.

tenant, or category of tenant, though certain customs applicable to whole groups may be recorded separately. They are alike, however, in that they were drawn up by a manorial lord or his officials, and written down in Latin by a clerk he employed. Nevertheless, it was not these officials who stated the customs, but a sworn jury drawn from the customary – or unfree – peasant tenants. This was a practice that both utilized local knowledge and gave legitimacy to the resulting document. The names of the jurors were usually recorded at the head of the custumal, after those of the presiding officials, revealing that the better-off customary tenants – including the holders of yardlands and half yardlands – were generally amply represented.⁶ It needs to be kept in mind, accordingly, that their testimony may sometimes reflect the preoccupations or ambitions of ‘the great and the good’ of the village as much as those of the wider tenant body. However, the process was public – custumals were often compiled at a session of the manorial court – and the jurors spoke in the presence of the broader community they were called on to represent.⁷

Though much about the process by which custumals were compiled remains obscure, it seems probable that, on the day, the jurors were generally required to approve an existing draft; by the second half of the thirteenth century this was likely to be an earlier custumal. These records were regularly amended and updated to reflect changing circumstances, and it is clear that the process was frequently contentious. This can often be deduced from the documents themselves. With the passage of time, custumals become increasingly detailed. This is in part a consequence of a more general expansion in record-keeping in the thirteenth century and, specifically, of the more detailed accounting of manorial lords engaging in direct demesne farming. However, much of the extra detail can only be explained as an attempt to settle disagreements or disputes that had arisen regarding the precise nature of the obligations and rewards described. Many of the additions and clarifications are signposted by being the subject of notes and memoranda or of badly phrased or clumsily inserted clauses. Also, though the juries are usually ‘silent’ in these documents (after an initial ‘they say’), custumals occasionally record interventions, as if made on the day, and quite possibly not expected by the supervising officials. Some of them are anonymous (‘but they say’), but they are often explicitly attributed to the jury (‘the jury say’ or ‘but the jury say’, even ‘all the jurors, speaking for themselves and the vill’). But even without these signposts it is often possible to infer that clauses are the product of bargaining and negotiation. Some appear to record victories – more often, of course, on the part of the lord – or losses, others to represent compromises; some appear to emanate from manorial lords, others from the peasant tenants. Such clauses are useful indicators of changes under way and of issues that had proved controversial. Many of them address aspects of the meals provided to tenants performing labour services, and especially boon works, in

⁶ The yardland varied in size, but was typically in the region of 30 acres. Of the six jurors named for the Glastonbury Abbey manor of Ditchat, Somerset, three are yardlanders (one holding a further half yardland) and three are half yardlanders: C. J. Elton (ed.), *Rentalia et Custumaria, Michaelis de Ambresbury, 1235–1252, Et Rogeri de Ford 1252–1261, Abbatum Monasterii Beatae Mariae Glastoniae* (Somerset Record Soc., 5, 1891),

pp. 115–16 (the custumal is mid-thirteenth-century). For a recent discussion of manorial jurors (with bibliography), see Peter L. Larson, ‘Village voice or village oligarchy? The jurors of the Durham Halmote Court, 1349 to 1424’, *Law and Hist. Rev.*, 28 (2010), pp. 675–709.

⁷ I have discussed this more fully elsewhere, in particular in Jean Birrell, ‘Manorial custumals reconsidered’, *Past and Present*, 224 (2014), pp. 3–37.

itself testimony to the importance these meals had acquired for peasants and manorial lords alike.

Boon works (in Latin usually *precaria*) differed from the other labour services widely demanded of customary tenants in a number of ways. First, they were concentrated at certain crucial times in the farming year, in particular the hay and corn harvests, periods when the labour of a large number of people was needed, often at short notice. Second, they had to be performed by a wider range of people than regular labour services, hinting at a different origin:⁸ they were often demanded of free as well as customary tenants;⁹ of the tenants' whole households, that is, their families and their servants and farmworkers ('he himself shall come with his whole *familia* except his wife', says the custumal for Horninglow, Staffs; at Houghton, Hunts., it was 'with his whole *familia* who are able to work, apart from his wife'; at Alveston, Warwicks., 'with his whole *familia* except his wife and his shepherd');¹⁰ and of their subtenants, and even their subtenants' servants ('anyone who holds a cottage of him shall come with his hands', at Aldingbourne, Sussex).¹¹ On some manors the labour of the wider community was called on to bring in the hay (it was all the neifs 'of age and not directly serving their father or mother ... and outsiders (*forinseci*) similarly' at Newnham, Gloucs),¹² and also sometimes the corn, as at Lessingham, Norfolk.¹³ Lastly, boon works were performed, in the rather tentative phrasing of the American sociologist George Homans, 'in theory at least, out of love'; or, as it was put by some tenants pleading in the royal courts, 'in the old days (*antiquitus*), at harvest time the lord used to ask for aid and they used to aid him'.¹⁴ Indeed the services are sometimes called 'love boons', the expression implying a voluntary nature,¹⁵ and in some custumals

⁸ As does the frequent use of English terms to describe them (these terms have been used where appropriate below).

⁹ F. R. H. Du Boulay, *The lordship of Canterbury* (1966), p. 171, quoting B. C. Redwood and A. E. Wilson (eds), *Custumals of the Sussex manors of the Archbishop of Canterbury* (Sussex Record Soc., 57, 1958), pp. 17, 21. W. H. Hale (ed.), *Registrum Prioratus Beatae Mariae Wigorniensis* (Camden Soc. 1865) p. 83b (1240).

¹⁰ The wife and the shepherd were both regarded as indispensable on the holding: Nigel J. Tringham (ed.), 'Select documents for the medieval borough of Burton-on-Trent', *A medieval miscellany* (Collections for a History of Staffordshire, fourth ser., 20, 2004), p. 12 (the custumal is of 1286); W. H. Hart (ed.), *Cartularium Monasterii de Rameseia* (Rolls Ser., 3 vols, 1884-93), I, pp. 367 (c.1250); Hale (ed.), *Registrum Prioratus Beatae Mariae Wigorniensis*, p. 83b (1240). See also Marjorie Chibnall (ed.), *Select documents of the English lands of the abbey of Bec* (Camden Third Ser., 73, 1951), p. 74 ('except his wife and his herd' (*custode averiorum suorum*)).

¹¹ W. D. Peckham (ed.), *Thirteen custumals of the Sussex manors of the Bishop of Chichester* (Sussex Record Soc. 31, 1925), pp. 33-4 (1256-7). See also R. H. Hilton

(ed.), *The Stoneleigh Leger Book* (Dugdale Soc., 24, 1960), p. 103; Chibnall (ed.), *English lands of the abbey of Bec*, p. 33.

¹² Hale (ed.), *Registrum Prioratus Beatae Mariae Wigorniensis*, p. 15a (1240), quoted in H. S. A. Fox, 'Exploitation of the landless by lords and tenants in early medieval England', in Zvi Razi and Richard Smith (eds), *Medieval society and the manor court* (1996), p. 525. See also John F. Nichols (ed.), 'Extent of Lawling', *Trans. Essex Arch. Soc.*, new ser. 20, 1930-33), p. 185 (mowing 'with the commonalty of the vill').

¹³ Marjorie Morgan, *The English lands of the abbey of Bec* (1946), p. 92 and note (1240s): the obligation is spelt out in a lengthy note attributed to the jury (quoted in Fox, 'Exploitation of the landless', p. 525). See also Hart (ed.), *Cartularium Monasterii de Rameseia*, I, p. 367.

¹⁴ G. C. Homans, *English villagers of the thirteenth century* (1960), p. 264; quoted by Rosamond Faith, *The English peasantry and the growth of lordship* (1997), p. 260.

¹⁵ Christopher Dyer, 'The Language of oppression. The vocabulary of rents and services in England, 1000-1300', in Monique Bourin and Pascal Martínez Sopena (eds.), *Pour une anthropologie du prélèvement seigneurial dans les campagnes médiévales (XIe-XIVe siècles)*

certain boons are described as 'ex gratia', or 'on request',¹⁶ though it seems unlikely that refusal was a realistic option. Nevertheless, it was possible for the meals customarily provided for the workers on these occasions to be presented as part of a reciprocal relationship, a just reward for labour freely rendered.¹⁷ There are both similarities and differences here in comparison with another 'communal' manorial meal, the much less well-documented Christmas dinner which was provided to tenants – and often their wives – on some manors¹⁸; the peasants eligible to attend these meals were usually required to make more or less substantial contributions that were generally described as 'gifts', though more likely in reality obligatory.¹⁹

Though the provision of meals at boon works was fairly general, there were considerable variations in practice from one manor or estate to another. Some boons were not 'rewarded' by any meals at all: *'nihil debet habere ad illas precarias'*, says the mid-thirteenth-century custumal of the winter ploughing boon at East Pennard, Somerset.²⁰ Usually, however, one or two meals a day were laid on for the workers, at midday, in the evening, or both.²¹ Sometimes breakfast was provided, too, but this was less common; work at the autumn bederip at Stoneleigh, Warwicks., began at sunrise, but if the reapers wanted breakfast they had to bring their own, and eat and drink as they worked (*comedunt eeciam et bibent eundo ascendendo seu descendendo per selionem*).²² Meals were often eaten in the fields, especially those laid on in the middle of the day: bread, bacon, and cheese were provided 'at the third hour or at noon *in campo*' at the autumn boon at Felsted, Essex.²³ Other meals, especially at the end of the working day, or at the end of the harvest, might be eaten in the manor house itself or in its precincts.²⁴

Note 15 continued

(2 vols, Paris, 2004), II: *Les mots, les temps, les lieux*, pp. 71–85. The word was common on the Ramsey estate: Hart (ed.), *Cartularium Monasterii de Rameseia*, I, pp. 315, 432 *et al.*

¹⁶ Hale (ed.), *Registrum Prioratus Beatae Mariae Wigorniensis*, pp. 61b ('ex gracia'), 72a ('ad petitione') *et al.*; Chibnall (ed.), *English lands of the abbey of Bec*, p. 62 ('de gracia'). See also P. Vinogradoff, *Villainage in England: Essays in English Medieval History* (1927), pp. 281–3; he notes that some boon ploughing services were given pejorative names.

¹⁷ It was in 'the arrangement of boon works', says Professor Raftis, that the 'mutual contractual obligations of lord and villein are most clearly described': J. Ambrose Raftis, *The estates of Ramsey Abbey* (1957), p. 196. Boon works were also frequently 'rewarded' by a range of perquisites in kind: see Andrew Jones, 'Harvest customs and labourers' perquisites in southern England, 1150–1350: the corn harvest', and 'Harvest customs and labourers' perquisites in southern England, 1150–1350: the hay harvest', both in *AgHR* 25 (1977), pp. 14–21, 98–107.

¹⁸ Elton (ed.), *Rentalia et Custumaria*, p. 83.

¹⁹ Dyer, 'Language of oppression', pp. 73, 77, 81.

²⁰ Elton (ed.), *Rentalia et Custumaria*, p. 125. See also Chibnall (ed.), *English lands of the abbey of Bec*,

pp. 93, 95.

²¹ The midday meal was provided 'at nones', or 'at the third hour' and the Latin term usually *prandium*; the evening meal was usually *cena*, and eaten at vespers or in *sero*.

²² Breakfast was *ianticulum*, *gentaculum*: S. R. Scargill-Bird (ed.), *Custumals of Battle Abbey in the reigns of Edward I and Edward II (1283–1312)* (Camden Soc., 1887), p. 87 (t. Edward I); Chibnall (ed.), *English lands of the abbey of Bec*, pp. 97, 110, 111; Hilton (ed.), *Stoneleigh Leger Book*, p. 103 (the Leger Book is c. 1392, but the customs it records are probably late thirteenth–early fourteenth century: p. xxvi).

²³ Marjorie Chibnall (ed.), *Charters and custumals of the abbey of Holy Trinity Caen*, (British Academy Records of Social and Economic History, new ser. 5, 1982), p. 89 (1220s – see p. xxxvii).

²⁴ Peckham (ed.), *Thirteen custumals*, p. 72: haymakers at Ferring 'shall eat in the lord's manor house' when they had 'mowed all that meadow (mid thirteenth century); Scargill-Bird (ed.), *Custumals of Battle Abbey*, p. 5: tenants at Marley who had to do two days' muck spreading ate one meal a day in 'the common hall' (*in communi aula*). For the date of the custumal, see E. Searle, *Lordship and community. Battle Abbey and its banlieu, 1066–1538* (1974), p. 174: 'between 1307 and 1320 ... for convenience ... 1310').

Harvest suppers were customarily more lavish, and must have been communal events of some significance in the manorial calendar, festive occasions and a time for conviviality and relaxation, the successful bringing in of the crop a cause for celebration, the 'free' meal afterwards a right and proper reward for labour rendered. They might be attended by large numbers of people, of both sexes; if wives are not explicitly included (as they often were at Christmas dinners), they may have attended harvest suppers either as members of the *familia* or as additional labour, which we know included women.²⁵ At one boon on the Battle Abbey manor of Hoton the reapers could bring a friend to the harvest supper.²⁶ These meals must have demanded considerable preparation, if not on the scale of the more famous medieval banquets celebrating notable events in aristocratic life. Animals might be slaughtered for the occasion, as we will see; fires needed to be lit,²⁷ bread baked ('in the manor house', specifies a note in the custumal for Borley, Essex)²⁸ and ale brewed or bought in – the harvesters were often given cash to buy it themselves: haymakers at Warboys got 6d. 'from the abbot's purse for *sythalis* [scythe-ale]'.²⁹ The ale must have added to the jollity of the gathering, which might continue well into the evening. Candles were sometimes provided, if more often at the Christmas dinner than harvest suppers – and even then rather grudgingly: at Bleadon, says the custumal, the yardlanders could sit and drink as long as it was a light enough for candles not to be needed. We may suspect an attempt to impose restraint in a clause in the custumal for Lawling, Essex: at the ale boon, it says, 'he shall sit drinking with his fellows so long as five candles of tallow, each a shaftment in length, are burning together'.³⁰

And the custumals reveal tensions surrounding these meals, even the harvest suppers. One sign is the way that local practice was increasingly spelled out, rather than left to custom or to the discretion of the manorial officials. Twelfth-century custumals are rarely full in their descriptions of these meals, if they mention them at all.³¹ In the thirteenth century, by contrast, the meals are often described in what can seem to a modern reader obsessive detail. The enormous precision with which tenant labour services are described in thirteenth-century

²⁵ Women reaped, with a sickle, even if they rarely mowed with a scythe (but there were many other lighter tasks in the hayfield): Simon A. C. Penn, 'Female wage-earners in late fourteenth-century England', *AgHR* 35 (1987), pp. 10–11. For women working at the autumn boon, see Hart (ed.), *Cartularium Monasterii de Rameseia*, I, p. 49 (*cum omnibus hominibus et feminis domui sui pertinentibus*); II, p. 24; Chibnall (ed.), *English lands of the abbey of Bec*, p. 100.

²⁶ Perhaps in an attempt to increase the number of workers, suggests the editor: Scargill-Bird (ed.), *Custumals of Battle Abbey*, p. xxxix.

²⁷ The lord found the 'wood to cook the dinner' for haymakers at Ferring: Peckham (ed.), *Thirteen custumals*, p. 72. See also H. C. Maxwell-Lyte (ed.), *Two Registers formerly belonging to the Family of Beauchamp* (Somerset Record Soc., 35, 1920), p. 13; Jones, 'Hay harvest', p. 102.

²⁸ G. F. Beaumont (ed.), 'The extent of the manor of

Borley', *Trans. Essex Arch. Soc.*, new ser. 18 (1927), p. 268 (1308). See also Elton (ed.), *Rentalia et Custumaria*, p. 99.

²⁹ Hart (ed.), *Cartularium Monasterii de Rameseia*, I, p. 311 (1251). See also Chibnall (ed.), *English lands of the abbey of Bec*, p. 85 (brewing for the Christmas dinner).

³⁰ E. Smirke (ed.), 'Notice of the customs of Bleadon, Somerset and of the agricultural tenures of the thirteenth century' in *Memoirs Illustrative of the History and Antiquities of Wiltshire and the city of Salisbury* (1849), p. 204; Nichols (ed.), 'Extent of Lawling', pp. 185–6 (1310). See also Homans, *English villagers*, p. 358.

³¹ Details of the food given to boon workers are 'rarely mentioned' and 'never itemized' in the 1189 surveys of Glastonbury Abbey (and are an innovation in those of the mid thirteenth century): N. E. Stacey (ed.), *Surveys of the estates of Glastonbury Abbey c.1135–1201*, (British Academy Records of Social and Economic History, new ser. 33 (2001), p. 43.

customals has often been remarked on, with good reason, but perhaps equally noteworthy is the amount of space devoted in many customals to the associated meals.³²

And just as the descriptions become more detailed over time, so the language changes too. True, in some customals the meals are still described only briefly and vaguely: some ploughing and harrowing boons at Sidlesham, Sussex, remain simply 'at the bishop's food' in the custumal of 1275.³³ In others, the language is not only imprecise but expansive: 'And on that day the prior feeds everybody', proclaims the custumal for the Worcester Cathedral Priory estate of the Benrip and the Benerthe, the chief autumn and ploughing boons; more modestly, the custumal for Ashill, Norfolk, says simply that the mowers were to get 'a good meal' (*unum bonum repastum*).³⁴ A custumal for Bishopstone, Sussex, is a little more specific: at the wheat boon, it says, 'at dinner each [worker] shall have as much bread as he wishes to eat'; at Denton, Sussex, at 'the great wheat boonwork', reapers got 'cheese and ale all day'.³⁵ At the Christmas dinner at North Curry, Somerset, some tenants were to have 'as much ale as they will drink in the day', while one tenant, next day, was to have 'as much ale as he will drink till even'; at the Christmas dinner at Bleadon, Somerset, the tenants were to get not only 'good' bread and ale, but also one 'full serving' (*plenarium ferculum*) of beef and another of pork.³⁶ These are all phrases suggestive of a generous provision, freely offered.

Equally common, however, is a more cautious and cost-conscious note: at the harvest boons, says the custumal for Hartest, Suffolk, the workers were 'to have food in moderation', and it refers later to 'a small meal, that is to say a loaf and some relish'.³⁷ Reasonableness and moderation are an insistent theme, well exemplified in the custumal for Felsted: the servings of meat or fish at the plough and harvest boons on this manor were to be 'reasonable' (*rationabilia fercula*), and the quantity of bread, bacon and cheese to be 'within reason as was the custom' (*rationabiliter sicut mos est*).³⁸ The inclusion of bread in this list may seem surprising but a parsimonious attitude even to this staple food was widespread: the wheaten loaf provided at a boon at Lawling was to be 'of reasonable size'.³⁹ Perhaps less surprisingly, we find similar caution with regard to ale: at the plough boon at Bishopstone the amount was to be 'reasonable' (*cervisiam rationabilem*); at Moreton Sanderville, Berks., the harvest workers got 'sufficient' ale at the bedrippas.⁴⁰ But what counted as reasonable or sufficient might be interpreted differently

³² In the custumal for Ilmer, Bucks (1337), of some nine lines devoted to the *messio ad cibum*, at most four describe the tenants' obligations, the rest are taken up with the details of the provision of food and drink: TNA, SC 11/79. Eleanor Searle notes the addition of 'the amount of food' provided to customary labourers by 1251–2: *Lordship and community*, p. 169; see also Raftis, *Estates*, p. 197 for the appearance of 'long paragraphs in the thirteenth-century extents'.

³³ Peckham (ed.), *Thirteen custumals*, pp. 22–3.

³⁴ Hale (ed.), *Registrum Prioratus Beatae Mariae Wigorniensis*, 83b; TNA, SC 11/465 (the custumal is undated, but of Edward I or II).

³⁵ Peckham (ed.), *Thirteen custumals*, pp. 89, 101 (the custumals are dated 1253–62 and 1274).

³⁶ Homans, *English villagers*, p. 358 (1314); Smirke (ed.), 'Customs of Bleadon', p. 204.

³⁷ M. Bailey, *The English Manor c.1200–c.1500* (2002), p. 50 (a survey of Hartest, 1251, and see also p. 54).

³⁸ Chibnall (ed.), *Holy Trinity Caen*, pp. 89–90; there are no references to food at boon works in an early twelfth-century Felsted survey: *ibid.*, pp. 33–4; see also pp. 40–5.

³⁹ Nichols (ed.), 'Extent of Lawling', p. 186.

⁴⁰ Peckham (ed.), *Thirteen custumals*, p. 89; TNA, SC 11/83 (the custumal is 1333–4). Ale was not provided at the hay harvest but the mowers could on certain days go *ad tabernam* after the ninth hour. See also Peckham (ed.), *Thirteen custumals*, p. 81; Homans, *English villagers*, p. 261.

by an economically minded manorial administration and hungry peasant recipients: at Felsted, a clause had to be added to the custumal to say that, when it came to bread, what counted as a reasonable quantity was to be decided by 'worthy men' (*panis erit rationabilis per visum proborum hominum*).⁴¹ We are a long way here from a liberality in provision, and also from peasants grateful for whatever they received.

Another approach was to avoid vague, approximate, or emotive terms in favour of listing the various components of the meal, in neutral language. Thus at Lawling a note has been added to the custumal ('and be it known that ...') spelling out what the meal at the ale boon was to consist of: at midday each tenant was to get 'a wheaten loaf, milk and cheese', in the evening, 'a wheaten loaf, ale, pottage, a platter of meat, and a dish of bread and milk with cheese'.⁴² Many custumals go further and specify precise quantities. Herrings, a relatively cheap food, were often counted: at Hadleigh, Essex, two men got six between them, valued at a halfpenny, at Mickleover, Derbs., each reaper got two, at Laughton, Sussex, it was one, while on the Battle Abbey manor of Marley they were doled out in fractions.⁴³ At Stoneleigh it was eggs that were kept count of: each reaper got four at the bedrepa.⁴⁴ It is sometimes possible to trace the appearance of the extra precision: the 'ale or cider for drinking' provided with the harvest supper at Horninglow, according to a survey of 1286, has become, by that of 1307, a measured 'one gallon of ale or cider' between two.⁴⁵ Even the quantity of bread might be strictly defined: custumals regularly specified not only how many loaves each worker was to get but also their weight: at Preston, Sussex 'each [harvester] shall have for his dinner a halfpenny loaf, and every two shall have for supper one or two halfpenny loaves', and if the bread was baked specially, then '24 loaves must be made from one hop'; or, at Bradcar, Norfolk, 'four barley loaves, and twenty loaves are made of every bushel'.⁴⁶ Small variations in the provision on different days are carefully recorded. At Appledrum, Sussex, for example, a slightly different meal was provided at each of four harvest boons and each of them was separately described in the custumal: the bread at the second was to be half wheat and half rye, but at the third all wheat, and so on; at Ilmer, Berks., the tenants were to get more ale on the second day than the first.⁴⁷ The provision of salt might be recorded: sometimes how much (a 'basketful' for haymakers at Hartest), often in association with cheese ('two cheeses and as much salt as may cover a cheese mould' for haymakers at Lawling),⁴⁸ or meat, as

⁴¹ Chibnall (ed.), *Holy Trinity Caen*, p. 90.

⁴² Nichols (ed.), 'Extent of Lawling', p. 185.

⁴³ Hugh Pigot (ed.), 'Extent of the Manor of Hadleigh', *Procs. of the Suffolk Institute of Arch.*, 3 (1859–63), p. 237 (1305). See also Beaumont (ed.), *Extent of the manor of Borley*, p. 268; Hart (ed.), *Cartularium Monasterii de Rameseia*, I, pp. 414, 432; Tringham (ed.), 'Select documents', p. 43 (1307); A. E. Wilson (ed.), *Custumals of the manors of Laughton, Willingdon and Goring* (Sussex Record Soc., 60, 1961), p. 3 (1292); Scargill-Bird (ed.), *Custumals of Battle Abbey*, pp. 6, 7, 9 *et al.* (and see p. xiii). See also Hart (ed.), *Cartularium Monasterii de Rameseia*, I, pp. 414 (3 herrings between two), 432.

⁴⁴ Hilton (ed.), *Stoneleigh Leger Book*, p. 103.

⁴⁵ Tringham (ed.), 'Select documents', pp. 13, 38.

⁴⁶ Peckham (ed.), *Thirteen custumals*, p. 81 (mid-thirteenth century); William Hudson (ed.), 'Three manorial extents of the thirteenth century', *Norfolk Arch.*, 14 (1901), p. 28 (1298–9). See also Beaumont (ed.), 'Extent of Borley', p. 264; Pigot (ed.), 'Extent of Hadleigh', p. 237.

⁴⁷ Scargill-Bird (ed.), *Custumals of Battle Abbey*, p. 54 (t. Edward I); TNA, SC 11/79 (1337).

⁴⁸ Bailey, *English Manor*, p. 50; Nichols (ed.), 'Extent of Lawling', p. 185. See also Hart (ed.), *Cartularium Monasterii de Rameseia*, I, p. 336 (*fiscellam plenam sale*); Scargill-Bird (ed.), *Custumals of Battle Abbey*, p. 81 (t. Edward I).

at Brightwalton, Berks.,⁴⁹ or to season the haymakers' broth or pottage, at Borley.⁵⁰ The custumal for North Curry specifies that mustard should be provided with the beef and bacon at the Christmas dinner.⁵¹

The dread hand of the accountant is clearly visible in many of these clauses. Further, everywhere provisos and exclusions creep in, often revealing a notably penny-pinching attitude, but also hinting at local disputes. Why else should it be recorded that the harvest workers at Chatteris, Cambs., were to get 'sufficient ale' at the third lovebene, but that at the fourth, if they got ale, it was not as of right but as a favour (*nisi ex gratia*); or that if the haymakers at Ferring, Sussex, wanted ale with their harvest supper, they had to provide it themselves; or a note be added at Lawling to the effect that there were to be as many ale boons as dry boons – the latter no doubt more popular with the administration than with the harvest workers.⁵² The cheaper but less attractive option of water was often written into the custumal: this was spelled out in a note at Borley for the oat boon (though the harvesters got ale at the wheat boon); at Goring, Sussex, it was water at the first autumn boon, ale at the second; the third autumn boon at Hartest was the eponymous 'Waterbedrepe'.⁵³ The provenance of the water was specified at Denton – it was to be 'of the king's well'.⁵⁴ And a different type of parsimony is suggested at Barnwell, Cambs., in this case with regard to time: on that day (the first day of haymaking), says the custumal, a half yardlander could sit down 'with all the lord's men' to drink the 12*d.* worth of ale provided 'without challenge' (*sine vendicatione*);⁵⁵ had this 'privilege' been contested?

If much of this new detail was included in an attempt to settle or forestall local disputes, why had these arisen? Reasons are not hard to find. For their part, manorial lords had increasingly strong grounds for wanting to cut back on these meals, which were often fixed by custom at a notably generous level.⁵⁶ In the thirteenth century they faced a pincer movement of rising food prices and falling labour costs, which made the customary provision of food and drink for workers performing labour services an increasingly heavy burden. Awareness of the high price of providing meals relative to the value of the labour is visible in many custumals: it was increasingly common to attach a cash value to the meals, often together with a calculation of the value of the labour rendered. This might reveal only a narrow margin of profit, or even an outright loss: at Barnhorn, Sussex, in 1306–7, Battle Abbey calculated each of two Lent harrowing services to be worth 4*d.*, and the cost of providing the customary three meals a day to the workers at 5*d.*, leaving the lord, the document notes, 1*d.* out of pocket; a similar calculation was made with regard to mowing services, with the

⁴⁹ Scargill-Bird (ed.), *Custumals of Battle Abbey*, p. 61 (1283–4).

⁵⁰ Beaumont (ed.), 'Extent of Borley' p. 264 (1308). See also W. H. Hart (ed.), *Historia et Cartularium Monasterii Sancti Petri Gloucestriae* (Rolls Series, 3 vols, 1863–7), III, p. 203.

⁵¹ Homans, *English villagers*, p. 358.

⁵² Hart (ed.), *Cartularium Monasterii de Rameseia*, I, p. 432 (1240); Peckham (ed.), *Thirteen custumals*, p. 72; Nichols (ed.), 'Extent of Lawling', p. 186.

⁵³ Beaumont (ed.), 'Extent of Borley', p. 268 (see also Pigot (ed.), 'Extent of Hadleigh', p. 237); Wilson (ed.), *Custumals of Laughton, Willingdon and Goring*, p. 50 (1321); Bailey, *English manor*, p. 50.

⁵⁴ Peckham (ed.), *Thirteen custumals*, p. 101.

⁵⁵ Hart (ed.), *Cartularium Monasterii de Rameseia*, I, p. 49 (c.1275).

⁵⁶ Dyer, *Making a living*, p. 134; id., 'Changes in diet in the late Middle Ages: the case of harvest workers', *AgHR* 36 (1988), p. 34.

same result.⁵⁷ The temptation to cut back on the customary provision in these circumstances may often have proved irresistible: 'it is not surprising', in the words of Professor Raftis, 'to find attempts to standardise and control ... consumption'.⁵⁸ And, in 1291, the villeins of the Ramsey Abbey manor of Broughton walked out in the middle of the great harvest bene on the grounds ('giving the malicious and false cause', claimed the manorial administration, at the November manorial court) that the loaves of bread they were offered were not 'as large as they were accustomed formerly and ought to have them'. A search of the register/custumal showed they had no right to 'more bread than may be purchased so that two men together have bread worth 3 farthings' unless 'the lord wishes'.⁵⁹ Had the lord perhaps so wished in previous years? Had the loaves been larger when the Abbey had baked its own, and no account was taken of the price of corn, as the custumal hints had once been the case? This we cannot know, but what is clear is the strength of feeling on both sides, and the assertiveness of the peasant tenants. They must have been aware they risked a heavy fine for their actions – in due course they were adjudged to be in contempt of the lord and amerced 40s. – but they went ahead with their action nevertheless. It is noticeable that, even as translated into Latin and written down by a scribe in the formal court record, their language was one of 'rights' ('ought to have') and not of humble requests. Eventually, as the century passed, many labour services were commuted for cash, in whole or in part, temporarily or permanently, in favour of cheap wage labour. But old habits died hard, and there were still circumstances and occasions in which it remained profitable or convenient to use labour services; and boon works, as we have seen, had a particular value to manorial lords and were among those most frequently still called on.

Though the quantity and type of food provided at these works was clearly a matter of concern on both sides, if for different reasons, it is notable that it was not only these aspects that mattered to the peasants. Many clauses reveal quality to have been an issue, too, even if the food itself remained fairly basic. High quality is often specified and if we assume, as seems reasonable, that the impetus for such clauses came from the peasants, they are revealed as well able to discriminate. This is immediately apparent in the case of bread, an important component of all these meals. As we have seen, custumals regularly stated not just its quantity but also the type of corn from which it was to be baked. Barley bread, cheaper and less highly prized, was often found, as at Goring at the first autumn boon, but the more expensive bread baked from wheat was generally preferred and also often specified: mowers at Ashbury, Berks., got wheaten bread twice a day with their cheese.⁶⁰ The value attached to this bread corn and the level of discernment present, not to speak of the pernicky nature of some of the bargaining that must have taken place, is suggested by a proviso in the custumal for Holywell, Hunts.: the bread at the first autumn boon, it says, was to be 'of wheat and rye, but mostly wheat'

⁵⁷ Searle, *Lordship and community*, p. 179. The phrase '*nec extenditur propter reprisam cibi*' is twice repeated in the custumal for Hadleigh: Pigot (ed.), 'Extent of Hadleigh', p. 237.

⁵⁸ Raftis, *Estates*, p. 198.

⁵⁹ J. Ambrose Raftis, *Tenure and mobility. Studies in the social history of the mediaeval English village*

(1964), p. 10; Homans, *English villagers*, p. 262 (slightly different translations in each case). See also Hart (ed.), *Cartularium Monasterii de Rameseia*, I, p. 337, where the bread allowance is described in detail.

⁶⁰ Wilson (ed.), *Custumals of Laughton, Willingdon and Goring*, p. 49; Elton (ed.), *Rentalia et Custumaria*, p. 52.

(*major pars sit frumentum*). Meanwhile, at Burton Abbey, the reapers got 'two loaves, one of wheat and the other of rye', each 'of the same weight as the bread of a monk'.⁶¹ White bread was similarly highly valued, and occasionally specified, if in modest quantities: each reaper at Stoneleigh got one small white wheaten loaf; haymakers at Marley got two and a half 'black' loaves (*panes nigros*) each, but also, 'in common', three large and three small simnel loaves, that is, loaves of fine white wheat flour.⁶² Even the best white wastel bread is occasionally found: at Ilmer reapers got one dish of some sort of pudding made with it (*ferculum mortrellorum de wastelle*); wastel bread from the county town ('*wastelli* of Derby'), that is, from a superior urban bakery, was given to reapers at Micklegate.⁶³ One is inevitably reminded of the beggars in *Piers Ploughman* who 'refused the bread that had beans in it, demanding milk loaves and fine white wheaten bread'.⁶⁴

Another luxury food, at least for the peasantry, was fresh meat. So highly was it valued that boons at which it was customarily provided were sometimes named after it: it was at 'the great metebene' on the Burton Abbey estate that the reapers got a meal that included 'one dish of meat, either beef or pork' (*carnis bovis vel porci*) between two.⁶⁵ At Cranfield, Beds., it was 'one dish of beef', similarly shared between two, at one boon.⁶⁶ More often, however, customals said simply 'meat' or 'fresh meat'.⁶⁷ At Broughton, the very inclusion of the latter was left uncertain: 'recent or salt' (*recentem vel salatam*) says the customal of one autumn boon: had the manorial administration here refused to let themselves be pinned down?⁶⁸ An even more grudging attitude is suggested at Stoneleigh, where the reapers got '*potagio scilicet Gruwel sine carnibus cocto*', that is, pottage without cooked meat, unless the lord decreed otherwise (*nisi dominus aliter permiserit*).⁶⁹

However, fresh meat must have been a frequent component of the main harvest supper at the end of haymaking, as it was common for an animal to be slaughtered for the occasion. Mowing and haymaking – 'very much group activities' – are characterized by 'common' rewards, as opposed to 'servings', and often surrounded by ritual.⁷⁰ It was traditional on many manors – after the hay had been carried in – for a sheep to be turned out into the field,

⁶¹ Hart (ed.), *Cartularium Monasterii de Rameseia*, I, p. 300 (1252); Tringham (ed.), 'Select documents', p. 38.

⁶² Scargill-Bird (ed.), *Customals of Battle Abbey*, p. 5;

⁶³ TNA, SC 11/79; Tringham (ed.), 'Select documents', p. 43. Wastell bread was introduced into the reapers' supper at Laughton between 1292 and 1325: Wilson (ed.), *Customals of Laughton, Willingdon and Goring*, p. xxxv. See also Teddington (1225) ('*1 gastelkum* worth a farthing'): CUL MS Kk 5, fo. 24 (I am grateful to Barbara Harvey for lending me her microfilm of this customal).

⁶⁴ William Langland, *Piers the Ploughman* (Penguin Books edn, 1959), pp. 127–8; note also the threat of having to eat barley bread, p. 123.

⁶⁵ Tringham (ed.), 'Select documents', pp. 13, 38 (and for pork, see above, p. xx). For other 'meat boons', see Hart (ed.), *Historia et Cartularium Monasterii Sancti Petri Gloucestriae*, III, pp. 90, 94, 110 *et al.* For a

'chesebene' see Chibnall (ed.), *English lands of the abbey of Bec*, p. 93.

⁶⁶ Hart (ed.), *Cartularium Monasterii de Rameseia*, I, p. 463 (*carnis bovini*) (1245); Beaumont (ed.), 'Extent of Borley', p. 268 (spelled out in a note). On the manors surveyed by Dyer, fresh beef was included in meals for harvest workers in 1286: Dyer, 'Changes in diet', p. 28 (though he emphasizes the relative unimportance of meat in the meals provided to harvest workers at this period: pp. 26–8).

⁶⁷ Hart (ed.), *Cartularium Monasterii de Rameseia*, I, pp. 311 (*carnem recentam*), 415, 432 (*unum ferculum carnis*); see also Peckham (ed.), *Thirteen customals*, p. 34 ('fresh meat').

⁶⁸ Hart (ed.), *Cartularium Monasterii de Rameseia*, I, p. 337.

⁶⁹ Hilton (ed.), *Stoneleigh Leger Book*, p. 103.

⁷⁰ Jones, 'Hay harvest', p. 100.

for the haymakers to try to catch and kill themselves; if they succeeded they had it for their supper, if they let it escape it remained the lord's. More prosaically, by our period, mowers were more likely to be given a sum of money to purchase an animal ('a sheep worth 12d., or 12d.', a note inserted into the Goring customal specifies).⁷¹ Or an animal was provided and slaughtered by the lord. Either way, many customals stipulate that it was not to be an inferior beast: it was to be 'one of the best sheep in the bishop's fold', declares the customal for Sidlesham, 'the best [wether] they like to choose', says that for Preston, and 'the second best ram in the lord's fold' was specified at Winterbourne, Wilts.⁷² At Badbury, Wilts., the haymakers could select a sheep themselves, but by sight alone; they were not permitted to feel it.⁷³ At Laughton, where an ox was slaughtered for the reapers, it 'must be fattened on the better pasture of the lord until the time when it must be used'.⁷⁴ These peasants were well able to tell the difference between good and less good meat, it is clear, and such provisos may well be attempts to thwart a common and resented practice on the part of manorial lords of choosing inferior animals for these occasions.⁷⁵

A whole cheese was often provided for haymakers, and again we find stipulations as to quality: a note added to the Borley customal specifies that the cheese was to be 'from the lord's dairy', and 'after the better sort'; at Broughton the cheese for the mowers was to be one of the best in the curia; the yardlanders required to shear the lord's sheep at Bleadon were to share 'the best cheese' then being salted (*qui jacet in augeo ad saliendum*); on some Glastonbury manors it was to be a cheese made that same day.⁷⁶ Concern for the quality of dairy products emerges also in relation to milk, sometimes specified as a superior alternative to water, as we have seen at Lawling.⁷⁷ That of the milk given to mowers at Borley was very precisely stipulated, in phrases that hint at hard prior bargaining: it was to be from the morning milking and 'from all the cows of the whole dairy at one and the same time' (the milk fat yield is higher in the morning, mixing means that the thinner, earlier-drawn milk cannot be used).⁷⁸ Clauses insisting on the high quality of these dairy products may be instances of small victories for the tenants but a word of caution is needed: the cheese for the yardlanders and their men mowing on the Glastonbury Abbey manor of Burton in Marnhull, Dorset, might well be 'one cheese

⁷¹ Jones, 'Hay harvest', pp. 102–3; Chibnall (ed.), *English lands of the abbey of Bec*, p. 103 (*si possit evadere remanebit ad opus domini* at Atherstone); Wilson (ed.), *Customals of Laughton, Willingdon and Goring*, p. 49 (though a sheep was turned out into a meadow and killed by haymakers ['with a knife'] at Alrewas in 1336): Staffordshire RO, DO3 (W), Roll Oct. 1335–Oct. 1336, mm. 1, 1d).

⁷² Peckham (ed.), *Thirteen customals*, pp. 23, 80; Elton (ed.), *Rentalia et Custumaria*, pp. 61–2. See also Jones, 'Hay harvest', pp. 103–5.

⁷³ Elton (ed.), *Rentalia et Custumaria*, p. 58 (*per visum et non per tactum*), quoted by Jones, 'Hay harvest', p. 103.

⁷⁴ Wilson (ed.), *Customals of Laughton, Willingdon and Goring*, p. 3 (1292).

⁷⁵ For the 'procession of ancient bulls, enfeebled oxen, sterile cows and culled wethers and ewes' slaughtered for harvest workers, see Dyer, 'Changes in diet', p. 30. In their own homes, peasants may often have been obliged to eat the meat of 'elderly cattle and sheep', younger animals having been sent to market: Dyer, 'Material world', p. 21.

⁷⁶ Beaumont (ed.), *Extent of Borley*, p. 264; Hart (ed.), *Cartularium Monasterii de Rameseia*, I, p. 336; Smirke (ed.), 'Customs of Bleadon', p. 204; Elton (ed.), *Rentalia et Custumaria*, pp. 58, 61 etc.

⁷⁷ See above, xx; see also TNA, SC 11/79 (milk for reapers at Ilmer).

⁷⁸ Beaumont (ed.), 'Extent of Borley', p. 264. Morning milk was specified for the tenant acting as shepherd at Bleadon: Smirke (ed.), 'Customs of Bleadon', p. 207.

from the best cheeses' made in the lord's curia, as it is put in the custumal, but only as long as it did not cost more than 5*d*. There were clearly limits to what a cost-conscious administration was prepared to countenance.⁷⁹

Quality is indicated in a different – and highly significant – way elsewhere in the custumal for Burton in Marnhull, where it is related to the quality, or status, of the tenant rather than the foodstuff: at one of the winter ploughing boons, says this custumal, the yardlander was to be fed not only sufficiently but 'honourably' (*sufficienter et honorifice*).⁸⁰ The same word is used again in the custumal for another Glastonbury Abbey manor, Sturminster Newton, Dorset, this time of the ale to be provided to the yardlander and his wife at the Christmas dinner: it was to be 'sufficient and honourable and clear' (*sufficientem et honorifice et clera*).⁸¹ It is an unusual word to find in this context, that is, in a manorial document and in connection with a peasant tenant, and we can only speculate how this loaded language came to be used. It seems unlikely to have been volunteered by the manorial administration, more likely that it came from the peasant tenants. It is unlikely to be by chance that it is in both cases employed in connection with yardlanders, that is, with members of a sort of village elite from whom, we may remember, the jurors were often recruited. Should we assume that these tenants used the word themselves in conversations in the village? Or was it perhaps produced for the occasion, in an attempt to convey the quality or type of appropriately respectful treatment these men felt was their due, in the face of the lord's officials – possibly inclined to look down on them?

That the concept of a yardlander's 'honourable' status was present in villages elsewhere is confirmed by other custumals, again in connection with food and drink. It is articulated in those for some of the Ramsey Abbey manors, where the yardlander was expected to treat the 'servants of the curia' on the day of his marriage: at Broughton, the custumal says, he should provide a meal of bread, meat and ale 'as his honour demanded and his financial situation allowed' (*secundum quod suum honorem deceat et suae competat facultati*), a nice combination of aspiration and realism; at Warboys, Hunts., it was '*pane, cervisia, carne vel pisce servientes curiam honorifice respiciet*'.⁸² There may be a hint that this vocabulary was unwelcome to manorial lords in a comparison of two surveys made at an interval of two decades on the Burton Abbey estate: the word 'honourable' is used in the earlier survey (1286) of a 'gift' (*honorabile exennium*) the yardlanders were required to make to the abbot on certain fixed dates, but it has disappeared from the survey of 1306 on all but one manor, along with the element of discretion allowed to the tenants. The exceptional manor is Mickleover, where its continued use is laboriously and clumsily insisted on, presumably a victory for the local tenants on a matter about which they felt strongly.⁸³

If a desire on the part of this category of tenant for treatment appropriate to their status is visible in custumals, so also is a readiness on the part of manorial lords to go along with it,

⁷⁹ Elton (ed.), *Rentalia et Custumaria*, p. 96. See also Lechford, where mowers got 'one second best cheese': *Rotuli Hundredorum* (Record Commissioners, 2 vols, 1812–18), II, p. 772.

⁸⁰ Elton (ed.), *Rentalia et Custumaria*, p. 96.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 83, cited in Dyer, 'Language of oppression', p. 73.

⁸² Hart (ed.), *Cartularium Monasterii de Rameseia*, I, pp. 338, 312 (1252); see also p. 326.

⁸³ Tringham (ed.), 'Select documents', pp. 13, 39, 41; discussed more fully in Jean Birrell, 'Rereading manorial custumals: lords, tenants and custom on three Staffordshire estates (1297–1341)', in *Staffordshire Studies*, 19 (2008), p. 8.

by showing them special favour at boon feasts. This preferential treatment might take various forms. Sometimes it was simply more or superior food and drink: at the three autumn beddrips at Moreton Sanderville, the custumal flatly states, the yardlander was to receive better food and drink (*melius cibari et potari*) than the workers he brought with him.⁸⁴ At Teddington, Middlesex, the yardlander got ale with his dinner at the great boon while his men got water (though everyone was given ale at supper); added to which he received a substantial further allowance of 32 gallons of ale, which, if he shared it with his workers, put him in the happy position of distributing largesse, for all the world a little lord in his own small patch.⁸⁵ At the two harvest boons at Aldingbourne the yardlander received an additional and exclusive midday meal (there was bread and cheese for everyone in the evening), lavish enough at the wheat boon to include fresh meat and ale.⁸⁶

The yardlanders might also be singled out by where and how they ate the meals. At the three autumn beddrips at Moreton Sanderville the yardlander – who was, as we have seen, to receive better food – was to be more ‘honourably’ seated: *sedebat honestius* says the custumal. At the third autumn boon at Felsted, the *probi homines* – the expression apparently used as synonymous with yardlanders, a significant equivalence – were to come to the manor house (*ad curiam domine*) for the evening meal, but seemingly not the reapers they had to supply, though they too received a meal.⁸⁷ A note has been added to the Bishopstone custumal to clarify that it was only those who contributed oxen to the teams at the ploughing boon (‘they and not more’) who were to come to the lord’s house to dinner.⁸⁸ At the second and third harvest boons at Hoton, Essex, the yardlander was entitled to eat ‘with the sergeant’, that is, in superior company.⁸⁹

And there may have been other ways of distinguishing certain categories of tenant not noted in the custumals. For example, it is known that tablecloths were sometimes used at harvest suppers. A cloth bought at Sedgford, Norfolk, was not big enough to cover a table seating all the harvest workers; perhaps it adorned one end of a long table, or perhaps a smaller more selective table.⁹⁰ The use of a cloth as a marker of status is suggested in some custumals for the Glastonbury Abbey estate, where the yardlander was to bring his own plate, cup and cloth (*discum et cifum et mappam*) to the Christmas dinner; at Burton in Marnhul the phrase ‘should he wish to eat off a cloth’ (*si voluerit de mappa comedere*) has been added – perhaps betraying a hint of disdain on the part of the scribe?⁹¹ Yet the use of tablecloths in late medieval peasant

⁸⁴ TNA, SC 11/83.

⁸⁵ Barbara Harvey, *Westminster Abbey and its estates in the Middle Ages* (1977), pp. 219, n. 2, 221 (the custumal is of 1312).

⁸⁶ Peckham (ed.), *Thirteen custumals*, pp. 33–4.

⁸⁷ Chibnall (ed.), *Holy Trinity Caen*, pp. 89–90. See also Hart (ed.), *Historia et Cartularium Monasterii Sancti Petri Gloucestriae*, III, p. 43.

⁸⁸ Peckham (ed.), *Thirteen custumals*, p. 95 (see also p. 89) (the custumal is t. Edward II). See also Wilson (ed.), *Custumals of Laughton, Willingdon and Goring*, pp. 75–6.

⁸⁹ Scargill-Bird (ed.), *Custumals of Battle Abbey*,

pp. xxxix–xl (1311–12).

⁹⁰ It was five ells long: Dyer, ‘Changes in diet’, p. 28; see also p. 31. The obligations of a sokemen at Haywood as recorded in the episcopal survey of 1297/8 included finding cloths – and towels – for the mowers and reapers (and also dishes, cups, pitchers and tankards, and other utensils): Staffordshire RO, D1734 J2268, fol. 23 (for this reference, I thank Dr Nigel Tringham, who is preparing an edition of this survey).

⁹¹ Elton (ed.), *Rentalia et Custumaria*, pp. 83, 97 (were the plate and bowl likely to be of better quality than whatever was routinely supplied, presumably treen?) See also Homans, *English villagers*, 358.

households is documented in inventories; cloths are often recorded in association with towels, suggesting that hands might be washed before meals.⁹²

So there were a variety of ways in which manorial administrations showed special favour to the tenants of the standard yardland holdings at boon feasts. In doing so they were implicitly equating these particular customary tenants with peasant tenants of higher status, those who were free or on the border between free and customary, who were often entitled to similar forms of preferential treatment; or, as it is put in the custumal for the ancient demesne manor of Stoneleigh, they – that is, the free sokemen – were to be ‘ministered to in a better fashion ... as their status demanded’ (*meliori modo ministrabitur secundum exigenciam status eorum*).⁹³ More explicitly, at Preston, the tenant of a yardland that owed only light services, including two ploughing and two harvest boons, was on these occasions to ‘eat with the sergeant of the manor’; similarly, two tenants of uncertain, but not customary, status at Houghton were to eat in the hall with the farmer (of the manor) at the boon, unlike their reapers, who, the custumal says, were to eat ‘with the other workers’ (*cum operariis aliis*).⁹⁴

These forms of privilege – eating in the manor house or in the hall within it, eating in superior company, eating better food – are reminiscent of the dining rights, or *bouche à court*, more usually discussed in relation to aristocratic households. However, they were common at lower social levels too, perhaps in particular in the case of certain manorial officials. The most important of these, the reeve, a man chosen or elected from the customary peasant tenants, was on many manors entitled to eat in the manor house on certain occasions, especially at key times of the farming year. This may often have been at table with the lord’s *familia*, that is, the permanent demesne farmworkers, but it might also be in ‘superior’ company: ‘at table with the bailiff of the manor’ during the winter and Lent sowing and the autumn harvest at Bradford on Tone, Somerset, and ‘in the lord’s hall at the table of the manorial officials’ when the lord was resident on the manor. At Stoke-sub-Hamdon, Somerset, the reeve ‘shall be with him at table ... whenever the steward shall be at table for holding courts’.⁹⁵ There were obvious practical advantages in such an arrangement – saving of time, ease of exchange of information and decision-making etc. – but the practice must have brought benefits of a more intangible kind, too, encouraging the reeve to feel part of the manorial administration, bringing him, as it were, onside, while at the same time distancing him from his fellow tenants. It seems likely that the preferential treatment offered to the yardlanders was intended to achieve a similar effect.

But in any case, if the yardlanders received marks of public recognition of their status at boon feasts, this only reflected an already existing hierarchy, not only in the home,⁹⁶ but also

⁹² Dyer, ‘Living in peasant houses’, p. 22; see also Dyer, ‘Material world’, p. 20.

⁹³ Hilton (ed.), *Stoneleigh Leger Book*, p. 103.

⁹⁴ Peckham (ed.), *Thirteen custumals*, p. 79; Hart (ed.), *Cartularium Monasterii de Rameseia*, I, p. 368 (see also p. 492). See also Wilson (ed.), *Custumals of Laughton, Willingdon and Goring*, p. 76; Redwood and Wilson (eds), *Sussex manors of Archbishop of Canterbury*, p. 1.

⁹⁵ T. J. Hunt (ed.), *The customs of the manors of Bradford on Tone, near Taunton, Somerset* (Somerset Record Soc., 66, 1962), pp. 86, 89 (1353–4); Maxwell-Lyte (ed.), *Two registers*, p. 23 (1287). The range of ‘dining rights’ of reeves and other manorial officials, like their other perquisites of office, deserves fuller discussion than is possible here.

⁹⁶ Chris Dyer has noted ‘the single chair’ recorded in late medieval inventories, signalling ‘the authority

in the harvest field, which was similarly encouraged by manorial lords. As we have seen, the yardlander was generally required to provide the labour of several reapers at the autumn boon, and these were drawn primarily from his family and household, supplemented if necessary by hired labourers. On many manors, customals state that on certain days he was not required to labour himself, but only to supervise the workers he supplied, and see, in the words of the Moreton Sanderville customal, that they did a good job (*bene operentur*).⁹⁷ Further, some customals specify that he was on these occasions to carry a rod, traditional symbol of authority, further enhancing his role as supervisor: at the metebene, says the Burton Abbey customal, he must, 'as their overseer ... stand there all day with a rod' (*custos eorum ... cum virga*).⁹⁸ In this, the yardlander was once again being put on a par with tenants of higher status, such as the free sokemen of Stoneleigh, though they, with their rods, were required to ride to the bedrepa (*equitantes cum virgis suis*), and also not only to see that the labourers they supplied did a good job, but present them in a special court if they offended.⁹⁹ The potential advantages for the lord in this practice are clear. Firm supervision of the disparate body of workers assembled for the corn harvest must have been an urgent necessity. This was the job of the manorial officials, of course, specifically the ripreeve or hayward, more generally the reeve and bailiff. Nevertheless, making the yardlanders responsible for their own workers might greatly contribute to the efficiency of the harvest, and giving them this formal right to supervise, rod in hand, must have seemed a good way of winning their cooperation.

How the customary yardlanders reacted is difficult to gauge, and raises wider issues than can be discussed fully here.¹⁰⁰ No doubt they generally welcomed privileges that recognized or enhanced their status as heads of household and as gaffers, perhaps even sought them out; and no doubt they felt that children and servants should know their place and be amenable to their supervision. But in the field, at least as formally demonstrated in the ways I have described, the hierarchy was specific and limited; on many occasions in the harvest, as when performing other labour services, and as indeed throughout the farming year on their own farms, master and servants worked alongside each other. The yardlanders remained peasant tenants owing a range of rent obligations that marked them out as unfree. And there is evidence that they were not necessarily won over. Labour services were never popular and often poorly performed. By the late thirteenth century, as is well known, men and women were regularly presented in manorial courts for offences or derelictions of duty at boons, and the offenders frequently included village worthies. An excellent example is Henry Godswain, a tenant on the Ramsey Abbey manor of Elton, presented at the very same manorial court at which he was a sworn

Note 96 continued

of the male head of household, at the top of the family hierarchy': 'Public and private lives in the medieval household', in Isabel Davis, Miriam Müller, and Sarah Rees Jones (eds), *Love, marriage, and family ties in the later Middle Ages* (2003), p. 237; see also Dyer, 'Living in peasant houses', pp. 21, 26.

⁹⁷ TNA, SC 11/83.

⁹⁸ Tringham (ed.), 'Select documents', p. 38. See also Chibnall (ed.), *English lands of the abbey of Bec*, pp. 97,

103; CUL, Kk-5-29, fo. 22.

⁹⁹ Hilton (ed.), *Stoneleigh Leger Book*, p. 103 (the earliest surviving records of the bederepe courts date from the late fifteenth century: pp. xxxvi–xxxvii). The supervisory responsibilities of the semi-free tenants also typically extended beyond their own workers. See also E. Miller, *The abbey and bishopric of Ely* (1951), p. 126; Peckham (ed.), *Thirteen customals*, p. 99.

¹⁰⁰ There are, in any case, hints that the supervisory role could be burdensome and was not always welcome.

juror; not only, it was alleged, had this man not wished to work at the second autumn boon, but he had impeded this boon by telling everyone to go home early.¹⁰¹

It would be mistaken, also, to exaggerate the extent of the special privileges the yardlanders were accorded at meals. They were neither consistent nor universal: they go unmentioned in many customals; at the very least masters and men probably usually ate in each other's vicinity. And a rare interpolation in the early fourteenth-century customal for Hoton suggests that the concern that things should be done properly was not confined to a tenant elite: all those attending the harvest supper at the Great *Precaria*, says this customal, were 'to be, as they say, *solemniter depasti*', perhaps best translated as 'in a dignified fashion'.¹⁰² We can only speculate as to precisely what was meant. The insertion of the phrase 'as they say' may imply some surprise or unease on the part of the scribe: was this a demand that had been made unexpectedly, perhaps by the jury? Had there been discontent with the way the meal had been served in previous years? However that may be, we once again find peasants concerned to maintain an element of decorum on these occasions, a sign of respect, and in this case the aspiration was expressed on behalf not only of an elite but of all who attended the harvest supper.

The amount of space customals devote to describing the meals provided at boon works testifies to the importance they acquired for all concerned. If these meals became a focus of attention and a privileged arena for bargaining and negotiation, it was no doubt in part because this was one aspect of their relations with their manorial lords where the peasant tenants could reasonably hope to exert some influence. But it was surely also because the meals had both a material and a symbolic importance. Any 'free' food or drink was likely to be welcome to men and women who had toiled long hours to bring in the harvest on the lord's demesne. But the customals show that they were not simply grateful for whatever they were given, and that they had clear ideas about what they were entitled to receive. And they are shown to have argued, bargained and articulated demands with the aim of getting their 'rights' written into the customals.

Thus many clauses specify the type and quantity of food at these meals, which is perhaps unsurprising at a time when lords of manors had good reason to seek to cut back on the traditional generous provision. Perhaps more surprising are the clauses revealing a concern for quality, too, and for the way in which the food and drink was provided. Thus customals include both clauses stipulating quality – not only in the case of notably variable products such as ale and cheese, but also of bread and meat – and clauses addressing aspects of how the food and drink were to be consumed. They range from the right of reapers to sit down to drink ale in mid-morning to that of all to be fed 'in a dignified fashion' at a harvest supper. Some of

¹⁰¹ F. W. Maitland (ed.), *Select pleas in manorial courts* (Selden Soc., 2, 1889), p. 91. For other examples, see Peter Franklin, 'Politics in manorial court rolls: the tactics, social composition, and aims of a pre-1381 peasant movement', in Razi and Smith (eds), *Medieval society and the manor court*, pp. 162–98; Miriam Müller, 'Conflict and revolt: the Bishop of Ely and his peasants at the manor of Brandon in Suffolk c. 1300–81',

Rural Hist., 23 (2012), pp. 1–19.

¹⁰² Scargill-Bird (ed.), *Customals of Battle Abbey*, pp. xxxix–xl, viii (cited in Bennett, *Life on the English manor*, p. 111). At Haywood, the obligations of one sokeman (see note 90 above) included providing serving men twice a day 'when the men eat' (*homines ... deservient*), at the 'metebon' is implicit: Staffordshire RO, D1734 J2268, fol. 23.

these clauses reveal the operation of hierarchies within the peasant community, which it might suit manorial lords to encourage, and they shed light on the internal workings of the peasant household. If such revealing clauses remain relatively rare in customals, this is only to be expected given the nature of the documents, that is, their seigneurial origin, their purpose and their generally concrete and workaday nature. Those that appear provide a remarkable window onto the mentality and attitudes of these thirteenth- and early fourteenth-century peasants, revealed as having appreciated good quality in food, and as having had a sense of 'dining', as opposed to simply eating to satisfy hunger.