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Chapter 1

Risk and choice

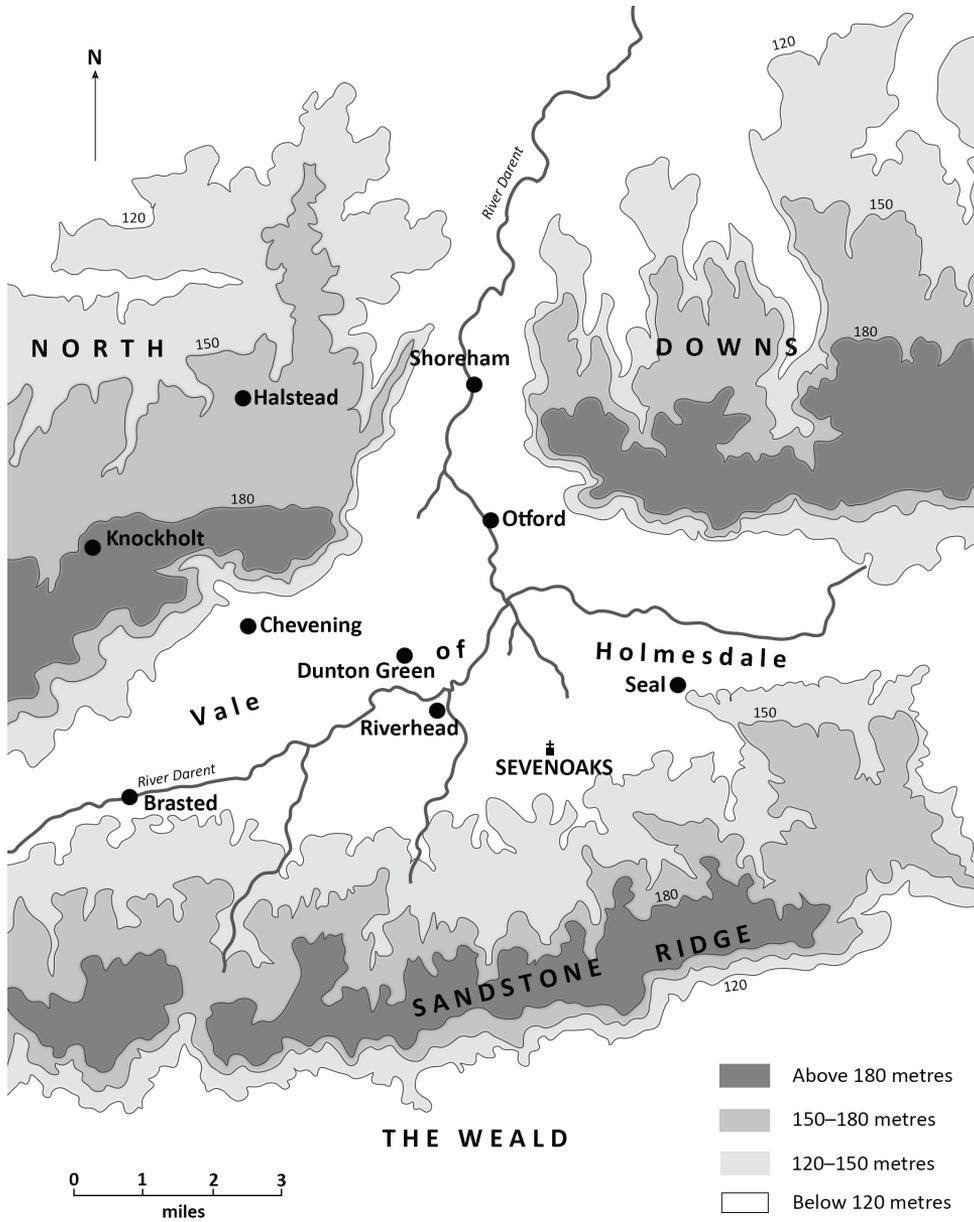
This is a story about Sevenoaks, a market town in west Kent, and the villages within a ten-mile radius of it, from roughly 1790 to 1914. This area of over 300 square miles, which constituted the greater part of the ‘mental maps’ referred to by many of its residents, is examined during a time of increasingly dramatic social, economic, political and cultural changes. Many stemmed from the town being 25 miles south-east of the burgeoning London metropolis, the population of which expanded rapidly from one million in 1800 to nearly seven million a century later.

There are many histories of English market towns and rural areas for this period, but many are very limited, failing to address the various complex interactions taking place in these societies. Almost all suffer, in one form or another, from what John Marshall calls the ‘tyranny of the discrete’, with an over-narrow focus, while generally ignoring the important national and regional factors that undoubtedly influenced those localities to a very significant degree.¹ We seek to avoid falling into this trap by concentrating on how extra-local issues impacted on the broader Sevenoaks area, to give a more complete picture of events. Most importantly, we wish to introduce an entirely new approach to studying local history, for the main thread running through this book is the twin ideas of risk and choice.

Our basic argument is that, particularly for poorer people in early nineteenth-century west Kent, their lives revolved around overcoming the everyday risks that could and often did impact their very survival, especially the struggle to obtain the four bare necessities: food, clothing, housing and fuel. Those efforts are placed within their contemporary contexts, examining what types of risk mitigation strategy were available to the disadvantaged in relation to employment opportunities and family support. We then analyse other areas of risk, including those arising from poor health and substandard sanitary conditions, and the ways that these too might be mitigated. Our contention is that focusing on the risks people had to bear, how they coped with them, what impact that might have had

1 John Marshall, *The tyranny of the discrete: a discussion of the problems of local history in England* (Aldershot, 1997).

SEVENOAKS



Map 2 Physical map of the Sevenoaks district.

on other social groups (with the potential for political conflicts) and how those risks were eventually removed or reduced, provides a fruitful new way of looking at the history of the Sevenoaks area in this period. And there is no reason why it might not be applied to others, too.

The small market town of Sevenoaks

Here are some very neat houses, inhabited by independent persons, which renders the place highly respectable. The principal ornament of the town is the park and mansion of the Dorset family. This august and venerable pile stands in the centre of the celebrated Knole Park which is considered one of the finest in England: the walks, the fine and diversified scenery ... form a rare concentration of beauty and advantage ... The church ... is an handsome and interesting fabric. Here is also an Hospital for yielding comfort and maintenance to 32 aged decayed trades people, which is laudably conducted. A school for educating poor children by Sir William Sevenoak. Lady Boswell's school is another excellent charity. The market is large and well supplied and is on Saturdays.

Source: Pigot's directory of Kent, 1824, pp. 412–13.

Since risk bore disproportionately heavily on the poor, the primary emphasis will be on history 'from below'. Thus our concern is the mass of the population, most of whom were poor; despite the recent labours of many historians, 'there are still few histories of the working poor and they have names and faces, and stories to tell'.² This means we need 'so far as possible, to see things their way', which requires digging deep in the available sources to uncover what the lower social orders were thinking, doing and feeling.³ This does not mean ignoring the well to do and the 'middling sort', whose lives and fortunes also changed in this period. Our starting point is therefore those things central in the lives of labouring people in west Kent. One flipside of risk is choice; others might include trust and hope. Risk diminished as economic improvements from c.1850 put more money in people's pockets, including some of the poorest in society. Choice was not merely expressed in terms of greater disposable incomes and a growing ability to choose a wider range of consumer goods. For choice or, perhaps better, pluralism made accessible to a larger number of people many more opportunities and rights: the entitlement to vote; alternate places in which to worship (or not); access to knowledge and education; more spare

2 Alison Light, *Common people: the history of an English family* (London, 2014), p. xxii.

3 Quentin Skinner, *Visions of politics*, vol. 1, *regarding method* (Cambridge, 2002), pp. 1–8.

time and a wider choice of leisure activities. How and why people (especially the poor) clamoured for more choice, and how and why they expressed those choices when they had the opportunity to do so, we believe drove the historical process in, broadly, the second half of the nineteenth century in much the same way as risk did the first. Pressure from below to reduce risk or enhance choice was not necessarily welcomed by all, giving rise to political factions and class conflict. Steering a way through life's difficulties was a complex and multi-influenced process, so we believe describing it in terms of risk and choice is an entirely valid approach.

These emphases feature in few other local histories. Politics in its broadest sense is often ignored. Religious belief and activity tends to concentrate on buildings and the clergy, while ignoring how faith impacted on the lives of ordinary people. Politics and religion were so interwoven in people's minds and responses in the long nineteenth century that they deserve to be considered together. After a chapter examining west Kent society and the power and authority structures that governed it, we combine politics and religion in two chapters under the broad heading of 'Ideas, Beliefs and Values'. These deal with adherence to and expressions of both religious and political ideas and opinions. This means seeing 'parish pump' politics as important to communities and assessing religious (and non-religious) beliefs as powerful and dynamic influences that helped shape the ideas and actions of individuals, in both local affairs and national issues. This, in turn, requires historians seriously to understand the moral imperatives of religious belief and practice as they were played out locally in relation to the national political stage.

In addition, a risk- and choice-centred framework enables us to examine more fully during the long nineteenth century the impact on west Kent of important socio-economic developments: Britain's rapid increase in population; Sevenoaks' close proximity to rapidly expanding London; the growth and change in agricultural output; industrialisation and urbanisation; the growth of steam and steel; changes in working practices; the national railway network; the growth in the power and influence of the state both locally and nationally; radical changes in labour relations; changing religious affiliations and the decline in religious belief; advances in the medical sciences; an increase in ideas of individualism and personal leisure time; and ideas of progress. By the early twentieth century parts of west Kent could boast a distinctive working class, whereas a hundred years earlier there were only incipient signs of that major reordering of society and attitude.