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Chapter 1

The county and beyond

The national context

Behind the continuities of rural life, late medieval England witnessed immense social and economic change. Much of these developments were driven by population change. Historians may disagree about the precise scale of this fourteenth-century demographic shrinkage,¹ but the general trend is clear, and witnessed by records throughout much of the country. The impact of these changes varied; and economic historians, like their political counterparts, have held contrasting pessimistic and optimistic views of the period.² On a national scale, this seems a period of gloom: of falling production, shrinking settlements and a retreat from arable land, a time of difficulties for the large-scale demesne agriculture that had characterised farming in the thirteenth century. But this gloomy national situation provided opportunities for the generation of greater individual prosperity. Now, the balance between lord and tenant had shifted: the bargaining position of tenant and wage-earner had greatly strengthened, and the period also saw the erosion of the unfree status of villeinage. The improved economic situation of the bulk of the population increased the demand for luxuries or more wasteful forms of agriculture: more meat and ale rather than bread and porridge. The changing circumstances offered the peasantry new opportunities for self-improvement, by acquiring a tenancy or by accumulating several holdings. As people became better off, they became increasingly dependent on manufactured goods and services produced by others. Each individual was now engaged in more commercial transactions and had a wider range of available choices.³

Such social improvements were both general and subject to regional variations. Analysis of the distribution of tax assessments from the early fourteenth to the early sixteenth century shows a marked regional change in the rankings of taxation per 100 acres. Some areas, such as the east midlands, Lincolnshire and Norfolk, declined in relative assessed wealth and others, such as the west country, prospered. Wiltshire rose from fourteenth to fifth in the rankings.⁴ This was to be one of those periods in English history, like the nineteenth century or the interwar years of the following

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1. J. Hatcher, *Plague, population and the English economy, 1348–1530* (Basingstoke, 1977); R. Smith, 'Human resources', in G. Astill and A. Grant (eds), *The countryside of medieval England* (Oxford, 1988), 188–212; B.M.S. Campbell, *English seigniorial agriculture, 1250–1450* (Cambridge, 2000), 399–410.
 2. Compare the views of M.M. Postan, in e.g. 'The fifteenth century' in his *Essays on medieval agriculture and general problems of the medieval economy* (Cambridge, 1973), 41–8; and those of A.R. Bridbury, *Economic growth: England in the later Middle Ages* (London, 1975).
 3. For a recent and positive view of the period see C. Dyer, *An age of transition? Economy and society in England in the later Middle Ages* (Oxford, 2005). Dyer's arguments are clearly of considerable importance in relation to those put forward here and provide welcome reassurance from a much wider perspective.
 4. R.S. Schofield, 'The geographical distribution of wealth in England, 1334–1649', *EcHR*, 2nd series 18 (1965), 483–510.

century, when growth and decline were to be immensely regional in character. Much of this regional divergence showed the impact of commercial growth, above all in the cloth industry. This was the period when England shifted from being an exporter of wool (a raw material) to an exporter of cloth (a manufactured product) and began to benefit from the value of the labour inputs that transformed wool to cloth. This industrial growth increased the demands on agriculture for wool, grain, meat and other foodstuffs, as well as boosting the demand for labour and consumer goods. Moreover, the expansion of the cloth industry was not spread evenly throughout the country, but was concentrated in particular areas, above all in the west country, and in Essex and Suffolk, areas which consequently showed the greatest rise in wealth according to the ranking of counties by taxation. The new industries required trade and towns, to sell their manufactured products and to use their surpluses to buy food and consumer goods. Consequently, specialism grew in both town and countryside. Towns might shrink and urban land become vacant as the population contracted, but there were also signs of urban prosperity, redevelopment and new building.

Thus, behind the dramatic falls in both population and gross national product lay a very different England. For those who survived the traumas of plague there were great opportunities for self-enhancement in the countryside. The consequent improved standards of living generated increased demand for particular foods, and more land was available. The cloth industry generated new demands both for labour and for agricultural products. Towns might have shrunk, but they were needed nevertheless, and there was little sign that shrinkage was greater than that of the population as a whole. Wiltshire, like many, but not all, parts of the country, prospered during the later Middle Ages.

Studying the county

Later medieval England showed great contrasts between areas of growth and of decline, and these variations emphasise the need for further local and regional studies. Moreover, the nature of the available evidence encourages and necessitates a focus on small units which are not only manageable but also possess suitable records. R.H. Hilton commented in reference to the peasantry that 'the microscopic view is essential if generalisations about the peasantry are to have a satisfactory evidential basis.'⁵ But what should be our unit of study? In the past the focus has been on the village, the manor, or the estate.⁶ These have clear inner logics, as seen in the records themselves, and their study has produced works of distinction. Some historians have tackled whole regions.⁷ The choice of a county as a unit of study for

5 R.H. Hilton, *The English peasantry in the later Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1975), 17.

6 e.g. F.G. Davenport, *The economic development of a Norfolk manor, 1086–1565* (1906), reprinted London 1967; P.D.A. Harvey, *A medieval Oxfordshire village, Cuxham 1240–1400* (Oxford, 1965); J.A. Raftis, *The estates of Ramsey Abbey* (Toronto, 1957); B. Harvey, *Westminster Abbey and its estates* (Oxford, 1977); C. Dyer, *Lords and peasants in a changing society: the estates of the bishopric of Worcester, 680–1540* (Cambridge, 1980).

7 e.g. R.H. Hilton, *A medieval society: the west midlands at the end of the thirteenth century* (London, 1966); and E. Miller (ed.), *The agrarian history of England and Wales: vol. 3, 1348–1500* (Cambridge, 1991).

the agrarian, economic and social history of a period is less familiar. Most counties lack geographical unity and their boundaries have little economic significance. But it is precisely this regional variety that makes them so appropriate for such a study. We have a unit which is both manageable and allows us to see something of the variation that existed within medieval society, and whose significance thus extends beyond the individual county itself. Wiltshire, for instance, is divided between the long-settled chalklands that occupy so much of its south and east parts, and the clay vales in which there were, in the medieval period, opportunities for colonisation of the woodlands. Here were two different agrarian worlds, or pays, with contrasting landscape and settlement patterns and agricultural histories, as different as chalk and cheese. By contrast, the boundaries that divided the chalklands of Wiltshire from those of Hampshire or Dorset, or that split the cloth industry of Somerset and west Wiltshire, were of no importance in the economic life of the people. Material from the neighbouring counties has been incorporated here where it can help illuminate what was happening in Wiltshire. For the historian the artificial nature of the county thus has real values, providing a microcosm of what was happening in a wider area beyond its borders: in this case, southern England. Underpinning this study is the belief that we need to examine the local and the particular, whether an individual estate or manor, and make comparisons between estates and between regions. The diversity of Wiltshire becomes a strength, not a weakness, and offers the opportunity to examine a part of England that has tended to be neglected in the recent published literature.

The county also provides a manageable body of sources that allows us to overcome some of the problems inherent in the varied nature of manorial documentation, particularly in the latter stages of demesne agriculture. Users of such records will be familiar with a situation where we can ask particular questions on individual documented manors but not on others. The manageable scale of the county also allows us to integrate a wide variety of manorial and non-manorial documentation, especially important at a time when so many lords were gradually ceasing their direct involvement in agriculture. The use of such non-manorial evidence is also crucial as one of the underlying themes of this book is the need to see agriculture as part of the wider economy, to explore the interactions between countryside and town and between agriculture and the growth of the cloth industry. This book examines the impact of commercial growth as a generator of prosperity as well as looking at the potential disadvantages of this new dependence on cloth-making when prosperity turned to short-term recession.

This study explores issues of change and continuity from c.1380 to c.1520. Its starting point is determined by the paucity of surviving documentation for the county in the generation after the Black Death, other than for the bishopric of Winchester. Its end avoids the very different conditions of the sixteenth century, with the Tudor price rise and the change of ownership that was to befall so many of the ecclesiastical lands. The study is concerned both with the changes of our period and with longer-term patterns of agriculture and social continuities. A chapter on the better-documented agriculture of the early fourteenth century allows us to provide a firm base from which to view the great changes of the main period examined. The study also seeks to establish how far this period developed the characteristics of Wiltshire's agriculture that dominated the next few centuries: above all, the contrast between large-scale capitalist farming in the chalklands, with its dependence on wage labour

and heavy investment in sheep–corn husbandry, and a smaller, more family-orientated, pastoral agriculture in the clay vale.

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- 8 Dyer, *Lords and peasants*, 162.
 - 9 E.M. Carus-Wilson, 'Evidences of industrial growth on some fifteenth century manors', in Carus-Wilson (ed.), *Essays in economic history*, 158.
 - 10 R.R. Davies, 'Baronial accounts, incomes and arrears in the later Middle Ages', *EcHR*, 2nd series xxi (1968), 227–9.