

COMMERCIAL ACTIVITY,
MARKETS AND ENTREPRENEURS
IN THE MIDDLE AGES

Edited by Ben Dodds and Christian D. Liddy



COMMERCIAL ACTIVITY, MARKETS AND ENTREPRENEURS
IN THE MIDDLE AGES



COMMERCIAL ACTIVITY,
MARKETS AND
ENTREPRENEURS
IN THE MIDDLE AGES

ESSAYS IN HONOUR OF
RICHARD BRITNELL

edited by
Ben Dodds *and* Christian D. Liddy

THE BOYDELL PRESS

© Contributors 2011

All Rights Reserved. Except as permitted under current legislation no part of this work may be photocopied, stored in a retrieval system, published, performed in public, adapted, broadcast, transmitted, recorded or reproduced in any form or by any means, without the prior permission of the copyright owner

First published 2011
The Boydell Press, Woodbridge

ISBN 978 1 84383 684 1

The Boydell Press is an imprint of Boydell & Brewer Ltd
PO Box 9, Woodbridge, Suffolk IP12 3DF, UK
and of Boydell & Brewer Inc.
668 Mount Hope Ave, Rochester, NY 14620, USA
website: www.boydellandbrewer.com

A catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library

The publisher has no responsibility for the continued existence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this book, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Papers used by Boydell & Brewer Ltd are natural, recyclable products
made from wood grown in sustainable forests



Designed and typeset in Aldus with Palatino display by
The Stingray Office, Chorlton-cum-Hardy, Manchester

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CRO 4YY

Contents

.....

| | |
|--|------|
| <i>List of Figures</i> | vii |
| <i>List of Tables</i> | viii |
| <i>List of Contributors</i> | ix |
| <i>List of Abbreviations</i> | x |
| Richard Britnell: An Appreciation <i>Ben Dodds and Christian D. Liddy</i> | xi |
| 1. Unreal Wages: Long-Run Living Standards and the 'Golden Age' of the Fifteenth Century <i>John Hatcher</i> | i |
| 2. Minimum Wages and Unemployment Rates in Medieval England: The Case of Old Woodstock, Oxfordshire, 1256–1357 <i>John Langdon</i> | 25 |
| 3. Crisis Management in London's Food Supply, 1250–1500 <i>Derek Keene</i> | 45 |
| 4. Grain Shortages in Late Medieval Towns <i>John S. Lee</i> | 63 |
| 5. Market Regulation in Fifteenth-Century England <i>James Davis</i> | 81 |
| 6. Self-Government in the Small Towns of Late Medieval England <i>Mark Bailey</i> | 107 |
| 7. Marketing and Trading Networks in Medieval Durham <i>Christine M. Newman</i> | 129 |
| 8. Peasant Opportunities in Rural Durham: Land, Vills and Mills, 1400–1500 <i>Peter L. Larson</i> | 141 |

| | |
|---|-----|
| 9. The Shipmaster as Entrepreneur in Medieval England <i>Maryanne Kowaleski</i> | 165 |
| 10. Cheating the Boss: Robert Carpenter's Embezzlement Instructions (1261×1268) and Employee Fraud in Medieval England <i>Martha Carlin</i> | 183 |
| 11. The Public Life of the Private Charter in Thirteenth-Century England <i>James Masschaele</i> | 199 |
| 12. Luxury Goods in Medieval England <i>Christopher Dyer</i> | 217 |
| <i>Index of People and Places</i> | 239 |
| <i>Bibliography of the Writings of Richard Britnell</i> | 249 |
| <i>Tabula Gratulatoria</i> | 256 |

List of Figures

.....

| | | |
|-----|---|-----|
| 1.1 | Changes in the equivalent of the wage rate of a building craftsman expressed in a composite physical unit of consumables in southern England, 1284–1954 | 4 |
| 1.2 | Real agricultural day wages, 1209–1869 | 4 |
| 3.1 | London wheat prices, 1258–1499 | 49 |
| 3.2 | London wheat prices, daily 1309–29 | 50 |
| 8.1 | Bishop Middleham parish land market, 1350–1500 | 149 |
| 8.2 | Bishop Middleham parish land market, 1400–1420 | 149 |
| 8.3 | Bishop Middleham parish land market, 1480–1500 | 150 |

List of Tables

| | | |
|------|---|-----|
| 1.1 | Estimates of the economic performance of peasant households | 17 |
| 1.2 | Estimates of economic performance of peasant households using revised wage data | 19 |
| 2.1 | Male wages at the royal manor and park at Woodstock, 1256–1357 (part one) | 30 |
| 2.2 | Male wages at the royal manor and park at Woodstock, 1256–1357 (part two) | 31 |
| 2.3 | Female wages at the royal manor and park at Woodstock, 1256–1357 | 32 |
| 2.4 | Women-days worked at the royal manor and park at Woodstock, 1256–1357 | 37 |
| 3.1 | Relative severity of famines measured by peak wheat prices | 51 |
| 3.2 | Winchester bishopric manors with high sale prices for wheat, 1256–63 | 53 |
| 4.1 | Coventry wards in the dearth of 1520 | 67 |
| 6.1 | Exploitation of some boroughs on the estate of the duchy of Cornwall in 1338–9 | 117 |
| 6.2 | Exploitation of some boroughs on the estate of the duchy of Cornwall in 1461–2 | 117 |
| 12.1 | Individuals pursuing luxury and non-luxury occupations in small towns | 229 |
| 12.2 | Individuals pursuing luxury and non-luxury occupations in large towns | 233 |

List of Contributors

.....

| | |
|---------------------|--|
| Mark Bailey | Professor of Late Medieval History at the University of East Anglia |
| Martha Carlin | Professor of History at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee |
| James Davis | Lecturer in Medieval History at Queen’s University Belfast |
| Christopher Dyer | Emeritus Professor of Regional and Local History at the University of Leicester |
| John Hatcher | Emeritus Professor of Economic and Social History at the University of Cambridge |
| Derek Keene | Leverhulme Professor of Comparative Metropolitan History at the University of London |
| Maryanne Kowaleski | Professor and Director of Medieval Studies at Fordham University |
| John Langdon | Emeritus Professor of History at the University of Alberta |
| Peter L. Larson | Associate Professor at the University of Central Florida |
| John S. Lee | Research Associate at the Centre for Medieval Studies at the University of York |
| James Masschaele | Professor of Medieval History at Rutgers University |
| Christine M. Newman | Honorary Fellow in the Department of History at Durham University |

List of Abbreviations

.....

| | |
|----------------|---|
| <i>AgHR</i> | <i>Agricultural History Review</i> |
| <i>AHEW</i> | <i>The Agrarian History of England and Wales</i> , general ed. J. Thirsk (8 vols., Cambridge, 1967–2000) |
| BL | British Library |
| CCR | <i>Calendar of Close Rolls</i> |
| CChR | <i>Calendar of Charter Rolls</i> |
| CIM | <i>Calendar of Inquisitions Miscellaneous</i> |
| CPR | <i>Calendar of Patent Rolls</i> |
| CRR | <i>Curia Regis Rolls of the Reigns of Richard I, John and Henry III preserved in the Public Record Office</i> (19 vols., 1922–2002) |
| CUL | Cambridge University Library |
| DRO | Devon Record Office |
| DUL | Durham University Library |
| ECL | Exeter Cathedral Library |
| <i>EcHR</i> | <i>Economic History Review</i> |
| <i>EHR</i> | <i>English Historical Review</i> |
| NH | <i>Northern History</i> |
| <i>P&P</i> | <i>Past & Present</i> |
| <i>PROME</i> | <i>The Parliament Rolls of Medieval England, 1275–1504</i> , ed. C. Given-Wilson (16 vols., Woodbridge, 2005) |
| SR | <i>Statutes of the Realm</i> (11 vols., London, 1810–28) |
| TNA | The National Archives |
| TRHS | <i>Transactions of the Royal Historical Society</i> |

Richard Britnell: An Appreciation

.....
Ben Dodds and Christian D. Liddy

RICHARD BRITNELL, FBA, will almost certainly be slightly embarrassed by the production of a *Festschrift* in his honour. One of the editors of this volume was supervised by Richard for his doctoral work and remembers, when he became a little overheated in a discussion, Richard's gentle reminder that 'we're not trying to change the world'. And yet, over the course of his distinguished academic career, Richard's work and teaching have indeed changed the world of medieval economic history. The papers collected in this volume, from scholars on both sides of the Atlantic, several of whom are his former students, reflect the impact of Richard's scholarship on the international academic community.

Richard arrived in Durham in 1966 and spent the first part of his career working in the Department of Economic History until its closure in 1985. For most of this period, during which he met his wife Jenny, also a distinguished academic, none of Richard's teaching involved medieval economic history. The focus of the Economic History degree at Durham was the process of modern economic growth through the themes of Land, Labour and Capital. Richard's teaching concentrated upon the last of these. Among his various courses was one with the rather forbidding title, 'Problems in Invention and Business Activity', later rebranded as 'Capital Formation and Technological Change' and, finally, 'Industrialisation in Europe'. In addition, Richard helped to teach a first-year survey course on 'Industrial Britain: Origins and Development', which served as an introduction to economic history and which was a compulsory requirement for all students studying Social Science degrees involving Economics, Politics and Sociology. Richard's teaching load was, therefore, enormous, and time for research limited. To use the present-day jargon, 'research-led teaching' was not made easy for Richard. One colleague remembers his comment that his Special Subject (a final year Honours course) on the eighteenth-century Scottish economy was the nearest thing to medieval economic history that he could find. It was only following the

We should like to thank our colleague, Professor Ranald Michie, for sharing some of his reflections on Richard's early career in Durham.

closure of the Department of Economic History and the merger with the Department of Modern History to form the Department of History that Richard was to enjoy greater freedom to develop his own courses.

Characteristically, Richard made the best of difficult circumstances and used his wide knowledge of more recent economic history and his strong grasp of conceptual issues to inform his work on the Middle Ages. This is most apparent in the ground-breaking 1993 book for which Richard is best known: *The Commercialisation of English Society, 1000–1500*. Richard's description and exploration of the growth of commercial institutions, practices and ideas, and his assessment of the significance of these changes, have become fundamental to our understanding of the Middle Ages. When Richard began studying the medieval economy at Cambridge in the 1960s under the supervision of Michael Postan, work in the field concentrated on demographic change and class conflict. Although both factors have remained prominent in historical scholarship in subsequent decades, our thinking on economic change has been deepened, and in many ways altered, by much greater understanding of the role of the market. Richard's work on the urban and rural economies has been at the centre of this development. Although acknowledging the long phase of expansion from c.1000 to c.1300 and the subsequent contraction from c.1300 to c.1550, Richard described and analysed a process of commercialisation that was not always defined by these cycles.

Richard's ideas about the commercialisation of the economy and the wider importance of the market in medieval life permeate many of the contributions presented here. All those working on the late Middle Ages have benefited from Richard's assessment of the significance of commerce in different settings. Maryanne Kowaleski, for example, explores the entrepreneurial skills and business acumen of shipmasters in the port towns of late medieval England, while Peter L. Larson considers the entrepreneurial activities of peasants and their engagement with the land market in three villages in County Durham. Martha Carlin discusses the phenomenon of employee fraud, the dark side of business, while James Davis investigates the development of regulatory frameworks to govern the market. Christopher Dyer's essay reflects a new interest among medievalists in consumerism and the relationship between the buyer and the market.

One of the great strengths of Richard's work is the combination of conceptual rigour with concern for the detail of specific examples. This applied as much to his teaching as to his research. In his popular undergraduate course on 'Italian Towns and Trade', Richard introduced students to the complexities of Malthusian models and political violence while encouraging each student to choose their 'favourite' Italian town. Richard's enthusiasm for detailed and meticulous archival research has been clear from the beginning of his career in his work on regional and local history, culminating in his first book, *Growth and Decline in Colchester, 1300–1525* (1986), which used a case study of an important English town to shed light on wider industrial and commercial developments. Both the conceptual and

the archival strands continue to be important in Richard's recent publications. His 500-page *Oxford History of Britain and Ireland, 1050–1530: Economy and Society* (2004), for example, appeared in the same year as a close study of field systems in north-east England. Both approaches are reflected in the papers presented in this *Festschrift*. John Hatcher challenges firmly held beliefs about fifteenth-century wage labour and reassesses the value of familiar datasets drawn from throughout England. John Langdon, by contrast, has selected one particularly important set of records relating to the construction industry to raise questions about the little-understood issues of low wages and unemployment.

No less considerable is Richard's reputation as an urban historian. His work on towns stemmed in part from his broader interest in commercialisation, but it also extended to the character and processes of urban government. One of Richard's earliest published papers (1968) was about the market town of Witham in Essex, since when the study of small towns has become a major strand of English urban historiography. Christine M. Newman's contribution here charts the contrasting economic fortunes of three seigniorial boroughs in County Durham, while Mark Bailey examines, more directly, the relationship between economic and political development in an urban context and argues that small towns, particularly seigniorial boroughs, enjoyed considerably more autonomy in the late Middle Ages than historians have suggested. In separate essays, Derek Keene and John S. Lee address two of the issues critical to the well-being of any town in the late Middle Ages (which Richard also considered in his study of Colchester): relations between the town and its rural hinterland, and urban management of the food supply in the face of the threat of famine.

Richard is also known to many as an important historian of north-east England. His study of feudal reaction in Durham in the aftermath of the Black Death clarified ways in which the economic and political history of the region conformed to wider patterns and ways in which they were distinctive. Richard was one of the first historians to exploit fully the rich archives available locally, which he did through a series of major research grants from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and the Leverhulme Trust. In the 1990s Richard directed two collaborative projects with Professor A. J. Pollard on the economic and social history of the small Yorkshire market town of Northallerton and on the employees of Durham priory in the fifteenth century. He also co-directed (with Professor Brian Roberts of the Department of Geography at Durham) an innovative interdisciplinary project on the settlement of the wasteland in the region, which produced illuminating evidence from an area outside historians' traditional focus and in which the chronology of development before the Black Death differed markedly from that observed elsewhere. Richard's contribution to the history of the north-east is reflected in the essays of Larson and Newman in this volume, both of which develop Richard's ideas on the interplay between markets and institutional structures.

A further strength of Richard's work is its chronological range. His concern with economic and political developments at the very end of the Middle Ages is pioneering. Unlike their continental counterparts, economic historians of medieval England have tended to concentrate on the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, periods to which Richard himself has devoted considerable attention. The majority of contributions to this *Festschrift* echo this emphasis. However, Richard's 1997 book, *The Closing of the Middle Ages?*, covers an unusual chronological period and reflects the author's wider interests in political history, especially Cardinal Wolsey, the subject of his Special Subject taught in the Department of History at Durham. The book also incorporates an original and detailed discussion of the economy in the final quarter of the fifteenth century and the first quarter of the sixteenth, including comments on the role of entrepreneurship. Notable in this respect is the essay by Lee, a former student of Richard, whose contribution is a detailed discussion of the response of the city of Coventry to a serious grain shortage in the second decade of the sixteenth century.

Aside from the brilliance and innovation of his work, Richard enjoys a reputation for scholarly generosity within academic circles, and he has helped generations of historians, including all of those whose work appears in this volume. Since 1999 Richard has been joint editor of the Surtees Society with his close friend and colleague, Dr Margaret Harvey. In this capacity Richard has demonstrated his tireless commitment to the publication of archival sources in order to make them widely available to the scholarly community. In 2008 Richard's own edition of the court records of the prior of Durham's borough of Crossgate (*Records of the Borough of Crossgate, Durham, 1312–1531*) was published by the Surtees Society. Richard's awareness of the importance of charters, record keeping and the administrative mechanisms of market exchange is reflected in this volume by the contribution of James Masschaele, who explores the public use of charters in the resolution of legal disputes relating to the transfer of land. Richard's own interest in the interaction between literacy and commercial life led to his edition of a pioneering collection of essays on the subject of *Pragmatic Literacy, East and West, 1200–1330* (1997). It is typical of the breadth and depth of Richard's learning that he took it upon himself to write about Chinese bureaucracy in the Yuan period (thirteenth and fourteenth centuries). Richard's work represents a remarkable combination of high quality documentary analysis and broad reaching synthesis on an increasingly global scale.

Within a short period, Richard, who had been a Lecturer in Economic History at Durham between 1966 and 1985, was appointed to a Readership and then Chair. In the words of a former colleague, Richard had become 'one of the research stars of the Department of History'. He was, for instance, the co-director (with another colleague and friend, Professor Paul Harvey) of two major projects on the peasant land market in southern England, which drew on the wonderfully rich estate records of the bishops of Winchester (Winchester Pipe Rolls). Richard's elec-

tion as a Fellow of the British Academy in 2005 was a fitting acknowledgement, by the wider academic community, of the significance of his research.

In his dealings with others, Richard has always shown rare levels of modesty and insight, often with a humorous twinkle in his eye. This was particularly apparent at his inaugural lecture following his appointment to a Chair at Durham in 1997. Richard delivered his lecture to a large and enthusiastic audience until, two minutes before the end, a small group of students arrived noisily. When the floor was opened for questions, one of the late-comers raised a hand, observed that he had missed the talk, and demanded a short summary. Many speakers would have been flummoxed by such a cheeky question but, without a second thought, Richard addressed the student and responded with a brief comment on the significance of medieval field systems and their distinctiveness in Durham. The contributors to and editors of this volume present their work here in gratitude to Richard Britnell as a scholar, colleague and generous friend.

Acknowledgements

.....

We should like to thank James Davis for suggesting the cover illustration and Lisa Liddy for preparing the index.

August 2011

Unreal Wages:
Long-Run Living Standards and the 'Golden Age' of the Fifteenth
Century

.....

John Hatcher

NOT MANY DECADES AGO the long fifteenth century was a notoriously dark age in English history, neglected because it was located awkwardly between the 'true' Middle Ages and the early modern era. When at last it began to receive the attention it warranted, attempts to dispel the gloom were bedevilled by an ambition to fashion generalisations that fitted the whole experience of the 150 years after 1350, or even the quarter millennium from 1300 to 1550. As a result fundamental disagreements arose, the most notable being whether this era should be characterised by economic growth and prosperity or by recession and decline.¹ However, contention cooled as more research was undertaken, topics on the agenda defined and prioritised, and more manageable chronologies adopted, along with a willingness to identify sub-periods and sectors whose characteristics differed in major respects.² Confidence has now increased sufficiently to persuade us that we are close to achieving a full understanding of the economy and society

I am grateful to the Humanities Center, Stanford University, for awarding me a fellowship for the academic year 2008/9, and for providing the ideal environment in which I completed much of the planning and research for this essay. Earlier versions of this essay benefited greatly from constructive comments by members of the Social Science History Workshop at Stanford, the Pre-Modern Economic and Social History Seminar at the Institute of Historical Research, London, and the Core Economic History Seminar at Cambridge. I am also indebted to Mark Bailey, Bruce Campbell, Nick Crafts and Steve Broadberry for reading drafts of the essay and making many valuable suggestions.

¹ Most notably the differences of interpretation between M. M. Postan ('The Fifteenth Century', *EcHR* 9 (1939), 160–7, and 'Some Economic Evidence of Declining Population in the Later Middle Ages', *EcHR* (1949–50), 221–46) and A. R. Bridbury (*Economic Growth: England in the Later Middle Ages* (London, 1962)).

² For notable more recent contributions to this field by Richard Britnell, see *The Closing of the Middle Ages? England, 1471–1519* (Oxford, 1997); *The End of the Middle Ages? England in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries* (Stroud, 1998); *Britain and Ireland, 1050–1530: Economy and Society* (Oxford, 2004).

of England at the close of the Middle Ages, and there are distinct signs of a consensus emerging, with optimistic epithets such as 'Economic Growth', 'An Age of Ambition', 'A Golden Age of Prosperity', 'An Age of Transition', 'A Consumer Economy' and 'A New Middle Ages' in the ascendant.

However, a little more probing reveals that there is much that remains mysterious about the era and paradoxical about attempts that have been made to describe and explain it. There is a library of economic, social and demographic theory that tells us what should have happened in the century and a half after the Black Death, but most of it fails to explain what actually happened. Many crucial elements of the pictures that have been drawn do not fit together as they should, and many leading indicators on which great reliance has been placed are very unusual and in some cases contradictory. Attempts to incorporate the later Middle Ages into long-term models and data sets of economic and social change have also faced formidable difficulties. Much of the economic theory that has been applied to the era is ill suited to the task because it was designed to analyse modern rather than pre-modern economies and the types of data that illuminate the workings and measure the performance of modern industrial and industrialising economies cannot be extracted with the same confidence from their pre-industrial equivalents.

Amidst all the uncertainties that remain, however, there is one crucial matter on which for centuries there has been universal agreement: the long fifteenth century was 'a golden age' for the mass of the population. The promethean efforts of a host of compilers of wage and price data have combined to add depth and precision to observations first made by eighteenth-century political economists, and there is now a massive statistical archive that attests the prodigious levels attained by the wages of late medieval workers.³ And these enthusiastic affirmations have been taken to confirm the existence of widespread levels of prosperity unparalleled for a pre-industrial economy. Whether by association, intuition or economic theory,

³ For England see, for example, J. E. T. Rogers, *The History of Agriculture and Prices* (7 vols., Oxford, 1866–1902); W. H. Beveridge, *Prices and Wages in England*, 1: *The Mercantilist Era* (London, 1939); E. H. Phelps Brown and S. V. Hopkins, 'Seven Centuries of Building Wages', *Economica* 22 (1955), 195–206; E. H. Phelps Brown and S. V. Hopkins, 'Seven Centuries of the Prices of Consumables, compared with Builders' Wage-Rates', *Economica* 23 (1956), 296–314, repr. in E. H. Phelps Brown and S. V. Hopkins, *A Perspective of Wages and Prices* (London, 1981); D. L. Farmer, 'Prices and Wages', in *AHEW* II, 716–817; D. L. Farmer, 'Prices and Wages, 1350–1500', in *AHEW* III, 431–525; J. H. Munro, 'Prices and Wages' in *The Medieval and Early Modern Data Bank*, ed. R. M. Bell and M. Howell, accessed at www.scc.rutgers.edu/memdb; R. C. Allen, 'Data: Wage and Price History', accessed at www.nuffield.ox.ac.uk/General/Members/allen.aspx; G. Clark, 'The Price History of English Agriculture, 1200–1914', *Research in Economic History*, 22 (2004), 41–124; G. Clark, 'The Long March of History: Farm Wages, Population, and Economic Growth, England, 1209–1869', *ECHR* 60 (2007), 97–135.

the fortunes of the unskilled have commonly been taken as a reflection of the exalted material living standards of the bulk of the population.⁴ Accepted wisdom has for centuries seen this era as characterised by living standards that were so phenomenally high they were not to be equalled until the mid nineteenth century or even the 1880s, long after the benefits of advanced industrialisation had finally trickled down to the masses.

It is notable that the host of scholars who have diligently laboured in this field have arrived, without exception, at extremely optimistic outcomes. Thorold Rogers, the leading modern pioneer in the collection of price and wage data, was the first to use the term 'golden age', when he concluded in 1884 that 'the fifteenth century and the first quarter of the sixteenth were the golden age of the English labourer, if we are to interpret the wages which he earned by the cost of the necessities of life. At no time were wages, relatively speaking, so high, and at no time was food so cheap.'⁵ The publication seventy years later of the immensely influential Phelps Brown and Hopkins index duly revealed a doubling of the purchasing power of the day wages of urban building craftsmen between the first half of the fourteenth century and the third quarter of the fifteenth, and the most recent contribution, Gregory Clark's computations based on a host of new wage and price data, shows the real wages of agricultural labourers soaring by more than 160 per cent, comparing 1300–49 with the peak reached between 1440 and 1479 (see Figures 1.1, 1.2).⁶

These are striking rates of increase, but even more extraordinary are the absolute levels that living standards are held to have attained in comparison with those of much later times. As Henry Hallam noted, with the approval of Thomas Malthus, in his *View of the State of Europe during the Middle Ages*, first published in 1818:

There is one very unpleasing remark which everyone who attends to the subject will be induced to make, that the labouring classes, especially those engaged in agriculture, were better provided with the means of subsistence in the reigns of Edward III [*recte* IV] or of Henry VI than they are at present.⁷

It was not entirely unexpected, therefore, that the peak of the Phelps Brown and

⁴ For example, the confident statements in G. Clark, *A Farewell to Alms: A Brief Economic History of the World* (Princeton, 2007), 21–2.

⁵ J. E. T. Rogers, *Six Centuries of Work and Wages: The History of English Labour* (London, 1949 edn), 326.

⁶ The higher rate of increase found by Clark is largely due to his plausible adoption of a substantially lower level of real wages before the Black Death than that calculated by Phelps Brown and Hopkins.

⁷ H. Hallam, *View of the State of Europe during the Middle Ages*, III (11th edn, London, 1855), 96 and fn.

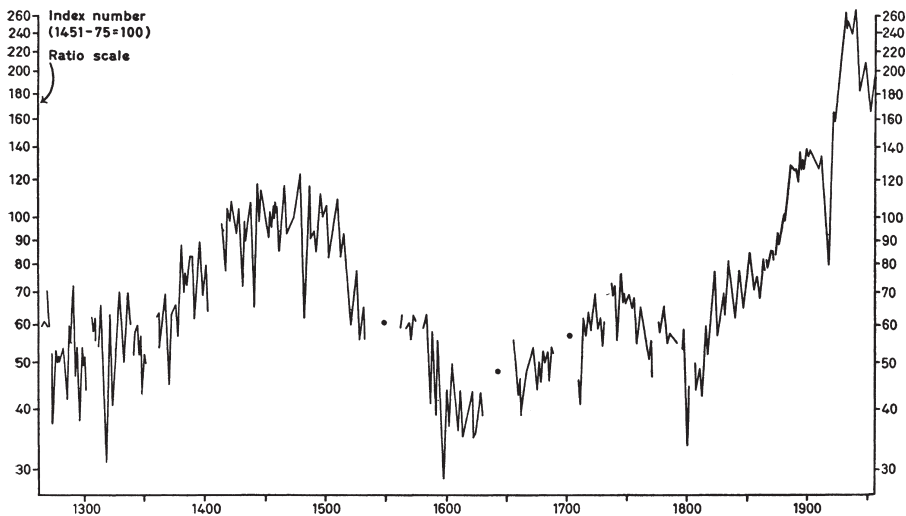


Fig. 1.1: Changes in the equivalent of the wage rate of a building craftsman expressed in a composite physical unit of consumables in southern England, 1284–1954
Source: E. H. Phelps Brown and S. V. Hopkins, *A Perspective of Wages and Prices* (London, 1981), 19.

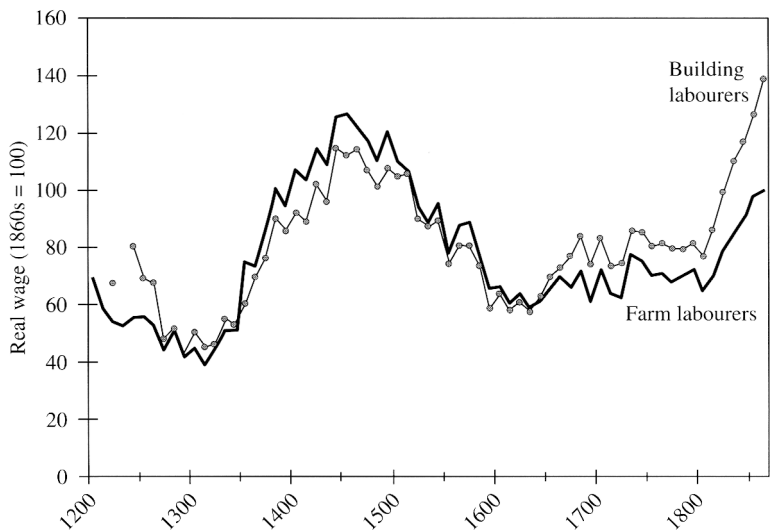


Fig. 1.2: Real agricultural day wages, 1209–1869
Source: G. Clark, 'The Long March of History: Farm Wages, Population, and Economic Growth, England 1209–1869', *EcHR* 60 (2007), 109.

Hopkins index reached in the later fifteenth century was not to be surpassed for more than four hundred years. There have been many adjustments and improvements to this seminal index, as well as a wide range of completely new statistical compilations that span the centuries from the Middle Ages to modern times, but the broad thrust of the original findings have been confirmed rather than supplanted. Indeed, the close similarities shared by the abundant series of long-run real wages that are now available lend great strength to their credibility. The experience of Clark's agricultural labourers, for example, differs relatively little from Phelps Brown's building workers when the purchasing power of their wages in the 1860s are shown to be still twenty per cent short of the exalted levels their fifteenth-century predecessors had achieved.⁸

Results no less stunning have been produced by reversing the standard statistical computations of what a day's wage would buy by measuring improvements in welfare by the amounts of work required to provide subsistence. Farmer's investigations of the money wages of threshers and reapers show that the number of units of work required to purchase a quarter of wheat and a quarter of barley fell by almost sixty per cent between the first half of the fourteenth century and the 1440s,⁹ and Allen and Weisdorf have recently computed that, at the money wages that are assumed to have prevailed in the fifteenth century, an agricultural labourer in southern England would have been able to provide for all his basic needs, and those of a wife and two children, from no more than 200 days' work.¹⁰

There is, therefore, a centuries-old and disciplines-wide consensus that the living standards of ordinary Englishmen and women at the close of the Middle Ages were stupendously high for a pre-industrial economy. This essay will challenge this consensus. It will argue that the towering peak in real wages that dominates the later Middle Ages in all long-term representations of living standards has been grossly exaggerated, and that it does not represent the course that the living standards of either the landless or the landholding majority followed.

Whereas there is no doubt that the real wages of labourers rose very substantially between the crowded and crisis-torn early fourteenth century and the spacious later fifteenth century, rates of improvement should not be confused with absolute levels of income. It will be shown that the real wages of the landless and near landless did not soar nearly as high as it has been conventional to believe, and that it is misguided to believe that the rate of improvement of the real incomes of the lower strata of rural society was representative of the experience of

⁸ G. Clark and Y. van der Werf, 'Work in Progress? The Industrious Revolution', *Journal of Economic History*, 58 (1998), 830–1.

⁹ D. L. Farmer, 'Crop Yields, Prices and Wages in Medieval England', *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance History*, 6 (1983), 146.

¹⁰ R. C. Allen and J. L. Weisdorf, 'Was There an "Industrious Revolution" Before the Industrial Revolution? An Empirical Exercise for England, c.1300–1830', *University of Copenhagen Department of Economics, Working Papers no. 10–14* (2010), 8.

the majority, whose fortunes improved far less dramatically. Preliminary modelling indicates that the real incomes of the substantial body of middling peasants with holdings of roughly subsistence size remained relatively stable in the face of dramatic changes in the prices of labour and farm produce, while those of large-scale farmers declined. The golden age of the fifteenth century is in need of a severe dose of debasement.

Real wages are of considerable significance, not just for the fifteenth century but for all periods of history, and they are ensconced at the heart of almost all major descriptions and analyses of long-term economic, social and demographic development. However, it will be argued here that across much of history the conventional measures used to compute them are ill suited to their task.¹¹

The daily wage rates of workers and the prices of subsistence commodities are almost universally accepted as the data that can best perform the many crucial functions demanded of them. By the simple procedure of converting wage rates and the costs of subsistence into index numbers, and dividing the former into the latter, real-wage indices are created that are precise and consistent, as well as abundantly available.¹² They lend themselves admirably to the mapping of trends and fluctuations across centuries and continents and form the basis of comparisons of not merely the living standards but the economic performance of countries.¹³

However, despite their value in facilitating comparisons between economies and across time, there are many reasons why such crude data cannot bear the weight that is routinely placed on them and why their deficiencies proliferate and deepen the further back one goes in history. The most significant failings may be grouped under three main heads: first, the daily wage rates of labourers and craftsmen and the prices of subsistence goods do not constitute a sound basis for measuring the real incomes of these groups; second, the real incomes of landless or near landless males cannot be used as a surrogate for those of the landholding population at large, for whom daily wages were not the source of all income nor

¹¹ The author is preparing an article that provides more detailed criticisms of current estimates of English real wages before the nineteenth century and presents new methods and data for estimating long-run changes in real incomes and living standards.

¹² For a recent account of the methods of measuring real wages and the value of real-wage data, see R. C. Allen, 'Real Wage Rates (historical trends)', in *The New Palgrave Dictionary of Economics*, ed. S. N. Durlauf and L. E. Blume (2nd edn, Basingstoke, 2008).

¹³ Hence: R. C. Allen, 'How Prosperous were the Romans? Evidence from Diocletian's Price Edict (301 AD)', *Oxford Department of Economics Discussion Papers* (2007); W. Scheidel, 'Real Wages in Early Economies: Evidence for Living Standards from 2000 BCE to 1300 CE', *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 53 (2010), 425–62; S. Özmucur and S. Pamuk, 'Real Wages and Standards of Living in the Ottoman Empire, 1489–1914', *Journal of Economic History*, 62 (2002), 293–321.

the market the source of all subsistence; third, the incomes of households are far more informative than the incomes of their male heads.

Henry Phelps Brown voiced these reservations. On the first page of his 'Seven Centuries of the Prices of Consumables compared with Builders' Wage-rates' he stated in an unequivocal manner: 'Nowadays, real wages are commonly estimated by comparing money wages with an index of the cost of living, but there are several reasons why we cannot do that here'.¹⁴ He elaborated, 'all we have is the rate of pay for a day, we do not know how many days' work the builder was getting in the year from time to time, nor what other resources he had . . . and we know little or nothing about some important costs'. Phelps Brown continued, 'These things apart, we still could not attach much meaning to "the cost of maintaining a constant standard of living" through seven centuries of social change. So we have not tried to construct any measure of real wages in the modern sense'. Accordingly, he took great care never to use the terms 'real wages' or 'real income' for his findings, and instead he composed the following lengthy title: 'Changes in the equivalent of the wage rate of a building craftsman expressed in a composite physical unit of consumables in southern England'.

Yet, Phelps Brown's admonitions have been repeatedly ignored by those who have used and interpreted his index, or amassed similar data to construct new indices.¹⁵ Time and again comparisons of the nominal daily wage rates of labourers and craftsmen with the prices of baskets of basic consumables have been deemed to constitute not just the real wages of those workers but their real earnings over a period of time, commonly a year. Indeed, their annual earnings are often computed by multiplying the daily wage by a working year of 250 to 300 days.¹⁶ This is not all. Implicitly and explicitly the population at large is commonly assumed to have shared the same experience and benefited from the same rate of improvement in real incomes between the early fourteenth century and the later

¹⁴ Phelps Brown and Hopkins, *Perspective of Wages and Prices*, 23.

¹⁵ For a notable exception, see D. Woodward, 'Wage Rates and Living Standards in Pre-Industrial England', *P&P* 91 (1981), 28–46. Concentrating on building craftsmen in the early modern period, Woodward argues convincingly that the daily wage rates of building craftsmen and the price of a basket of commodities cannot provide an accurate guide to their fortunes by showing that they were not wage earners but small independent businessmen who made money from a variety of sources including the employment of apprentices, the supply of raw materials and sometimes from small-scale farming. He also stresses our ignorance of the number of days they worked and of the income brought in by other members of their households. Woodward's arguments were extended and amplified in D. Woodward, *Men at Work: Labourers and Building Craftsmen in the Towns of Northern England, 1450–1750* (Cambridge, 1995).

¹⁶ See, for example, the transmutation of the purchasing power of an urban day's wage into a ratio of full-time annual income to annual subsistence costs in R. C. Allen, *The British Industrial Revolution in Global Perspective* (Cambridge, 2009), chap. 2: 'The High-Wage Economy of Pre-industrial Britain'.

fifteenth. However, Malthus was not measuring the living standards of the average labourer, still less those of the mass of Englishmen and women, when he compared the money paid to a man for a day's labouring and the price of grain in the fifteenth century with those prevailing in his own day.¹⁷ He was merely computing the quantity of food that a day's labouring at that wage would purchase, and that is precisely what Gregory Clark's newly-produced series of farm labourers' wage rates and living costs does. The sources Clark is forced to use over the greater part of the period his series covers are the same as those available to all other price and wage historians, and they do not reveal how many days in each year the average labourer was employed at these rates, or what other sources of income and subsistence he might have had. There is also the vexed question of whether, when, and how much food and drink labourers received at work.

At first sight the real value of the pay received for a day's work in the later fifteenth century might well appear comparable to that pertaining in the 1880s. But earnings are what really matter. A true comparison must take into account the number of days worked in the two periods, and there can be no doubt that this differed substantially. The labour market in the late Middle Ages, and indeed throughout the early modern centuries, offered far less regular employment than was to be the case subsequently, when the great bulk of the population worked in non-agricultural occupations and the majority of those that remained in the countryside were employed on large farms.¹⁸ In pre-modern times paid employment in the countryside was characterised by its intermittent and piecemeal character: the changing routine of the seasons of the farming year combined with uncertain weather to cause wide fluctuations in the demand for labour and produce short-term and discontinuous working, and this inherent irregularity was accentuated by the fact that both the demand for labour and its supply came overwhelmingly from the occupiers of relatively modest farms. It is particularly regrettable that there is little or no useful information on the terms and conditions on which peasants hired each other because the likelihood remains that much work was undertaken between people in the same village using swap arrangements rather than cash payments.

In the fifteenth century access to land was unusually easy and the proportion of landless in the adult rural population was unusually low. The great bulk of the farmland of England was distributed in relatively small parcels among households that primarily used family labour to farm them, and if these households

¹⁷ T. R. Malthus, *Principles of Political Economy* (2nd edn, London, 1836), chap. iv, sec. iv, p. 204, cited by Phelps Brown and Hopkins, *Perspective of Wages and Prices*, 61.

¹⁸ Steve Hindle provides an extremely perceptive and well-documented picture of spasmodic and fragmented labour markets in the countryside of early modern England: *On the Parish? The Micro-Politics of Poor Relief in Rural England, 1550–1750* (Oxford, 2004).

needed to hire additional labour, or had spare labour to market, they bought and sold it on an intermittent and short-term basis. The proliferation of large farms and the rise of an involuntary landless proletariat that came to dominate the agricultural landscape had yet to get under way. Relatively few villagers possessed lands that were sufficiently extensive to make it worthwhile hiring labour on a continuous and full-time basis, and those who did appreciated that their needs could be served better and more cheaply by servants hired by the year and remunerated with a combination of food, lodging, clothing and cash rather than by labourers hired by the day.

So far as the construction of a reliable wage series for the fifteenth century is concerned, it is particularly unfortunate that information has to be compiled exclusively from the demesne accounts of great institutions when by far the greater part of labour was hired by peasants and lesser lords. Not only were these institutions unusually inflexible employers but they progressively abandoned direct farming, so that by the 1440s the sample of accounts supplying data is tiny.¹⁹ There are also serious problems with the most dominant constituents of the agricultural wage series: payments for harvest work and for threshing and winnowing grain. These tasks were chosen because they are well recorded and strictly defined, but they are also untypical and problematical. Harvest work was paid exceptionally well, commonly at double the winter wage, but such employment lasted for only a few weeks a year, while threshing and winnowing constituted only a tiny proportion of labour inputs in agriculture. Even on the largest seigneurial farms with expansive arable acres, threshing and winnowing the whole crop of grains and legumes rarely took more than the equivalent of the annual labour of a single man. Moreover, remuneration for this task was both lower and far more variable between manors than it is usually portrayed, and those who performed it were commonly paid by the piece rather than by the day.²⁰

The daily wages paid for casual work during the slack periods of the year are of great significance but, unfortunately, this is when the great demesnes normally used their servants rather than hired labourers and the available data are consequently sparse, disparate and poorly-suited to inclusion in statistical tables. However, there is a body of robust detailed empirical evidence, much of it drawn from

¹⁹ Farmer declared his series of agricultural wages to be 'fragmentary and unreliable, 1466–1500': *Prices and Wages, 1350–1500*, 524.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 468–71. Clark acknowledges the seriousness of a range of issues connected with the use of piece-rate payments for threshing as a surrogate for day-wage rates, including the fact that the ratio of day wages to threshing payments per bushel change substantially over time. He adopts a number of strategies to bring the threshing rates back into line including positing an increase of around forty per cent in the labour productivity of threshers, who threshed 5.1 bushels a day from 1209 to 1349 but a commendable seven bushels per day from 1350 to 1525; from 1525 onwards, however, the productivity of the threshers apparently sank progressively below the pre-Black Death level ('Long March of History').

extremely informative farm accounts of lesser lords, that convincingly undermines the current wage series by demonstrating the prevalence of far lower rates of pay and the scarcity of employment for casual labourers during the dominant slack periods of the year. Poos's detailed and resourceful analysis of the labour market in late-fifteenth-century Essex, which he characterises as 'highly episodic and discontinuous', is a particularly enlightening case study.²¹ Unusually informative records reveal that the great bulk of the work running William Capell's 300-acre mixed farm at Porter's Hall, Stebbing, in 1483–4 was performed not by wage labourers but by eleven year-round servants, who were paid modest cash stipends ranging from 3s. 3d. to 22s. 3d. in addition to their board and lodging. Almost two-thirds of the days worked by the labourers hired at Porter's Hall took place during the few weeks of harvest, when the males were richly rewarded with 4d. per day and food. During the rest of the year, however, tasks such as sowing, weeding, ditching and harrowing required the hiring of far less labour and were remunerated at only 1–2d. per day. Significantly, in the light of the heavy weight contributed by wages for threshing and winnowing in the series that estimates an average wage of 3.55d. per day at this time,²² the four men who performed these tasks at Porter's Hall earned an average of only 1.6d. per day and laboured for only fifty-one days between them. Overall, the mean employment of the male labourers hired during the year on this farm amounted to just 7.8 days and their mean earnings to 24d. Of course, the records of a single large farm can give only a partial picture of the demand for labour in the region, and most of the labourers hired at Porter's Hall must have found some additional employment elsewhere. However, Poos augments the intermittent employment and modest earnings of the labourers, cottagers and servants revealed by the Porter's Hall accounts with complementary evidence from proceedings under the labour legislation and in wills and tax assessments.²³

Such informative documentation is rare but not unique, and other sources attest to the prevalence of relatively low wages. On the Newton demesne in Cheshire at the turn of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, for example, casual labourers often received only 1d. per day for unskilled work and harvest workers were paid merely 2d., and the same niggardly sum was paid to harvest workers at Millom in Cumberland. The Newton accounts, like those of Porter's Hall, reveal a heavy reliance on servants employed on annual contracts, the cash element of which for males ranged from just 5s. to 13s. 4d.²⁴ The archive of Durham priory,

²¹ L. R. Poos, *A Rural Society after the Black Death: Essex, 1350–1525* (Cambridge, 1991), 213–19.

²² Clark, 'Long March of History', 100. Clark, however, is only following Beveridge, Farmer and others in relying heavily on the remuneration for these tasks.

²³ Poos, *Rural Society*, 219–22.

²⁴ D. Young, 'Servants and Labourers on a Late Medieval Demesne: The Case of Newton, Cheshire, 1498–1520', *AgHR* 47 (1999), 158–9. Around the same time cash stipends were 16s. at Elvethall manor, Durham, and from 8s. to 13s. 4d. at Millom, Cumberland: *ibid.*, 152–3.

which contains the names of employees, has enabled Christine Newman to complete a detailed study of workers and wages at the priory and its estates from 1494 to 1519, and she tells a similar story of brief, irregular and piecemeal hirings. Despite being by far the largest institution in the region, the priory offered substantial employment to very few. Newman's conclusion is that the golden age for labour was tarnished, for it did not have a 'labour market characterised for most people by fixed employment, settled patterns or predictable career prospects'; most of the time workers were taking what they could get, which did not amount to much.²⁵ This pessimistic view is shared by many other researchers, paradoxically including those who have compiled statistics that paint a far more optimistic picture.²⁶

There are also special concerns about the authenticity of the summit of later medieval real wages, which, according to almost all the series, was attained from c.1440 to c.1479. This was a time when the country was in the throes of a deep and prolonged slump and the agrarian economy was enduring a most savage retrenchment. It is well known that large-scale farmers faced severe problems from falling commodity prices and rising wages in the later Middle Ages and that these led to the abandonment of demesne farming by landlords, frequent chronic indebtedness of entrepreneurs who ventured to lease abandoned demesnes, a shift towards pastoral husbandry and the relative scarcity and short-lived duration of large-scale peasant farms. In the mid fifteenth century these adverse conditions profoundly worsened and engulfed substantial peasants and aspiring yeomen as well as the greater and lesser lords.²⁷ It is not surprising, therefore, that the main driver that sent the already elevated real-wage index even higher at this time was a further sharp fall in the prices of farm produce rather than a rise in money wages. More than this, there is evidence that the severity of the slump was reducing the demand for labour and driving employment and pay down.²⁸

Thus, there is no substance in the belief that the average agricultural labourer in the fifteenth century was able to find employment for around 250 days a year at the exalted wage rates recorded in various published series. Few labourers were able to find work whenever they sought it, or accepted it whenever it was offered,

²⁵ C. Newman, 'Work and Wages at Durham Priory and its Estates, 1494–1519', *Continuity and Change*, 16 (2001), 375–8.

²⁶ For example, Farmer writes that, because of an inability to answer a series of basic questions adequately, 'it seems a little incautious to hail the fifteenth century as the "golden age of the English labourer"': 'Prices and Wages, 1350–1500', 490–1. Mavis Mate notes that in the fifteenth century, 'Earnings . . . did not always rise together with wage rates', and that outside of harvest time 'workers might be hired for just a few days': 'Work and leisure', in *A Social History of England, 1200–1500*, ed. R. Horrox and W. M. Ormrod (Cambridge, 2006), 286–7.

²⁷ J. Hatcher, 'The Great Slump of the Mid-Fifteenth Century', in *Progress and Problems in Medieval England: Essays in Honour of Edward Miller*, ed. R. H. Britnell and J. Hatcher (Cambridge, 1996), 259–62.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 262–3.