Peasants Making History
Peasants Making History

Living in an English Region 1200–1540

CHRISTOPHER DYER
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Preface

This book is the result of research over many years, and in acknowledging help that has been received I will focus on those who have participated or have given advice in the period of active preparation since 2011. Initial progress was made possible by a Leverhulme Trust Emeritus Fellowship for which I was grateful because it enabled me to visit archives intensively, and to gain from the reliable and skilful services of Matthew Tompkins. The Aurelius Charitable Trust funded the preparation of the figures, which were drawn expertly by Andy Isham. During the period of preparation, I became involved in a number of short-term projects which were relevant to the themes of the book. They encouraged me to embark on specialized aspects of my theme, and stimulated me with contacts with other scholars. These included work on the Inquisitions Post Mortem on a project led by Michael Hicks, and investigations of social mobility with Sandro Carocci. Conference papers at the University of Western Australia and the Leeds Medieval Congress made me pull together my thinking about poverty. I learnt more about open fields from a symposium hosted by Erik Thoen, and I found the discussions on serfdom at the Anglo-American conference organized by Phillipp Schofield in 2019 very helpful. The theme of migration figures prominently in this book mainly because of my involvement in a project devised by Jo Story and the late Mark Ormrod. Umberto Albarella, by inviting me to a conference on the archaeology of birds, encouraged me to study poultry more closely. Invitations to contribute to conferences and books by Phillipp Schofield and Martin Allen encouraged me to work on tithes and earnings. Early versions of Chapter 2 were delivered in a lecture to the Institute of Historical Research, a lecture at Taunton in memory of Mick Aston, and to the Friends of the Centre for English Local History at Leicester. Parts of other chapters were given to the economic history seminars at Cambridge and the London School of Economics, and in presentations to the Institute of Archaeology in London, the Flaran conference, and the Berne conference of the European Agricultural History Organisation.

This is a book about a region, and I have always welcomed the opportunity to talk to local societies and groups, who have sometimes allowed me to try out the general themes of this book; for example, at occasions organized by the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society and the Worcestershire Archaeological Society, and also by the Nuneaton branch of the Historical Association and the Gotherington Local History Society. Invitations from the local history societies and heritage groups at Alcester, Bidford-on-Avon, Chipping Campden, the Forest of Dean, Thornbury, Welford-on-Avon, Winterbourne, Yate (near Chipping
Sodbury), and the Victoria County History Trust of Herefordshire, have all encouraged me to focus enquiries on particular places and themes, which are reflected in this book. Invariably at both the academic events and the talks to local groups, questions were posed which made me think harder.

This book uses archaeological evidence, much of which has been published quite recently, and I have also done fieldwork, but rarely on my own. My collaborators, who have contributed to interpretations as well as in practical matters, were David Aldred, Jenny Dyer, Bryn Gethin, Paul Hargreaves, Pat Lacy, and Sarah Wager.

The research includes work in specialist areas and I have had the benefit of advice from experts, notably Umberto Albarella, Laura Ashe, Jonathan Hart, Rose Hewlett, Matilda Holmes, Derek Hurst, Michael Lewis, David Pannett, Stephanie Ratkai, and Terry Slater. The contacts and conversations with fellow historians are too numerous for all to be mentioned, but I have gained specific benefits from Jean Birrell, Spencer Dimmock, Susan Kilby, Steve Rigby, and Andrew Watkins.

I do not have the space to thank individually all of the archivists (in 25 deposits), librarians, and custodians of Historic Environment Records of the three counties who have given me access to sources and information. Worcester Cathedral Library in the care of David Morrison has been especially welcoming. During the Covid-19 pandemic, special help has been provided by the David Wilson Library at the University of Leicester and the Wohl Library in the Institute of Historical Research, University of London. Worcestershire Archives and the Society of Antiquaries took trouble to answer queries.

Documents have been used by kind permission of the President and Fellows, Magdalen College, Oxford. I was also able to use the archives of Corpus Christi College Oxford and King’s College Cambridge. Figure 2.8 is reproduced by kind permission of the Master and Fellows of Balliol College Oxford. I am grateful for the hospitality and facilities of the library of Raynham Hall, Norfolk, provided by the Marquess Townshend. Documents from the Badminton archive can be cited by kind permission of the Duke of Beaufort.

Theses and unpublished typescripts by various authors have provide useful information and are acknowledged at the appropriate places: they are M. Andrews, S. Dickson, R. Field, D. Greenblatt, C. Hart, T. Lloyd, G. Scardellato, G. Smyth, A. Sutherland, J. Toomey, and E. Vose.

I appreciate greatly the patience and expertise of the staff of the Oxford University Press, and in particular my main contact, Cathryn Steele.

As always, my wife supports and encourages my work in many ways, including reading drafts, compiling the index, and contributing to my understanding of history.

Christopher Dyer
Oadby, November 2021
Notes on boundaries and measures

The region covers three counties, but their boundaries have changed over time. I have tried to use as much as possible the boundaries that existed between 1935 and 1974. Accordingly, the short-lived county of Avon is not mentioned, enabling villages to the north of Bristol to be described as in Gloucestershire. In the once complicated area at the meeting point of Gloucestershire, Warwickshire, and Worcestershire the boundaries after the reforms of the 1930s are used, so that Alderminster, Quinton, Shipston-on-Stour, and Welford-on-Avon are all here located in Warwickshire, and Blockley in Gloucestershire. The Birmingham area is more entangled in changes in local government, but the post-1974 West Midlands can be ignored, and Solihull for example is here regarded as in Warwickshire. Birmingham’s modern absorption of parts of Worcestershire and Staffordshire are set aside, and King’s Norton, Northfield, and Yardley are restored to Worcestershire. Halesowen, once in Shropshire, is treated as part of Worcestershire, as is Mathon, now in Herefordshire. Chaceley is now in Gloucestershire, having previously been in Worcestershire.

Measures

Distances are given in miles as these are most readily understood in the UK, but metric equivalents are indicated on maps. The metric system (metres and centimetres) is in universal use by archaeologists, so all references to dimensions of settlements, buildings, artefacts, etc. are metric. Measures used in the past (yards for cloth, acres for land), are retained, as also are sums of money in £ s d and marks. Some measures appear in the glossary.
Abbreviations

AgHR   Agricultural History Review
BAH    Birmingham Archives and Heritage
BGAS   Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society
CBA    Council for British Archaeology
Cov Reg P. Coss and J.C. Lancaster Lewis, eds., Coventry Priory Register
       (DS, 46, 2013)
CR Elmley R.K. Field, ed., Court Rolls of Elmley Castle, Worcestershire 1347–1564
       (WHS, new series, 20, 2004)
CR Romsley M. Tompkins, ed., Court Rolls of Romsley 1279–1643 (WHS, new series,
       27, 2017)
DS     Dugdale Society
EcHR   Economic History Review
GA     Gloucestershire Archives
GRS    Gloucestershire Record Series
Hist Glouc W. Hart, ed., Historia et Cartularium Monasterii Sancti Petri Gloucestriae,
       3 vols (London, Rolls Series, 1867)
HTC    M. Chibnall, ed., Charters and Custumals of the Abbey of Holy Trinity
       Caen (British Academy Records of Social and Economic History, new
       series, 5, 1982)
IPM    Inquisitions Post Mortem
Med Arch Medieval Archaeology
P&P    Past and Present
PT     C. Fenwick, ed., The Poll Taxes of 1377, 1379 and 1381, 3 parts (British
       Academy Records of Social and Economic History, new series, 27, 29, 37,
Rec Feck For J.R. Birrell, ed., Records of Feckenham Forest, Worcestershire, c.1236–1377
       (WHS, new series, 21, 2006)
Rec Hanley J. Toomey, ed., Records of Hanley Castle, Worcestershire, c.1147–1547
       (WHS, new series, 18, 2001)
Reg Guild M. Macdonald, ed., The Register of the Guild of the Holy Cross, Stratford-
       upon-Avon (DS, 42, 2007)
Reg Wig W. Hale, ed., Registrum Prioratus Beatae Mariae Wigorniensis (Camden
       Society, 1865)
SCLA   Shakespeare Centre Library and Archives, Stratford-upon-Avon
SRO    Staffordshire Record Office
TNA    The National Archives
TBGAS  Transactions of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society
TBAS   Transactions of the Birmingham Archaeological Society
### Abbreviations

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<td>UNMSC</td>
<td>University of Nottingham Manuscripts and Special Collections</td>
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<td>VCH Glouc,</td>
<td>Victoria County History (Gloucestershire, Warwickshire, Worcestershire)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Warw, Worc</td>
<td>J. Caley and J. Hunter, eds., Valor Ecclesiasticus temp Henry VIII (Record Commission, 6 vols. 1810–34)</td>
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<td>VE</td>
<td>Westminster Abbey Muniments</td>
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<td>WAM</td>
<td>Warwickshire County Record Office</td>
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<td>WCL</td>
<td>Worcester Cathedral Library</td>
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<td>WA</td>
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<td>Worcestershire Historical Society</td>
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Introduction

This book is not a response to the neglect of peasants by historians. Their historical significance has often been demonstrated, but this book is a new venture in the sense that no one has attempted an overview of the importance of peasants over a wide range of themes, from agriculture to religion.¹ The approach is peasant-centred, so it seeks to identify their contributions, and the changes in which they participated, from their perspective. It is concerned with peasants’ ideas and outlook, the controversies in which they became embroiled, the decisions that they made, and the actions that they took. Peasants were not gifted with free choices but were under pressure from external forces, such as the demands of their lords and the state, demographic movements, the hidden hand of the market, economic growth and recession, environmental factors including disasters, and political and religious movements. However, plenty has been written about these long-term tendencies, and my purpose is to give attention to peasants and their communities as they experienced these changes, resisted or accommodated them, and took advantage of opportunities they presented. Peasants varied greatly, and among them many different life chances and experiences can be found. Viewed as a mass, if we ignore their names or individual identities, they can be depicted as weak, miserable, poverty-stricken, ignorant, and unchanging. The narrative is often a negative account of crisis and decline. However, if disaggregated into individuals or small groups, a very different picture emerges of people with varied ambitions, concerns, knowledge, and the ability to make something of their lives.

Doubts about the use of the word ‘peasant’ were voiced briefly in the late twentieth century. It was alleged that the term could not be applied in medieval or modern England because the defining characteristics of peasants were their subordination to the family group, and their lack of participation in the market.² For


a time the rejection of the term peasants had some influence, and historians experimented with an alternative vocabulary, such as ‘villagers’ or even ‘agriculturalists’, but wiser views eventually prevailed and it was realized that the rural population across the world and over long periods could have different ways of life, but bore enough resemblance to one another to be usefully described as peasants.3

‘Peasant’ can be applied to a wide range of country people who possessed land in relatively small quantities (as small as the plot attached to a cottage, as large as 50 acres). They often produced their own food using family labour, so to some extent they were not dependent on the market. They were relatively poor and were socially subordinate, though they gained some benefit from belonging to communities. They were not farmers, who were a special category of leaseholders, often holding large amounts of land, employing labour and producing for the market. Some peasants can also be called labourers because they earned wages part-time, but most of them lived partly on the produce of their holdings. Many peasants were also serfs, but their servile status did not define them, as there were numerous free peasants. ‘Villagers’ is an alternative term of limited value, because although all rural people lived in units of government called villages or vills, the word village is often reserved for large compact settlements, and most people lived in hamlets or scattered farms. Peasants were not all male, because wives, daughters, and female servants formed part of the household and did much of the labour on the holding, and in some circumstances, especially widowhood, women were in charge. Peasants were involved in agriculture, but they did not disqualify themselves from the category of peasant by working also in crafts or retail trade.4

All of this is written in the past tense, because the example of late medieval England is in the forefront of the author’s attention. However, the definition can be applied widely. In the fourteenth century the majority of the English, European, and Eurasian population can be described as peasants, and although they have become extinct in modern England, and have greatly diminished in continental Europe (though still surviving in some countries and can be known as ‘family farmers’), in Asia, Africa, and much of South America they have modernized and are active in great numbers, accounting according to one estimate for a third of the world’s population.5

By including the term peasant in our historical vocabulary, it is much easier to communicate with other disciplines because the word is used and understood by social scientists, archaeologists, and geographers. International comparisons are

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4 For a useful definition in a European context, see P. Freedman, Images of the Medieval Peasant (Stanford, CA, 1999), pp. 9–12.
Introduction

also helped by sharing terminology; if we can agree on the types of people under discussion, similarities and differences can be more easily identified. An argument for 'English exceptionalism', that is, the belief that England was uniquely different in having no peasantry (and in many other ways), prevents any attempt at comparison.

This book has been made possible by a recent tendency in historical writing to give medieval peasants more prominence. For a long time, historians were using such phrases as 'lords and peasants' and tended to focus on peasants in their role as tenants, so they were seen as payers of rent, performers of labour services, and attenders at the lords' courts. Lords were imagined to have been the main producers and innovators. It was widely assumed that the planning of villages, the organization of field systems, farming methods, and much else followed mainly from initiatives by lords. Now we have learnt not to regard peasants as appendages of the seigneurial regime, nor as its victims, but as players in their own right, with resources, traditions, and ideas of their own.

The 'peasant-centred' approach has come from a number of different directions. An important influence has been historians on the left, who are associated with the 'history from below' approach. Peasant revolts, and especially the English Rising of 1381 has attracted interest from the progressive historians since the 1890s. Although historians from a Marxist perspective have written about rebellious peasants, they have not been as 'peasant-centred' as might be expected. One obstacle has been Marx's assumption that the industrial working class was uniquely capable of revolution, so that other discontented plebeians were overshadowed. Also, the analysis of the 'feudal mode of production' focusses attention on the 'struggle for rent' between lords and peasants, which is portrayed as giving feudal society its dynamic capacity to change. This is difficult to reconcile with an agenda to give pride of place to social differences within the village, peasant culture, and interactions among peasants. It is, however, important to be reminded that lordship was a presence and a strong influence throughout, which some enthusiasts for peasant autonomy are prone to forget.

Since the 1970s an important development in studies of peasants in the Middle Ages has been the interest of historians and historical geographers with a strong social science background, based mainly at Cambridge. Their initial agenda was to investigate the extent to which the demographic regime of early modern northwestern Europe, based on the European Marriage Pattern, went back before the sixteenth century. This research broadened to include not just marriage, but such

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subjects as the land market, inheritance, social welfare, servants, and credit. The main sources were manorial court rolls, and the lords’ presence is fully acknowledged in these investigations. Beginning rather earlier than the Cambridge research, the Toronto school of historians were also approaching peasants from a social science perspective, and they carried out comprehensive analyses of village life, with a special concern for office holding and stratification.

The history of women and gender in general has drawn on the abundant sources relating to the aristocracy, nunneries, and urban society, but peasant women have received a good deal of attention. In particular their leading role in brewing and selling ale has been highlighted, and also their contribution to rural labour, raising issues relating to pay differences between male and female workers. A controversial view, applied more to urban than peasant women, suggests that in the shortage of labour after 1349 women became more independent, their marriages were delayed, prolonging the demographic recession, and in the long term they made an important contribution to the supply of workers.

Economic historians tend to be drawn to the abundant manorial accounts and surveys which have primarily provided information about lords’ demesnes and rent income. They include receipts from tithes, which as they represent a tenth of the crops of each parish, are a guide to peasant crops. Notable work on tithes came from a study of peasant grain production in Durham over two centuries. Among other findings, it was shown that peasants changed the acreage of types of grain in relation to price movements. Mills were an important source of revenue for lords, who usually leased out the mill for a substantial sum of money. The miller drew an income and paid the rent from the tolls paid by the peasants who were compelled to take their grain to their lords’ mill. However, some mills escaped from close supervision, mainly before 1200, and the peasant tenants who paid a modest rent for a mill outside manorial control had the chance of profiting from the toll revenue. A sophisticated study of demesne policy in the fourteenth

12 B. Dodds, Peasants and Production in the Medieval North-East. The Evidence of Tithes, 1270–1536 (Woodbridge, 2007).
century, which explained the various decisions about agricultural management made by lords’ officials (many of them peasant reeves), made comparisons between demesnes and peasant holdings. An important finding was that peasants who seemed to have small numbers of animals actually kept a higher density of livestock than many lords. Similar conclusions have emerged from peasant animals recorded in tax records. The historian who had done the most thorough study of lords’ agriculture based mainly on manorial accounts turned to assess our understanding of the peasant economy in the early fourteenth century, and concluded that tenants could derive advantages from fixed rents, and could profitably sublet their land.

These are just some examples of the growing appreciation of the need to include peasants in any analysis of medieval society and economy, and they are selected from dozens of publications which give peasants careful attention. There are useful contributions to peasant history in the Agrarian Histories, general surveys of medieval economy and society, and the various handbooks aimed at both students and general readers. Taking peasants seriously as historical players in their own right is a feature of work on the early medieval period, for which sources are not so thin as is sometimes supposed.

Specialized fields of historical enquiry have also extended their scope to include the ordinary people of the medieval countryside. Legal historians whose concern was understandably focussed on parliament, the Westminster courts, and the workings of the common law have devoted more attention to manorial courts. This has led to them analysing customary law, exploring procedures such as the role of juries, and examining issues of tenure. All of these were directly the concern of peasants, and have led to legal historians appreciating the knowledge and understanding shown by peasant litigants and officials. Peasants were by no means confined to their local courts, and had a role as jurors in royal courts. Canon law courts, so important in their influence on marriage, were dependent like the secular courts on ordinary people prepared to report on their neighbours’

19 J. Masschaele, Jury, State and Society in Medieval England (Basingstoke, 2008).
behaviour, and on those bringing forward litigation. A similar development among historians of religion has led them to give more attention to ‘popular’ religion, and to take more seriously expressions of piety from all ranks of the laity. Participation by peasants in the life of the church has resulted from greater interest in parish churches and the parish in general. The study of late medieval English literature has traditionally been focussed on works intended for an elite audience, and historians rather than literary scholars showed more interest in such popular work as the Robin Hood ballads and the shorter pieces sometimes called ‘political songs’. Historical interest has been maintained, but literary scholars have shown more concern for works appreciated by a large general audience. Linguistic studies were always anchored in everyday speech, but without explicit links being made to peasant society. The interaction between social historians and place-name scholars has enabled local names to be explored more directly as evidence for peasant perceptions of their surroundings.

Medieval archaeology and its close allies, landscape history and vernacular architecture, began together in the mid twentieth century in a surge of interest in villages, fields, and rural non-elite houses. The practitioners proclaimed their objectives of discovering authentic peasant houses and exploring the daily lives of peasants. To some extent that initial focus has shifted, as the study of castles, churches, monasteries, and above all towns occupied important places on the agenda. The archaeology of the peasantry has survived with the ‘peasant house’ still a central concern but now with more interest in material culture and the environmental context. Landscape history (or landscape archaeology as it is often called) has not lost its early enthusiasm for rural settlements, fields, and associated sites.

This book can draw on the insights and achievements of many scholars, and they indicate the possibility of a broad enquiry into the full peasant experience, giving a more complete picture of the peasant contribution to late medieval life. Such a survey is more difficult to achieve if it is spread over a very large geographical area, and so is focussed here on one region, the west midlands. This

23 S. Kilby, Peasant Perspectives on the Medieval Landscape (Hatfield, 2020).
region, consisting of the counties of Gloucestershire, Warwickshire, and Worcestershire, was an obvious choice because the author is familiar with its documents and landscape. Treating the three counties together was not an original idea, because it was chosen by Rodney Hilton for his study, modelled on French regional surveys, which covers the whole social spectrum concentrating on the period around 1300.26 Writing this book has been aided not only by many works of Hilton's, but also by a dozen other scholars who have researched and written about the region and edited major texts, many of them influenced by him.

The region offers many other advantages. Its landscape is very varied, which allows comparisons to be made between open-field country with large villages, and woodlands where people lived in hamlets and in isolation, with some high ground (though no mountains) and areas of wetland. No region is typical, but the west midland region is free of idiosyncratic or very specialized characteristics. It was not dominated by a powerful lord, like county Durham, nor was it as urbanized as Suffolk, or as densely populated or intensively farmed as Norfolk, nor as unusually free as in Kent, nor as industrialized as parts of the south-west.

The period covered is divided into equal parts by the plague epidemic of 1349, and the content of the book reflects the differences between the growth of the thirteenth century which slowed or ended between 1300 and 1350, and the subsequent period of retreat but also new developments. We might be drawn into the belief that the Black Death was an overwhelming disaster and a decisive turning point, and certainly the west midlands suffered a very high mortality in what one source calls ’the first pestilence’ (in the context of the subsequent lesser outbreak in 1361–2). However, many developments began well before the fateful year and continued, such as the advance of peasant freedom, the rise of peasants with larger holding, the desertion of villages and abandonment of cultivated land, and the growth of some towns and industries. It is often said that women advanced their status and independence after 1349, but the records used for this book show women behaving decisively in the management of their inheritance in the early fourteenth century.

How can we write peasant-centred history, emphasizing their contribution to change without any sources written by them? There are no letters, diaries, or autobiographies. Instead, the main sources were written by clerks working in the administration of lords, church, and state and serving their purposes. We must use skill and imagination to counter the perspectives of the institutions which filtered and coloured the information that they provide. This is not so difficult because behind many of the sources lie the spoken words of peasants. They reported to the courts, and as litigants argued their cases, and some of their words formed the basis of the written record. When a peasant’s will was recorded, he or

she was often suffering a last illness, but could still make bequests to be written by
the clerk, though the details may have been prompted by the clerk’s suggestions. A
manorial account was based on the spoken words of the reeve, an unfree peasant,
with the help of aids to memory such as tally sticks. The document was prepared
by the clerk using a template. For us to hear the voice of the peasant is not always
an effort of imagination, as English phrases were included in the documents when
the clerk’s Latin failed him. Cattle grazing illicitly on a common because a peasant
had sold his rights to a butcher were called ‘chapman’s wares’. Landmarks in deeds
might include ‘a nether hadelond’ or a ‘wateryngplace’. A marriage agreed by
mutual consent was called a ‘handfasting’. These glimpses of everyday speech are
very satisfying, but almost all written records were Latin texts recording legal pro­
cesses in conventional formulae. They were written for the lords or the govern­
ment for particular ends, rarely for the benefit of the peasants, and never to help
future historians.

Archaeological evidence appears to give us direct access to the illiterate and
underprivileged. If a village, or part of one, is excavated and its surroundings sur­
veyed the houses, fields, material goods (pottery and metalwork) and animal
bones and plant remains are laid out before us as they were abandoned by the
peasant occupants. Of course the meaning of the surviving data is by no means
straightforward. The record is incomplete because organic building materials and
artefacts of wood, leather, and cloth have not survived. We cannot be sure how the
house was occupied, and we have no information about the status of the tenant or
builder. The dates of building and abandonment are based usually on pottery
which is often imprecise, and the material from the final phases is mingled with
debris from earlier periods. The surrounding landscape has much evidence of
boundaries and some for the use of land, but ownership, tenancy, and manage­
ment are matters for conjecture.

This book is based on a sample of evidence. Every major collection of manu­
scripts has been visited, and transcripts and notes made, but much has had to be
left unread. The largest collection is in Worcester Cathedral Library, which
includes a series of court rolls for eighteen of its larger manors for most of the
years between 1314 and 1520. All of the rolls for six sample years have been read,
and all of the rolls for two manors, Blackwell and Shipston and Cleeve Prior.
Many of the other rolls have been used in parts.

A higher proportion of the contents of other archives of manorial records have
been transcribed or summarized, but rarely all those surviving for one place or
estate. Some public records in print such as the Hundred Rolls, the lay subsidies,
the poll taxes, the inquisitions post mortem, and the Valor Ecclesiasticus have
been used often, but the voluminous unpublished records of the courts of King’s
Bench and Common Pleas have been barely scratched.

All of the archaeological reports with relevant material—that is, relating to
villages and other peasant sites—have been consulted, and also surveys and
reports resulting from landscape history projects. The author has done field work, mostly in south Warwickshire, the north Cotswolds, and in parts of woodland Worcestershire.

The purpose of this book is to use as much evidence as possible, hopefully overcoming the many problems of interpretation, in order to answer the central questions about the parts that peasants played in creating, promoting, and resisting change in a representative region between 1200 and 1540.
Peasants and landscapes

Landscapes provide the physical setting for people's lives, and geology and topography had a strong influence on farming, housing, communications, and economy. On the other hand, people could make choices about settlements and the organization and use of land which had an impact on the landscape. Two questions arise from this interaction between society and the land: How important was the human factor in forming landscapes, and which sections of society exerted most influence; in particular what was the peasants’ role? Before addressing these questions the region and its various landscapes, must be introduced.

The west-midland region

The west-midland region is defined here as the counties of Gloucestershire, Warwickshire, and Worcestershire, three modern shires with origins before 1066 (Figure 2.1). The boundaries of these shires began to be established by the seventh century, when the kingdom of the Hwicce had been assigned a bishop based at Worcester. The kingdom died in the ninth century, but its frontiers were fossilized in those of the Worcester diocese. Four shires were formed from this territory in the tenth and eleventh centuries; originally Winchcomb in the north Cotswolds was the head of a separate shire, which was subsequently absorbed into Gloucestershire.¹ Worcestershire was extended to the north-west along the Teme valley beyond the boundary of the diocese. The western parts of Warwickshire had been in the kingdom of the Hwicce, but when the shire boundary was drawn it took in a large area to the east up to Watling Street. Gloucestershire largely coincided with the southern end of the kingdom and its diocese, except that it took in land to the west of the Severn, including the Forest of Dean which came under the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of the bishops of Hereford. These units of local government were political institutions designed to perform specific tasks, but they

Figure 2.1 Topography of the west midland region.
derived some unity from the inclusion within their borders of the River Severn and its tributaries, in the east the Warwickshire Avon, and its tributaries such as the Arrow, Stour, and Dene, and in the west the Leadon, Teme, and Worcestershire Stour. South of Gloucester the Severn was fed by small rivers that flowed from east to west from the Cotswolds, notably the Frome, the Cam, and the Little Avon. Observers could stand on high ground, such as the Malvern Hills, the Birmingham plateau and its outliers to the north, Edge Hill to the east and the Cotswold escarpment to the south, and overlook a shallow bowl of valley land 36 miles across. Not all of the rivers flowed into the Severn, as in the north of Warwickshire the waters of the Blythe and Tame ended in the Trent, and most of the Gloucestershire Cotswolds were drained by the Evenlode, Windrush, Coln, and Churn which flowed southward into the Thames. The bulk of the land could be cultivated. The predominant soils are heavy, either the reddish marls associated with Mercian mudstone to the west and north of the region, or the grey lias clays of the eastern lowlands. The Cotswolds have ‘calcareous earths’ containing chips of oolitic limestone. Light alluvial soils occur mostly in the river valleys, though there are occasional patches of sand. The western edge of the region, notably Dean and Malvern, are characterized by ancient rocks and a variety of soils.2

The people of the three shires in the later Middle Ages must have been well aware of the unifying river valleys and the religious centre at Worcester. Together with their dialect of English these may have given them a sense of attachment to the region. They would also have recognized very clearly the varieties of countryside, with which we are familiar from the writings of the early modern topographers and county historians such as Leland, Camden, Habington, and Dugdale: they used such terms as forest, woodland, wold, champion, and Feldon (Figure 2.2).

Areas of land devoted to large trees and underwood were especially prominent in ‘the Forest’, that is the Forest of Dean. Royal forests occupied much of Worcestershire, notably in Feckenham in the east and Malvern to the west, and the short-lived Ombersley and Horwell. In south-western Gloucestershire lay Kingswood. These were legally defined hunting reserves, which gave the king the opportunity to hunt but also to raise revenue by fining the inhabitants for offences against the beasts of the chase and the vegetation that gave them shelter. Ombersley and Horwell ceased to be forests in 1218, and Malvern became a chase, a private forest of the earls of Gloucester. In north Warwickshire Sutton Chase

Figure 2.2 Landscape divisions of the west midland region.
belonged to the earls of Warwick. The boundaries of the forests and chases included some important woods, but also many settlements and fields with few trees or deer.

‘Woodland’ described a large area of the west and north of the region, where important features as well as trees, were the areas of pasture, often in extensive greens, heaths, commons, and moors. In the woodlands the arable lay in small open fields, often with five or more in a single township, and in enclosed crofts; the land was farmed from hamlets (often called greens and ends) and single farmsteads. Figure 2.3 shows the oddly shaped parish of Pendock, with houses strung along winding lanes, with an occasional cluster. The land included six fields, many crofts, parcels of assarts bearing distinctive clearance names like rudding and Newland, with access to large meadows and a moor for summer grazing. The country along the Severn in Gloucestershire below the hills, the Vale, resembled woodland landscapes in many ways, with dispersed settlements and many enclosed parcels. Similarly the wold shared many characteristics with champion country, as both types of landscape cultivated large areas of open field land, often divided into two fields, and their settlements were usually nucleated villages with between twelve and forty households. Figure 2.4 shows the village of Aston Blank and its original two fields, later divided into four, typically with a small grove.

‘Wold’ originally meant ‘woodland’, and extensive woods occupied parts of the Cotswolds and still do, but ‘wold’ for medieval people referred to high ground with extensive cultivation, though having access to hill pasture. Champion ran eastwards from the confluence of the Avon and Severn along the Avon valley and below the Cotswold edge, including the Vale of Evesham (‘the granary of Worcestershire’) and parts of central Worcestershire, and then extended across south and east Warwickshire. Here it was called the Feldon—in fact, the English equivalent of champion as both English *feld* and French *champ* refer to the abundance of arable land in open fields.

The four types of landscape—woodland, vale, wold, and champion—contained some distinctive subdivisions, such as the wetlands along the Severn estuary, and the less extensive marshes of Longdon marsh (in west Worcestershire) and the

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Figure 2.3  Pendock, Worcestershire. This parish was taken out of a larger land unit before the Conquest in a process that left it in two pieces. It lay within Malvern Chase. This reconstruction of its landscape in c.1300 shows scattered houses, winding roads, fields, crofts, assarts, meadows, and a moor. Its detached wood was in another parish (source: note 4).
Figure 2.4 Aston Blank, Gloucestershire (also called Cold Aston—it was sited on high ground in the Cotswolds). In c.1300, two settlements shared arable in two fields, with pasture and a small grove. By 1752, when the map shows the strips (selions) and furlongs, a single settlement was cultivating arable in four fields, and the northern area was enclosed (see Figures 6.1 and 6.4 for open-field villages in champion areas) (source: note 4).
Peasants and landscapes

Henmarsh near Moreton in north-east Gloucestershire. Distinctive wooded valleys were an important feature of the mid Cotswolds, around Stroud, Woodchester, and Painswick. Relatively flat country is seen as the Cotswolds dip gently into the Thames valley around Lechlade. Some of the landscape boundaries were and are sharp and distinct, like the ‘edge’ to the north and west of the Cotswolds, but sometimes we find hybrid frontier zones, leaving us uncertain as to how to classify, for example, the villages on the northern and western sides of the valley of the Warwickshire Avon.

Historic landscapes can partly be characterized from their topography of hills and valleys, and from the management of their land, but they were inhabited and a full assessment of the character of landscapes needs to take into account the human and social dimension. Peasants held land as tenants, and were subordinated to lords, and these social conditions had implications for their settlements and lands. Large church landlords, who were especially prominent in the southern parts of the region, had developed combinations of manors located in champion, woodland, and wold, as the varied resources of these landscapes benefited the estates’ production and consumption. However, champion and wold lands predominated, and as bishops and Benedictine monasteries exercised considerable social power, strengthened by continuous control over centuries, their lordship involved a high proportion of servile or customary tenants, who owed regular labour services in addition to cash payments for annual rent and extra dues. In the woodlands lay lords, especially knights and gentry, and smaller church institutions held much of the land and were more likely to gather rent in cash from freeholders or lightly burdened customary tenants. The obligations of tenants were not determined by their lords, as much depended on the productive capacity of their land, and the pull of the market. So it was a complex combination of factors that led customary tenants in the Vale of Berkeley and along the Severn estuary to be paying 12d per acre, while 4d–8d per acre is encountered more often in the Cotswolds and south Worcestershire, but 5d–6d in south-east Warwickshire. In the woodlands they might dip as low as 2d–4d.

By a paradox that surprises those who expect the unfree to be poor, servile tenants often occupied larger and middling holdings, while many free tenants were smallholders. Although nucleated villages were often inhabited by unfree or customary tenants, there is no exact coincidence between settlements and the powers of their lords. So the unfree tenants with heavy obligations near the Severn estuary lived in straggling hamlets and farms.

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A distinctive landscape was created from a combination of influences. On the Birmingham plateau in such Worcestershire parishes as Northfield, King's Norton, and Yardley the poor soils and damp climate encouraged pastoral farming. People lived in dispersed hamlets and farms, cultivated in many small enclosed fields as well as areas of open field, and their livestock could feed in the closes and on large areas of common pasture, often called heaths. The peasants, many of whom were smallholders, tended to hold land by free tenure under lay lords, including the king, a baronial family, and a rich knight; the estates of lesser lords are represented in the physical landscape by moats which had surrounded once prominent houses. Pastoral agriculture in the later Middle Ages was often aimed at the market, and both the country and the towns had a strong industrial dimension.7

A similar group of villages including CROPThorne, FLADbury, NETHERton, and ELMLEY Castle were placed between the river Avon and Bredon Hill, the inhabitants of which produced grain and legumes on both clay and alluvial soils of high quality in open fields. Two of the villages could feed animals on the hay from large riverside meadows, and Bredon Hill provided pasture for the others. The peasants lived in nucleated villages, many with standard holdings of about 15 or 30 acres, made up of strips scattered over the open fields. The majority were customary tenants owing labour services and cash rents to large church estates and, in the case of Elmley powerful lay lords, the earls of Warwick. With little scope for industry the inhabitants lived from agriculture and especially arable farming, sending a surplus of crops and animal products, especially wool, to nearby market towns, Evesham and Pershore.8

The countryside could only function with communications, which in most of the medieval west midlands means roads, lanes, tracks, and paths. These mattered at the most local level: Admington (Warwickshire), a champion village with extensive open fields, was provided with more than 18 miles of access routes to connect its thirty houses with hundreds of small strips. Admington now contains within its boundaries 3 miles of public roads. A woodland settlement of comparable size required a close network of routes for access to scattered small settlements, enclosed parcels, and strips of land in open fields, resulting in more roads than exist today.

Long-distance journeys were most easily made by rivers, but in the region only the Severn was navigable for many miles, though in addition the Bristol Avon


connected Bristol to the sea. Some roads were survivals from the Roman network, and the Fosse Way and the route from Bristol to Worcester, and then northwards towards Birmingham and Lichfield attracted much traffic. Hubs for long-distance roads included Cirencester, with connections to London, Gloucester, and Bristol. Droitwich sent salt out over the whole region and beyond on a network of roads. Coventry, the only regional capital in England not situated on a navigable river, had connections with coastal ports as well as smaller places in the region.\footnote{B.P. Hindle, \textit{Medieval Roads} (Princes Risborough, 1982); Hilton, \textit{Medieval Society}, pp. 10–13.}

Contrary to modern prejudice, medieval roads could cope with heavy traffic and for example there was regular cart traffic in the fifteenth century between Southampton and west midland towns.\footnote{M. Hicks, ed., \textit{English Inland Trade 1430–1540. Southampton and its Region} (Oxford, 2015), pp. 105–7, 108–9; a carrier connected London and Worcester by regular cart journeys: E.S. Fegan, ed., \textit{Journal of Prior More} (WHS, 1914), pp. 208, 260.} Towns were connected to one another, and to their surrounding villages by roads of varying quality. Many peasants owned carts, and even more used packhorses, and these were the main users of the region’s road system (see ‘Horses’ in Chapter 7). Costly bridges to take major roads over wide rivers, which increased in number in the thirteenth century, were funded by lords and towns. More numerous minor bridges were maintained, and presumably built, together with the metalling of roads, by peasants co-ordinated by villages (see ‘Village community’ in Chapter 4).

### Human impacts on the land

The road network is only one case of human intervention in the making of the landscape. A distinctive section of landscape in the south-western corner of the region is the low-lying south bank of the Severn estuary between the mouth of the Bristol Avon and Slimbridge Warth (Figure 2.1). This strip of land, a mile or two wide and 22 miles long, resembles parts of the Netherlands in that the inhabitants exposed themselves to the danger of flooding, but learnt to endure the occasional inundation. They protected themselves from rising water level with sea walls and drainage ditches. They were rewarded for their skill, vigilance, and communal co-operation by being able to take advantage of the wetland resources. They could benefit from lush meadows and good arable land. Beyond the sea wall, the salt marshes were managed to provide plentiful summer grazing, and access to the sea enabled them to profit from salt pans and fisheries. Flooding was not the only hazard, as the inhabitants were probably prone to malaria. The adaptations to the land are still visible, to the east of modern industrial Avonmouth, in a largely man-made countryside, with the ridge and furrow of former cultivation, small irregular fields defined by curving drainage ditches (once creeks in the marsh), and drove roads to give livestock access to reclaimed...
land (formerly salt marsh). The sea walls, water courses (called ditches, pills, and rhines), and gouts (water courses fitted with doors), still guard against incursions by the sea and flows of water from higher ground. The general message deriving from this example is that material conditions have profound consequences, but that people adapt and create appropriate landscapes. The same is true of the rest of the west midland region, even though dry land did not pose such great challenges and require such elaborate precautions.

Lords and landscapes

Many landscape features emerged in a period well before 1200, when evidence is very thin. It has been said that the lords must have been responsible for settling tenants and dependents in villages, and laying out fields which maximized orderly cultivation and economic efficiency. This could have happened as late as the eleventh century, but formation of nucleated villages could date back to the period before 1000, even before 800. No direct evidence from the early medieval period has been discovered for this process, though some excavated sites in other parts of England of c. 650–850 have quite regular arrangements of rectangular ditched enclosures. For a later period the planned streets of some nucleated villages, such as the very regular single street with rows of house plots on each side at Elmley Castle, suggests the work of a single authority. The regular plan might have coincided with the development of a market in the thirteenth century when houses were located on both sides of a wide village street which served as a marketplace. Villages, whether with a regular or irregular plans, were often associated with open fields. Were those devised by the lords also? Elmley happens to be a case where in the middle of the fourteenth century the lord can be observed exercising some control over the management of the open fields attached to the village. If a neighbouring village which had access to common pasture on Elmley’s fields wished to enclose part of the fallow, they had to obtain permission from the lord of Elmley.


13 CR Elmley, pp. xi–xiii, xxi.
Lords have also been regarded as playing a decisive part in the expansion of settlement and cultivation of land in the woodlands, which was still a very active process in the thirteenth century. The evidence comes from grants made by lords to tenants who were expected to bring the land into cultivation.\textsuperscript{14} For example the charters issued by Thomas, earl of Warwick between 1229 and 1242 include twenty-two grants of land in two very large, thinly populated manors in the Arden of north-west Warwickshire, Sutton Coldfield and Tanworth-in-Arden. Most of the land was in parcels of between 2 and 12 acres, often described as heath, and in four cases the new tenant was given permission to enclose or ditch the parcel, and to clear or assart it in preparation for cultivation. In most of the grants no reference is made to a previous tenant, which leads us to believe that the land lay in an undeveloped state, and formed part of the open common waste on which live-stock had been grazed. The impression that these were new parcels that were being precisely defined for the first time comes from the boundary descriptions which used as landmarks rivers, streams, roads, and the hedges and ditches around other parcels of land described as assarts. The lord gained only a modest rent of between 5\(d\) and 2\(s\) each, or about 2\(d\) per acre, but he may also have been rewarding a servant, or anticipating future services. A few of the new tenants also paid a more substantial initial sum to gain possession, between a mark and 15 marks (13\(s\) 4\(d\) and £10).\textsuperscript{15} In most cases the land was being granted rather than sold, and the impression is given that the lord was anxious to develop and populate his manor, offering low rents to encourage new settlers and cultivators. From the boundary descriptions we see a landscape filling up as new plots of land being added to clusters of closes and clearings. The main beneficiaries would have been the new tenants, once they had struggled through the hard work of removing vegetation and digging out tree stumps.

Only occasionally do the grants made by lords refer to the clearance of land by the lords themselves—only one of the group of documents analysed above mentions an assart of the earl of Warwick. In royal forests lords would be reported to the justices of the forest for appropriating land in purprestures, or removing the vegetation in assarts, sometimes in large quantities of 50 acres or more in a single episode. In the case of Westminster Abbey at Knowle in Warwickshire the costs of assarting by a lord appears in the reeve’s account, with £1 ‘for assarting by a certain contract’ in 1293–4, and a total of 16\(s\) 6\(d\) on labour and repairs to a plough in the following year. In this case one of the assarts lay within a park, demonstrating the versatility of these private landscapes.\textsuperscript{16} The act of enclosing land that had previously been open pasture or wood pasture often caused controversy, and the


\textsuperscript{16} WAM 27693, 27694.
lord had to deal with lawsuits brought against him under the assize of novel disseisin, which sought to prevent the loss of common pasture. Disputes could reach a pitch which led the defenders of common rights to assemble (commonly at night) and remove the hedges and fences and fill in the ditches around the newly appropriated land. At King’s Norton Wood in 1332, a great crowd of people from King’s Norton (Worcestershire) and adjoining Yardley and Solihull destroyed a bank and ditch which had been constructed by Roger Mortimer across a shared common pasture.\(^{17}\) To avoid such confrontations, some lords would make agreements with those exercising common rights, and even buy off those who had been deprived of grazing.

The role of lords in the planning of villages and clearing land should not be exaggerated. If lords were ordering their tenants into planned villages one might expect to see some resemblances between villages across a large and powerful estate such as that of Evesham Abbey or Worcester Priory, but their settlements seem rather varied. The neat and regular plan of Westcote in Tysoe in Warwickshire, which consisted essentially of a single street with rows of houses on each side, can be seen with particular clarity because it was abandoned in the fifteenth century, with its plan frozen in time (Figure 2.5). Westcote was recorded in 1279 as having tenants under the lordship of four church institutions and two laymen.\(^ {18}\) At the time when the village was laid out in an orderly fashion at an unknown earlier date there may have been two or three lords, but planning here and elsewhere would have needed agreement from a number of interested parties, and the source of the initiative is not known. Nor is it clear what lords would have gained from the complex processes of settling the inhabitants in new houses in neat plots. In the open fields the lords had an obvious interest in maintaining a systematic sequence of crops and fallow if the lord’s demesne and the tenants’ holdings were intermingled across the furlongs of the field system, and both had to follow the same routine. Often, however, the lord’s land was located in a block, and did not have to observe the same rotations as the village fields, and some lords had no demesne at all. The case for identifying lords as the usual organizers and planners of villages would be stronger if they were ever in the situation of starting a village from new, and bringing settlers into an empty countryside, such as an area of moorland. In the midlands the countryside was invariably inhabited, and nucleation and planning involved re-organization, with people being persuaded or ordered to move, coinciding with increased density of population and intensity in land use.

In the woodlands there is more evidence for identifying lords as changing the land by promoting the colonization of wastes. However the charters and legal disputes may be misleading us in presenting the lord as the activist. A lord who

\(^{17}\) Calendar of Patent Rolls, 1330–4, p. 268.  \(^{18}\) WHR, pp. 268–70.
Figure 2.5 Westcote in Tysoe, Warwickshire. The desertion of this village in the fifteenth century means that the plan of the village, unencumbered by modern houses, is visible as earthworks. The curving modern drive to the farmhouse follows approximately the straight line of the original village street, with rows of houses and building plots, at least twelve of them, set on either side of the street. Other houses to the north-west are not so well-ordered (plan by Sarah Wager and the author).