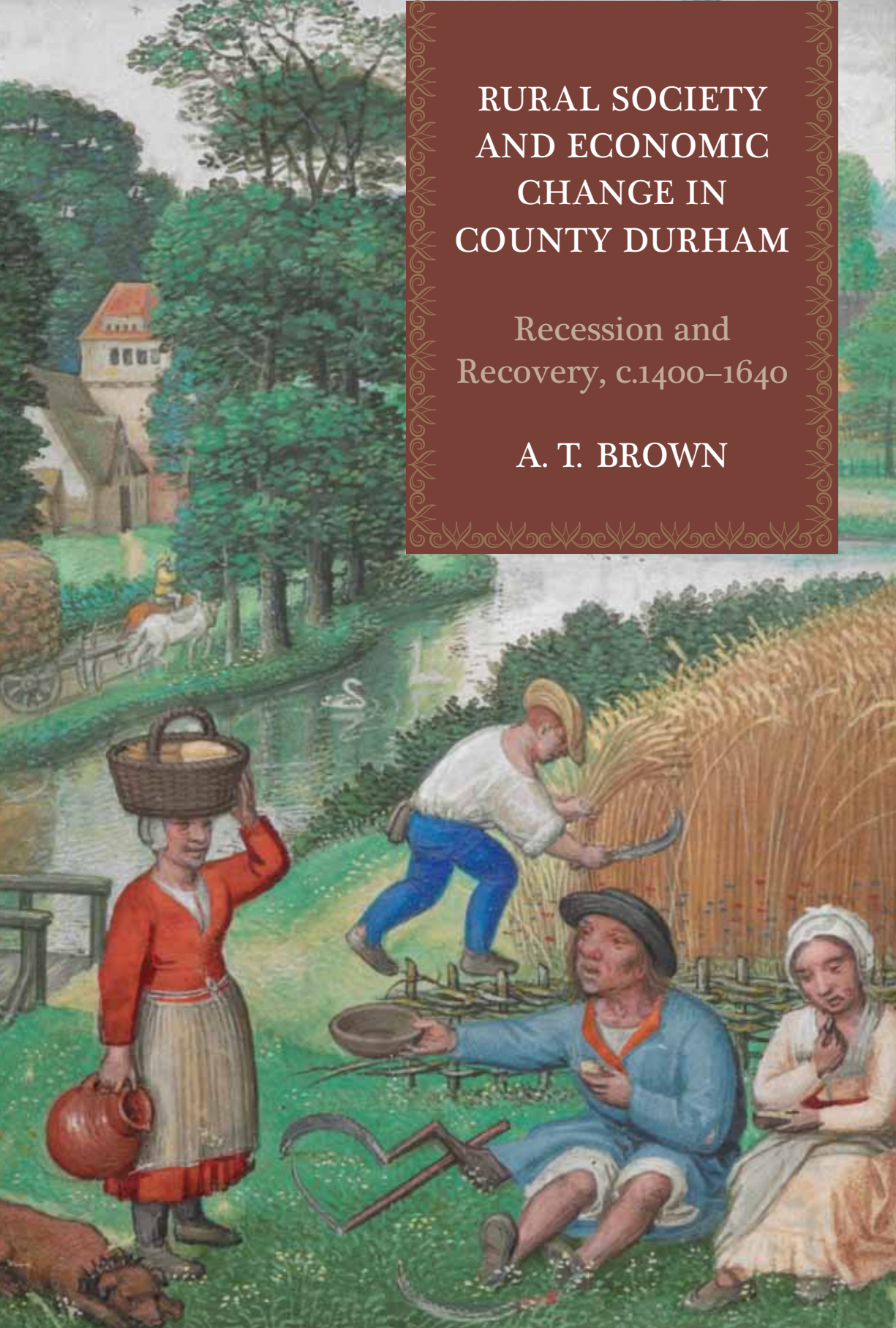
RURAL SOCIETY AND ECONOMIC CHANGE IN COUNTY DURHAM

Recession and Recovery, c.1400–1640

A. T. BROWN



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In loving memory of my grandad Tom Brown

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Abbreviations

AA	*Archaeologia Aeliana*
AgHR	*Agricultural History Review*
AHEW	*The Agrarian History of England and Wales*
AHR	*The American Historical Review*
BIHR	*Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*
CCB	Church Commission Deposit of Durham Bishopric
DCM	Durham Cathedral Muniments
DKR	'Durham Records: Cursitor's Records: Inquisitions Post Mortem', in *The Forty-Fourth Annual Report of the Deputy Keeper of the Public Records* (London, 1883) and *The Forty-Fifth Annual Report of the Deputy Keeper of the Public Records* (London, 1885)
DPRI	Durham Probate Records, Durham University Library
DUL, ASC	Durham University Library, Archives and Special Collections
EcHR	*Economic History Review*
HJ	*Historical Journal*
IPM	Inquisition Post Mortem
JEcH	*Journal of Economic History*
JIH	*Journal of Interdisciplinary History*
JMH	*Journal of Medieval History*
MH	*Midland History*
NH	*Northern History*
P&P	*Past and Present*
SHC	Surrey History Centre
TNA	The National Archives, London

Introduction

In 1597, Richard Bellasis wrote his will which detailed extensive bequests to his extended family, with each of his many nieces and nephews receiving between £100 and £200, as well as £100 being put aside for mending the highways of county Durham. Unlike many testators, he was not anticipating that these substantial bequests would be financed by the sale of his personal goods or from mortgaging his property but instead expected them to be made from the gold and silver he had sequestered around his home at Morton, a list of which was included with his will. Running to a total of over £2,000, this list included £800 walled away to the west side 'of the litell darke staire that goeth downe out of my bedde chamber'; a small stash 'put underfote, under the boordes'; further money 'laide within the bottom of the table chair'; some £400 in 'eight severall lether bagges' in the presser in his study; and a further £64 'thrust into an old lether shoe that lieth upon the upper floore of the said presser'.[1] Only his servant, Margaret Lambert, knew of these large stores of gold and silver throughout his home, having helped him hide them, and perhaps this explains the very generous bequest of £100 she was to receive on his death. Richard Bellasis was no mere hoarder, however, having already purchased the manors of Ludworth, Haswell and Owton in county Durham. In the fifteenth century the Bellasis family had been little more than members of the minor gentry, owning the single manor of Henknoll near Bishop Auckland, which was valued at £5 in 1409, but by the time of the lay subsidy of 1624, William Bellasis was one of the highest appraised individuals in the county. How did families like the Bellasises not only survive the difficulties of the mid-fifteenth-century recession, but actually come to prosper during the high levels of inflation in the sixteenth century? In the fifteenth century, rural society experienced one of the worst recessions in documented English history which was followed by a century of population growth and high levels of inflation, but what were the effects of these economic changes on the social structure of the English countryside?

This book seeks to answer these questions by exploring the effects of recession and inflation on rural society in county Durham, a region characterised by a high concentration of ecclesiastical landownership and the precocious development of large-scale coal production. It traces the fortunes of different types of estates and landholders in county Durham between the late fourteenth and early seventeenth centuries, showing the degree to which patterns of landholding fixed in the period of recession and low

1 DPRI/1/1599/B6/3–4. See chapter 4 for a more extensive discussion of Richard Bellasis.

population levels of the fifteenth century affected the distribution of profits between different types of lords and tenants in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. This book is broadly divided into three sections: the first two chapters explore the divergent development of the two major ecclesiastical estates in Durham; the next three chapters analyse the changing distribution of landed power amongst the laity of the palatinate; and the final two chapters explore how these changes in rural society affected the opportunities and challenges facing Durham tenants, with the gradual stratification of landed society and the emergence of the yeomanry as a social group. As such, it addresses the causes and consequences of agrarian capitalism in the sixteenth century and the relationship between these economic changes and the social structure of late medieval and early modern England. It shows that estate management and institutional constraints were crucial factors in the transformation of the English countryside, often creating a degree of path dependency which affected decision-making and economic opportunities for landlords and tenants alike into the early seventeenth century.

There has been considerable debate about the mechanisms of change in agrarian societies between those who, broadly speaking, favour changes in demography, commercialisation or class relations as explanatory factors of change.[2] In primarily agrarian societies demography has traditionally been seen as the most fundamental factor influencing the demand for land, labour and food, thus affecting, although by no means straightforwardly determining, levels of rent, wages and prices respectively. As such, changes in demography have been seen as vital in producing structural transformations of pre-industrial societies, often as fluctuations in population size push the supply or demand of resources to a crisis point.[3] M. M. Postan was a primary advocate of this neo-Malthusian approach to the agrarian history of medieval Europe, arguing that population growth outstripped economic expansion between 1000 and 1300. Thus for Postan, medieval society was pushed towards a crisis point by population growth as more marginal agricultural land was cultivated, producing a steady decline in yields.[4] This interpretation of population growth in the thirteenth century has come under criticism in recent decades, most notably from

2 See John Hatcher and Mark Bailey, *Modelling the Middle Ages: the History and Theory of England's Economic Development* (Oxford, 2001), pp. 1–20; see also the essays in Rodney Hilton et al., *The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism* (London, 1976); T. H. Aston and C. H. E. Philpin (eds.), *The Brenner Debate: Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe* (Cambridge, 1987); C. Dyer, P. Coss and C. Wickham (eds.), *Rodney Hilton's Middle Ages: An Exploration of Historical Themes* (Oxford, 2007).

3 For a survey of this literature see Hatcher and Bailey, *Modelling the Middle Ages*, pp. 21–65; Mark Bailey, 'Demographic Decline in Late Medieval England: Some Thoughts on Recent Research', *EcHR*, 49 (1996), pp. 1–19; M. M. Postan, 'Some Economic Evidence of Declining Population in the Later Middle Ages', *EcHR*, 2 (1950), pp. 221–46.

4 M. M. Postan, 'The Economic Foundations of Medieval Society', in M. M. Postan, *Essays on Medieval Agriculture and General Problems of the Medieval Economy* (Cambridge, 1973), pp. 3–27 and his 'Medieval Agrarian Society in its Prime: England', in M. M. Postan (ed.), *The Cambridge*

Bruce Campbell and Mark Overton, whose work has shown that medieval society may well have followed a Boserupian rather than a Malthusian model of agricultural growth.[5] They have found that 'in the late-thirteenth and early-fourteenth centuries, and again in the late-sixteenth and early-seventeenth centuries, yields did not fall as population grew: on the contrary, they rose', arguing that land responds far more generously to additional inputs of labour than has traditionally been assumed.[6]

Whether or not historians would now agree with Postan's argument that the Great Famine of 1315–17 was an inevitable Malthusian check, many still advocate the primacy of demographic change in creating economic and social transformations of agrarian societies. Most notably, demography has taken centre stage in much of the historiography of pre-industrial England thanks to the efforts of the Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure, and rightly so, for it clearly played a very important role in the transformation of rural society.[7] The Black Death, for example, was more than just a catalyst for processes already underway and had profound effects on rural society, standing 'unchallenged as the greatest disaster in documented human history, claiming the lives of up to half the population of Europe in just a handful of years'.[8] After the price crash of the 1370s there was at least a century of population stagnation or decline which affected all sections of rural society and, although the inflation of the sixteenth century was partially caused by debasement of the coinage, it is clear that many of the problems faced by rural society in this century were caused by rapid demographic growth.[9] Rentier landlords strug-

Economic History of Europe, Vol. 1: The Agrarian Life of the Middle Ages (Cambridge, 1966), pp. 548–70.

5 Bruce M. S. Campbell, 'The Agrarian Problem in the Early Fourteenth Century', *P&P*, 188 (2005), pp. 3–70; Bruce M. S. Campbell and Mark Overton, 'A New Perspective on Medieval and Early Modern Agriculture: Six Centuries of Norfolk Farming, c.1250–c.1850', *P&P*, 141 (1993), pp. 38–105; Ester Boserup, *The Conditions of Agricultural Growth: the Economics of Agrarian Change Under Population Pressure* (London, 1965); for Malthus, see *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, first published in 1798.

6 Campbell and Overton, 'A New Perspective', p. 41.

7 For the work of the Cambridge Group, see for example: E. A. Wrigley and R. S. Schofield, *The Population History of England, 1541–1871: A Reconstruction* (London, 1981); E. A. Wrigley, R. S. Davies, J. E. Oeppen and R. S. Schofield, *English Population History from Family Reconstitution, 1580–1837* (Cambridge, 1997); Lloyd Bonfield, Richard Smith, Keith Wrightson (eds.), *The World We Have Gained: Histories of Population and Social Structure* (Oxford, 1986).

8 Phillipp Schofield, 'Tenurial Developments and the Availability of Customary Land in a Later Medieval Community', *EcHR*, 49 (1996), p. 250. Quotation from Mark Bailey, 'Introduction' in Mark Bailey and S. H. Rigby (eds.), *Town and Countryside in the Age of the Black Death: Essays in Honour of John Hatcher* (Turnhout, 2012), p. 20.

9 For an overview of these economic and social changes, see for example: M. M. Postan, *The Medieval Economy and Society: Economic History of Britain, 1100–1500* (London, 1972); Richard Britnell, *Britain and Ireland, 1050–1530: Economy and Society* (Oxford, 2004); Christopher Dyer, *An Age of Transition? Economy and Society in England in the Later Middle Ages* (Oxford, 2005); Keith Wrightson, *Earthly Necessities: Economic Lives in Early Modern Britain, 1470–1750* (New Haven, 2000); Andy Wood, *The Memory of the People: Custom and Popular Senses of the Past in*

gled to increase their rents to keep pace with inflation, often leaving the aristocracy and larger landowners at an economic disadvantage compared to the lesser gentry who still worked their own lands. Moreover, the consolidated holdings created during the fifteenth century did not break apart as population increased, which produced a large rural landless population: some people were forced to carve out cottage holdings on the waste, others worked as wage labourers on the farms of their more fortunate neighbours or in the burgeoning cities, and still others roamed the roads of early modern England in search of work.[10]

Overall movements in demography were therefore important in producing the conditions for change in rural society during this period, but alone they cannot explain the direction or nature of that change. Why, for example, did population increase in the thirteenth century lead to a fragmentation of peasant holdings whereas a similar growth in the sixteenth century led to the engrossment of holdings by a wealthy yeomanry who were employing wage labour from the rural poor? Demographic factors were a key dynamic in the creation of various socio-economic trends, but how rural society adapted to them was not a linear or predictable process. Of course, this is widely acknowledged by historical demographers and often embraced by them, but the demographic model became so pervasive in the historiography of this period that in many works it seemed as though population fluctuations were *the* determinant of change in pre-industrial societies.[11] For example, in his introduction to Tawney's *Agrarian Problem*, Lawrence Stone described how 'population pressure has replaced the wicked enclosing or rack-renting landlord as the *diabolus ex machina*'.[12]

Alternatively, the extent of commercialisation has been seen as fundamental in producing economic growth. Nearly a century ago, Henri Pirenne put forward his thesis that long-distance mercantile trade and the evolution of cities created economic growth in medieval Europe between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries.[13] Robert Lopez drew on this work to advocate a Commercial Revolution which preceded the better-known Industrial Revolution. Through the growth of various businesses

Early Modern England (Cambridge, 2013); C. G. A. Clay, *Economic Expansion and Social Change: England 1500–1700*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, 1984).

10 See for example Henry French and R. W. Hoyle, *The Character of English Rural Society: Earls Colne, 1550–1750* (Manchester, 2007); David Palliser, 'Tawney's Century: Brave New World or Malthusian Trap?', *EcHR*, 35 (1982), pp. 339–53; R. H. Tawney, *The Agrarian Problem in the Sixteenth Century* (London, 1912); Jane Whittle, *The Development of Agrarian Capitalism: Land and Labour in Norfolk, 1440–1580* (Oxford, 2000); Keith Wrightson and David Levine, *Poverty and Piety in an English Village: Terling, 1525–1700* (Oxford, 1995).

11 For a survey of this research, see Hatcher and Bailey, *Modelling the Middle Ages*, pp. 21–65; D. B. Grigg, *Population Growth and Agrarian Change: An Historical Perspective* (Cambridge, 1980).

12 Lawrence Stone's introduction to the Harper Torchbooks version of R. H. Tawney, *The Agrarian Problem in the Sixteenth Century* (New York, 1967), p. xi.

13 Henri Pirenne, *Medieval Cities: Their Origins and the Revival of Trade* (Princeton, 1925). For a summary of this research, see J. Masschaele, 'Economic Take-Off and the Rise of Markets', in Carol Lansing and Edward D. English (eds.), *A Companion to the Medieval World* (Chichester, 2009), pp. 89–110.

and institutions, international banking, credit exchanges and debt enforcements were increasingly possible across medieval Europe. Acknowledging the importance of demographic growth, Lopez went on to demonstrate how the medieval economy experienced a commercial revolution between the tenth and the fourteenth centuries, in which an 'underdeveloped society succeeded in developing itself, mostly by its own efforts': 'even as demographic growth was a prime motor of agricultural progress, so agricultural progress was an essential prerequisite of the Commercial Revolution'.[14] James Masschaele and John Langdon have tried to combine these factors to show that there was a 'powerful conjunction between entrepreneurial activity and population growth, and that the former tended to lead the latter' in medieval England.[15]

The extent of commercialisation in medieval society has received significant attention in recent decades and has been the focus of much of the work of Richard Britnell, Bruce Campbell, Christopher Dyer, David Stone and Ben Dodds.[16] Rather than focusing upon international trade, this research has shown that commercialisation penetrated deeply into the medieval English economy, affecting not only how merchants and towns operated but also how peasants responded to market opportunities. As a result, Dyer has advocated that some features of a 'consumer society' can be traced back to the fourteenth century, if not earlier. These include, for example, the concept of economic investment and improvement; the notion of moral improvement in relation to charity; the growth in self-confidence and independence amongst peasants; and the widespread ownership of consumer items.[17] Growing market penetration saw the increasing commercialisation of land, labour, food and services, all of which helped pave the way for the development of agrarian capitalism. However, there are limitations on how far market penetration can be used as an explanatory factor, not least its potentially circular nature: there were more markets therefore peasants became more market-oriented, which in turn produced more markets and thus a greater market-orientation. There are, for example, many societies which have

14 Robert Lopez, *The Commercial Revolution of the Middle Ages, 950–1350* (Englewood Cliffs, 1971), preface and p. 56.

15 J. Langdon and J. Masschaele, 'Commercial Activity and Population Growth in Medieval England', *P&P*, 190 (2006), p. 36.

16 David Stone, *Decision-Making in Medieval Agriculture* (Oxford, 2005), pp. 3–44; Christopher Dyer, *Making a Living in the Middle Ages: The People of Britain, 850–1520* (London, 2002), pp. 155–86; Britnell, *Britain and Ireland*, pp. 158–222; Ben Dodds, *Peasants and Production in the Medieval North-East: the Evidence from Tithes, 1270–1536* (Woodbridge, 2007), pp. 132–61; Also see the essays in Richard Britnell and Bruce M. S. Campbell (eds.), *A Commercialising Economy : England 1086 to c.1300* (Manchester, 1995). For a survey of the importance of this research, see Mark Bailey, 'The Commercialisation of the English Economy, 1086–1500', *JMH*, 24 (1998), pp. 297–311. Eric Schneider has recently questioned the price responsiveness of seigniorial agriculture, Eric B. Schneider, 'Prices and Production: Agricultural Supply Response in Fourteenth-Century England', *EcHR*, 67 (2014), pp. 66–91.

17 Dyer, *An Age of Transition?*, pp. 242–6.

markets, money and commodities but do not develop agrarian capitalism, and so the key issue is why this happened in the specific case of England across this period.

The third school of thought to which historians have traditionally ascribed is the historical materialism of Marxism, with Marx arguing that 'in the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production'.[18] The leading Marxist historian of the middle ages Rodney Hilton maintained throughout his career that the 'conflict between landlords and peasants, however muted or however intense, over the appropriation of surplus product of the peasant holding, was a prime mover in the evolution of medieval society'.[19] There have been many historians since Marx who have emphasised the primacy of social relations who might not consider themselves Marxist in political terms but whose work has often been inspired by historical materialism.[20] For example, though R. H. Tawney was not a Marxist, Jane Whittle has recently noted that his focus upon landlord and tenant relations and, in particular, the expropriation of the peasantry during the sixteenth century highlighted exactly those issues which Marx chose to emphasise. In Marx's words, the 'great feudal lords created an incomparably larger proletariat by the forcible driving of the peasantry from the land', a claim which Tawney would not have refuted.[21]

Most notably Robert Brenner followed in Marx's footsteps in arguing that it is the surplus-extraction relationship that defines the fundamental classes in a society, and that it was changes in this relationship which were the key mechanism in producing much broader transformations in society.[22] In particular, he highlighted problems with the demography model by his comparisons with Eastern Europe, showing how the same exogenous impact could have different social and economic effects. He sought to explain why serfdom came crashing down in Western Europe at the same time as it was being reimposed in Eastern Europe, despite these societies having

18 Karl Marx, 'Preface' to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859). For other important Marxist thinkers, see: A. V. Chayanov, *The Theory of Peasant Economy* (ed.) Daniel Thorner et al. (Madison, 1986); Maurice Dobb, *Studies in the Development of Capitalism* (London, 1946); E.A. Kosminsky, *Studies in the Agrarian History of England in the Thirteenth Century* (ed.) by R. H. Hilton, trans. by Ruth Kisch (Oxford, 1956); R. H. Hilton, *The Decline of Serfdom in Medieval England* (London, 1969); and Eric Hobsbawm, *How to Change the World: Tales of Marx and Marxism* (London, 2011).

19 R. H. Hilton, *Class Conflict and the Crisis of Feudalism* (London, 1985), p. 9.

20 S. H. Rigby, 'Historical Materialism: Social Structure and Social Change in the Middle Ages', *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 34 (2004), p. 498.

21 Karl Marx, *Capital*, quoted in Jane Whittle, 'Introduction: Tawney's *Agrarian Problem* Revisited', in Jane Whittle (ed.), *Landlords and Tenants in Britain, 1440–1660: Tawney's Agrarian Problem Revisited* (Woodbridge, 2013), p. 1.

22 Robert Brenner, 'Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe', in T. H. Aston and C. H. E. Philpin (eds.), *The Brenner Debate: Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe* (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 10–12.

endured similar demographic decline.[23] His argument has often been questioned, not only because of the historical accuracy of his observations but also because of their theoretical underpinning in which he asserted that class relations were of primary importance.[24] However, his critique of the demography model is significant because it highlighted the importance of other factors which could radically affect how rural society adapted to the challenge of demographic change. As Steve Rigby has noted, there are essentially two Brenners:

> the 'strong' version illegitimately ascribes a causal primacy to class structure and even denies that demographic change was a genuine 'cause' of economic change on the grounds that different socio-economic outcomes resulted from similar demographic trends: the 'dilute' version impressively demonstrates that demographic trends acquire their significance for long-term economic change only in connection with specific forms of class structure.[25]

More recently, Rigby, followed by John Hatcher and Mark Bailey, has advocated the pluralism of causes in creating economic change. Using Mill's emphasis upon 'the whole of the contingencies of every description', Rigby has questioned the professional compulsion to establish a hierarchy of causes which would permit the ultimate or primary cause to be identified.[26] Similarly, Hatcher and Bailey have noted the 'recurrent streaks of superficiality and foolishness' in many of these causation debates: 'how can it be thought essential to minimise the role of demographic factors simply because one believes in the power of property relations?'[27] It was the combination of demographic changes, increasing commercialisation and changes in class relations which, when taken together, help to explain economic change in this period. Thus perceived differences between these schools of explanatory thought lie in the importance they place on individual causes, often reflecting differences between the purposes of individual historians rather than necessarily disputes over the events themselves.

In more recent years, economists have sought ways of modelling unpredictable and non-economic influences in the long-term evolution of societies. This has led to the development of path-dependency theory and new institutional economics, which have become important concepts in the social and political sciences: both offering some important challenges to neoclassical economics. Path dependency has

23 Ibid., pp. 10–64.

24 See the essays in Aston and Philpin (eds.), *The Brenner Debate*. See also, S. H. Rigby, *English Society in the Later Middle Ages: Class, Status and Gender* (Basingstoke, 1995); and Mark Bailey, *The Decline of Serfdom in Late Medieval England: From Bondage to Freedom* (Woodbridge, 2014), pp. 3–15.

25 S. H. Rigby, 'Historical Causation: Is One Thing More Important Than Another?', *History*, 80 (1995), p. 239.

26 Ibid., p. 233.

27 Hatcher and Bailey, *Modelling the Middle Ages*, p. 238.

especially been evoked to explain the adoption of certain technologies despite more efficient alternatives often existing. For example, Paul David argued that the universal adoption of the QWERTY keyboard showed the importance of historical accidents and the power of institutional constraints, despite the fact that other layouts were demonstrably more efficient and ergonomic.[28] Similarly, the width of 60 per cent of world railways today was developed from the width of waggonways used in the coal industry in north-eastern England, and, despite being regarded as narrower than optimal by many modern engineers, has never been replaced, displaying nearly two centuries of path dependency.[29]

In many ways, path dependence is very familiar to historians and has often been reduced to the metaphorical and vague sentiment that 'history matters' – that what's gone before will affect what will come – but at its most powerful path dependence 'may help explain why some countries succeed and others do not'.[30] Scott Page has argued that this theory has three related causes: increasing returns, meaning that the more a choice is made the greater its benefits (although this is in fact debatable since there are many instances of inefficiencies being introduced into economies in this fashion); self-reinforcement, in which taking an action sets in place complementary forces that encourage that choice to be sustained; and lock-in, which means that one choice becomes better than any other because a sufficient number of people have already made that choice and it becomes difficult to overturn it.[31] In path-dependency theory, decisions taken under past conditions remain fundamentally important long after those economic conditions have changed. As Paul Pierson has argued, the complexities of historical contingency mean that:

> specific patterns of timing and sequence matter; starting from similar conditions a range of social outcomes is often possible; large consequences may result from relatively small or contingent events; and particular courses of action, once introduced, can be virtually impossible to reverse.[32]

Given the long-term nature of landownership, tenure and agricultural production in rural societies, this theoretical framework has considerable implications for the study of medieval and early modern England.

28 P. A. David, 'Clio and the Economics of QWERTY', *American Economic Review*, 75 (1985), pp. 332–7. See also, for example, W. Brian Arthur, 'Competing Technologies, Increasing Returns, and Lock-In by Historical Events', *Economic Journal*, 99 (1989), pp. 116–31.

29 Douglas J. Puffert, 'Path Dependence, Network Form, and Technological Change', in Timothy W. Guinnane, William A. Sundstrom, and Warren Whatley (eds.), *History Matters: Essays on Economic Growth, Technology, and Demographic Change* (Stanford, 2004), pp. 63–94.

30 William Easterly, *The Elusive Quest for Growth: Economists' Adventures and Misadventures in the Tropics* (Cambridge, 2001).

31 Scott E. Page, 'Path Dependency', *Quarterly Journal of Political Science*, 1 (2006), p. 89.

32 Paul Pierson, *Politics in Time: History, Institutions and Social Analysis* (Princeton, 2004), pp. 18–19.

The revival of institutional economics has complemented many of the above theories, questioning the idea of evolutionary economic theory by showing how many economies have levels of inefficiency which survive in the long term.[33] In this respect, Douglass North has argued that 'institutional change shapes the way societies evolve through time and hence is the key to understanding historical change'.[34] Although we should be careful about describing institutional factors as 'the key' to understanding economic development, it is clear that institutional constraints play a considerable role in affecting how societies respond to changes in demography, commercialisation and class relations. The way organisations and institutions interact with formal and informal constraints, therefore, often helps to explain why some societies experience economic growth and others experience long-term stagnation. To put this in the present context, the relationship between landlords and tenants had reached an equilibrium based upon economic conditions in the fifteenth century which was fundamentally altered by population growth, inflation and commercial expansion in the sixteenth century. Individual landowners and groups of tenants sought to renegotiate that equilibrium, whether through law, custom or riot, but their ability to do so was often constrained by the previous arrangements in place, with many of the conflicts in rural society arising from these landlord–tenant relations. There are limitations to path dependency as a theory for economic development, not least its potentially deterministic approach to history and the seeming inevitability of events, but given the relative inflexibility of agrarian tenures in this period it has the potential to help explain the success or failure of economic groups in society. As we will see, the decisions taken during the depth of the mid-fifteenth-century recession, or indeed those not taken, continued to have an impact upon rural society for generations to come, long after those economic conditions were no longer prevalent.

It has often been recognised that there are many structural differences in agrarian societies which help to produce, accelerate or inhibit change. Joan Thirsk and William Hoskins, for example, highlighted the importance of understanding regional variations in agrarian history, for they often influenced, amongst other things, the extent of manorialisation, the population density, the market opportunities and above all the type of agriculture practised in an area.[35] Estates and seigniorial lordship also

[33] For a brief overview of new institutional economics see: Douglass C. North, *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance* (Cambridge, 1991); Ronald Coase, 'The Nature of the Firm', *Economica*, 4 (1937), pp. 386–405; Ronald Coase, 'The Problem of Social Cost', *Journal of Law and Economics*, 3 (1960), pp. 1–44; Thrainn Eggertsson, *Economic Behaviour and Institutions* (Cambridge, 1990); and Paul Milgrom et al., 'The Role of Institutions in the Revival of Trade: the Law Merchant, Private Judges, and the Champagne Fairs', *Economics and Politics*, 2 (1990), pp. 1–23. For the evolutionary economics North was criticising, see: Armen Alchian, 'Uncertainty, Evolution and Economic Theory', *Journal of Political Economy*, 58 (1950), pp. 211–21.

[34] North, *Institutions, Institutional Change*, p. 3.

[35] Joan Thirsk, 'The Farming Regions of England', in J. Thirsk (ed.), *The Agrarian History of England and Wales, Vol. 4: 1500–1640* (Cambridge, 1967), pp. 1–112; W. G. Hoskins, 'Regional Farming in England', *AgHR*, 2 (1954), pp. 3–11.

provided structural constraints upon landowners and tenants in this period that were as real and as important as the weather, soil conditions, market opportunities or indeed population movements. Placing a village within the institutional context of the estate it was a constituent part of is as important as placing it within a geological topography. As will be seen, the monks of Durham Cathedral Priory and the bishops of Durham faced the same demographic crisis in the late fourteenth century, but how the two institutions reacted differed greatly, creating long-term structural differences between their estates which had significant consequences for their sixteenth-century counterparts. These differences had profound effects upon their tenants, providing them with entirely different opportunities and challenges in both centuries. It was this same path dependence which posed such problems for rentier landlords after their withdrawal from direct-demesne agriculture in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. Many of their successors ran into difficulties in the sixteenth century and were forced to sell off their ancestral estates piecemeal, often to their own tenants who were increasingly benefiting from rising agricultural prices.[36] Estates and institutional constraints played a significant role in the economic development of rural society in this period and had long-term consequences by affecting the real incomes of landowners and their tenants alike.[37]

The Problems of Periodisation

The ability of historians to explore the changes in English society across this period has been hindered by the division of the profession into medieval and early modern specialisms, usually split at the end of the fifteenth century. Although this division has often been disparaged, it has persisted with extraordinary tenacity, not only in the historiography, but also in research projects and undergraduate courses studying this period. Margaret Yates summarised this division as:

> A historical fault line of seismic proportions [which] lies at the end of the fifteenth century. It has been re-enforced by the institutional and academic divisions within the discipline into 'periods' of history as medieval, early modern, and modern, which have led to segregation into specialisms and a fragmentation of research into chronologically discrete agendas.[38]

36 See the introduction to chapter 2 for a more in-depth discussion of path-dependency, rent and tenure.

37 Phillipp Schofield has discussed the 'ways in which lords served as "filters" for the range of exogenous influences' which affected rural society, but since the 1970s when there was a flurry of institutional studies across the country, there has been a relative paucity of work focusing upon estate management and institutional constraints, Phillipp Schofield, *Peasants and Community in Medieval England, 1200–1500* (Basingstoke, 2003), p. 35.

38 Margaret Yates, *Town and Countryside in Western Berkshire, c.1327–c.1600: Social and Economic Change* (Woodbridge, 2007), p. 1.

We need to bridge the gulf between these specialisms as this division is particularly detrimental for our understanding of such a key transitional period: many of the challenges and opportunities people faced in the sixteenth century had their origin in the fourteenth century, whilst many of the seeds of change planted in the earlier period did not reach fruition until the late sixteenth century.

Richard Britnell has argued that:

> The period 1471–1529 is often seen as an epilogue to the middle ages, or a prologue to the early modern period, for reasons that have more to do with the way in which historians specialise than with any intrinsic characteristics of these particular years.[39]

This conceptual division not only hinders our ability to trace developments across this period but it has also directly affected our interpretations of rural society. Interdisciplinary approaches have become commonplace in new research projects, and yet, despite our willingness to break down some traditional boundaries by engaging with the work of neighbouring disciplines, there is still a remarkable reluctance to demolish the artificial walls we have erected through the process of periodisation. Occasionally we peer over them, sometimes we even take a few bricks down and surreptitiously rebuild them elsewhere, but these walls have proven surprisingly enduring despite criticism. Thus disagreements abound surrounding the timing, extent and mechanisms of change, much akin to two neighbours arguing over a boundary dispute.[40]

The division between the medieval and early modern periods is not just a matter of arbitrary professional preferences because there are myriad practical problems with crossing this divide which have been imposed upon historians by the sources themselves, with a complete discontinuity in the sources used by economic and social historians from the fourteenth to the early seventeenth centuries. Parish registers and probate inventories form the predominant sources for the early modern period, whilst the records of feudal estates have offered a fertile ground for medievalists. This change has naturally had an impact upon the effectiveness with which historians of each period can engage with certain debates. Early modernists, for example, have focused upon detailed demographic studies, upon the living standards of the poor and upon household economics. There have been numerous admirable studies of these topics by medievalists, but the lack of adequate sources has plagued such

39 R. H. Britnell, *The Closing of the Middle Ages? England, 1471–1529* (Cambridge, 1997), p. 1.

40 For example, the end point of Dyer's *An Age of Transition?* is not necessarily the starting point of Wrightson's *Earthly Necessities*, two of the best explorations of the medieval and early modern economy respectively. This relates to, amongst other themes, the level of commercialisation in society; the economic rationality and individualism of everyday people; improving living standards and social ambition; the rise of the yeomanry and commercial farming; and even the development of the European marriage pattern.

attempts. We need only compare the work on demography by E. A. Wrigley and R. S. Schofield using parish registers with Hatcher's attempts to estimate life expectancies of monks in the fifteenth century or with Campbell's estimates of total population based upon the amount of land under cultivation: the former obviously benefit from the availability of sources which are more appropriate for such investigations.[41] Although medievalists traditionally bemoan their lack of sources, there are in fact some areas in which their knowledge far exceeds that of early modernists as, for example, in the abundance of data on yields in the early fourteenth century compared to the lack thereof in the latter period: a lack which obliged Overton to use probate inventories as an indirect source for calculating yields in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.[42]

This period is made even more difficult to study by the scarcity of surviving sources concerning agricultural progress from the late fourteenth to the mid-sixteenth century, a lack which has been widely commented upon. In his summary of agricultural sources in 1955, Rodney Hilton wrote that:

> the agrarian history of England between the rising of 1381 and the Dissolution of the Monasteries is much more obscure than it ought to be. The fact seems to be that historians have been nurtured in the manorial documentation of the great estates, and when these sources fail, as a result of the almost universal leasing of manors to farmers, they have found nothing to replace them. Consequently, bibliographies of English history of the fifteenth century contain little more than a sprinkling of inadequate and out-of-date material on agrarian conditions.[43]

He concluded that here lies 'one of the most formidable gaps in our knowledge of English rural life'. Although there has been much work on this period in the intervening decades Campbell and Overton still remarked in the 1990s on this relative paucity of investigation:

> the most marked dichotomy in the historiography of this six hundred year period is between interpretations of the medieval and early modern periods. Between them lie the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries; *a murky, ill-documented and under-researched period*.[44]

41 Wrigley and Schofield, *The Population History of England*; John Hatcher, Alan Piper, David Stone, 'Monastic Mortality: Durham Priory, 1395–1529', *EcHR*, 59 (2006), pp. 667–87; Bruce M. S. Campbell, *English Seigniorial Agriculture, 1250–1450* (Cambridge, 2000).

42 See for example the medieval debate on yields: Postan, 'Medieval Agrarian Society in its Prime: England', pp. 548–59; J. Z. Titow, *Winchester Yields: a Study in Medieval Agricultural Productivity* (Cambridge, 1972); Bruce M. S. Campbell, 'Arable Productivity in Medieval England: Some Evidence from Norfolk', *JEcH*, 43 (1983), pp. 379–404; Mark Overton, 'Estimating Crop Yields from Probate Inventories: An Example from East Anglia, 1585–1735', *JEcH*, 39 (1979), pp. 363–78.

43 R. H. Hilton, 'The Content and Sources of English Agrarian History before 1500', *AgHR*, 3 (1955), p. 6.

44 Campbell and Overton, 'A New Perspective', pp. 47–8. My italics.

It is a problem which has been compounded by contemporary events themselves, for socio-economic trends separate the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries as surely as do our own conceptions of the past, with rural society in the late-sixteenth century facing significantly different problems to their counterparts of the mid-fifteenth century. The fifteenth century is typically characterised as a period of economic stagnation or recession, with low prices, low rents and high wages, providing agricultural producers and landowners with a whole host of difficult decisions.[45] Did tenants retreat from the market into subsistence agriculture because of low prices and high wages despite generally having enlarged their holdings? How did landlords manage to retain their tenants when land was now so abundantly available?[46] The population of England was between 4 million and 6 million on the eve of the Black Death; it was reduced to just 2.5 million by 1377, and may have fallen to around 2 million by the end of the fifteenth century.[47] By comparison, the population grew to around 3 million by 1560, reaching 4 million by 1600 and was over 5 million by the time of the English Civil War.[48] This rapid recovery brought with it a whole plethora of different problems, not least a high demand for food which increasingly outstripped supply, with a resultant increase in grain prices. Although there was a general rise in inflation, partially exacerbated by Henry VIII's debasement of the coinage, it is generally thought that food prices, especially grain prices, rose more steeply than those for other goods.[49] Hoskins, for example, found that the average price of wheat increased from between 4s and 5s per quarter in the last two decades of the fifteenth century

45 See for example: M. M. Postan, 'The Fifteenth Century', *EcHR*, 9 (1939), pp. 160–7; John Hatcher, *Plague, Population and the English Economy, 1348–1530* (London, 1977); for a dissenting view, see A. R. Bridbury, *Economic Growth: England in the Later Middle Ages* (Westport, 1983).

46 For some of the problems facing landlords after the Black Death, see Christopher Dyer, *Lords and Peasants in a Changing Society: The Estates of the Bishopric of Worcester, 680–1540* (Cambridge, 1980); and his 'A Redistribution of Incomes in Fifteenth-Century England', *P&P*, 39 (1968), pp. 11–33.

47 For an estimated figure of pre-plague population of 6 million see Postan, 'Medieval Agrarian Society in its Prime: England', pp. 549–632 and R. M. Smith, 'Human Resources', in G. Astill and A. Grant (eds.), *The Countryside of Medieval England* (Oxford, 1988), pp. 188–212; for a lower estimate of around 4.7 million, see Campbell, *English Seigniorial Agriculture*; for mortality rate estimates in the fifteenth century see: Hatcher, *Plague, Population and the English Economy*; John Hatcher, 'Mortality in the Fifteenth Century: Some New Evidence', *EcHR*, 39 (1986), pp. 19–38; R. M. Smith, 'Measuring Adult Mortality in an Age of Plague: England, 1349–1540', in Bailey and Rigby (eds.), *Town and Countryside in the Age of the Black Death*, pp. 43–85; for a European estimate see Josiah C. Russell, 'Population in Europe', in Carlo M. Cipolla, (ed.), *The Fontana Economic History of Europe, Vol. 1: The Middle Ages* (Glasgow, 1972), pp. 25–71.

48 See for example: Bruce M. S. Campbell, 'The Population of Early Tudor England: A Re-evaluation of the 1522 Muster Returns and 1524 and 1525 Lay Subsidies', *Journal of Historical Geography*, 7 (1981), pp. 145–54; Wrigley and Schofield, *The Population History of England*; J. Cornwall, 'English Population in the Early Sixteenth Century', *EcHR*, 23 (1970), pp. 32–44.

49 For a European perspective, see: F. Braudel and F. Spooner, 'Prices in Europe from 1450 to 1750', in E. E. Rich and C. H. Wilson (eds.), *The Cambridge Economic History of Europe, IV: the Economy of Expanding Europe in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Cambridge, 1967), pp. 378–486.

to consistently over 30s in the 1610s: a six-fold increase in just over a century.[50] Similarly, Harrison recorded an increase in his index of the moving average of all grain prices from around 100 in the second half of the fifteenth century to over 700 by the 1620s.[51] Meanwhile, wages rose but did not keep pace with agricultural prices, producing a decline in real wages over the course of the century, although the extent of this has been questioned.[52] There is still much debate about the course of rents, with custom and tenure often making rent increases difficult, but there was certainly increasing pressure on landed resources, especially after the general engrossment of holdings across the fifteenth century. As a result of these changes, there were more opportunities for agricultural producers to profit during the sixteenth century, but there were also many hidden dangers.

Nonetheless, while there are undoubtedly many valid reasons for viewing these two centuries separately rather than comparatively, the period needs to be analysed as a whole because changes wrought across these centuries were vitally important in the development of agrarian capitalism. Agrarian capitalism involved the transition from a 'rural, peasant society based on subsistence-oriented agriculture to a market-dependent economy in which agriculture is productive enough to support a large non-agricultural population employed in industry and services'.[53] The period from the Black Death to the English Civil War is a key part of this development because it saw the de facto end of serfdom in the late fourteenth century, large-scale engrossment of holdings amongst peasants in the fifteenth century and the emergence of widespread landlessness in the sixteenth century.[54] In this context, Marx and his followers have placed particular emphasis upon the shift from the extra-economic coercion of serfdom to the more purely economic relations of wage labour. Two of the most important changes in the transition from feudalism to capitalism debate were the end of serfdom and the expropriation of peasants from the land, but it is here that Marxism is particularly weak because it struggles to explain why this transition took centuries to fulfil.[55]

50 W. G. Hoskins, 'Harvest Fluctuations and English Economic History, 1480–1619', *AgHR*, 12 (1964), p. 31.

51 C. J. Harrison, 'Grain Price Analysis and Harvest Qualities, 1465–1634', *AgHR*, 19 (1971), pp. 147–51.

52 E. H. Phelps Brown and S. V. Hopkins, 'Seven Centuries of the Prices of Consumables, Compared with Builders' Wage-Rates', *Economica*, 23 (1956), pp. 301–4; John Hatcher, 'Unreal Wages: Long-Run Living Standards and the "Golden Age" of the Fifteenth Century', in Ben Dodds and Christian Liddy (eds.), *Commercial Activity, Markets and Entrepreneurs in the Middle Ages: Essays in Honour of Richard Britnell* (Woodbridge, 2011), pp. 1–24.

53 Whittle, *Agrarian Capitalism*, p. 1.

54 See Mark Bailey's recent book on serfdom which tackles many of the problems related to tenurial development in this period, *The Decline of Serfdom in Late Medieval England*.

55 S. R. Epstein, 'Rodney Hilton, Marxism and the Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism', in C. Dyer, P. Coss and C. Wickham (eds.), *Rodney Hilton's Middle Ages: An Exploration of Historical Themes* (Oxford, 2007), pp. 248–69; see, for example, Dobb, *Studies in the Development*