

An Introduction to the Economy and Society of England and Dartmoor, c.1086-1500

A talk at the Moor Medieval Study Group Meeting 30 May 2015

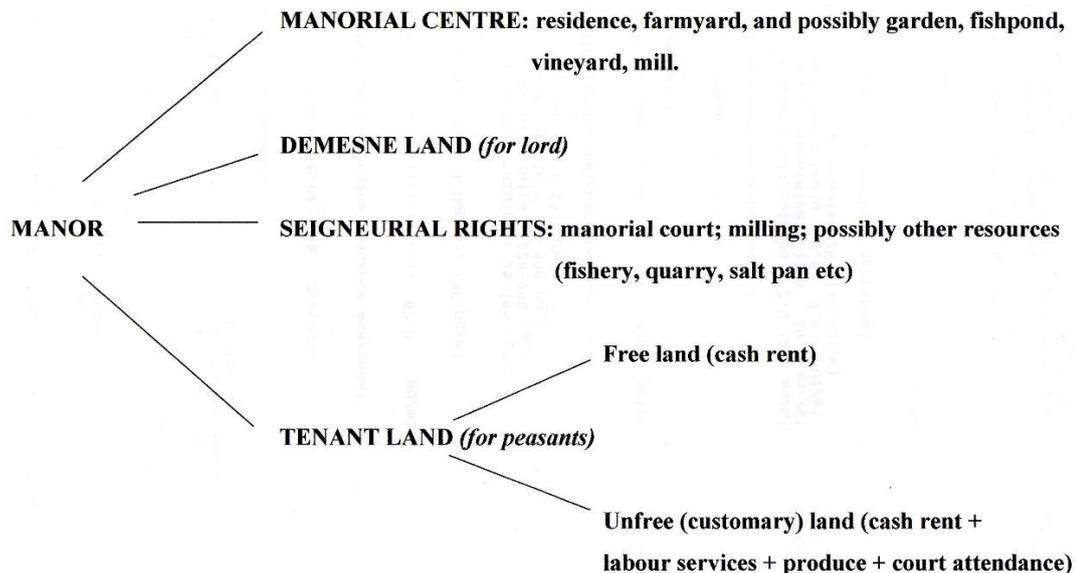
David Stone

I thought it would be useful to outline the nature of medieval society and social and economic developments c.1086-1500: national picture first; then how some of these themes might be developed for Dartmoor. Also, briefly, say something about historical sources for this period. Two aims:

1. To provide context and grounding for those less familiar with medieval England.
2. To help in the process of forming manageable questions about our different themes.

I NATURE OF MEDIEVAL SOCIETY

- 90% of people made income from land: agriculture; other resources (mining, crafts).
- Land and the obligations for holding it shaped and bound medieval society together. This system can be viewed as a pyramid: King at the top; then greater & lesser landlords, discharging religious, administrative, and military duties in return for land; and many peasants holding land, whether from the King or from these landlords, in return for rent and other obligations (labour services, renders in kind, etc.).
- Obligations of peasants were regulated through the manor, which classically comprised a manorial centre, demesne land (which the lord could use as he wished), and tenant land; landlords also had certain rights (including holding a manorial court).



- Freedom and villeinage are tricky but important concepts: legal unfreedom emerged in the late 12th century; difference between personal and tenurial unfreedom; many shades of freedom and unfreedom; decline of serfdom late 14th century onwards.

II ECONOMIC CHANGE OVER TIME

The environment, population, and economy of England did not remain static over time.

- *Climate*: warm period c.1000-1250; cooler period ('Little Ice Age') began c.1450; transitional period in between, bringing highly variable weather conditions.

- *Population*: growth started in c. 9th century; population reached about 2 million in 1086 and continued growing to 5-6 million in 1300; it's now argued that the years between the mid-12th and mid-13th centuries saw particularly fast growth. However, agrarian crisis of 1315-22 (including famines in 1315-17) killed approximately 10-15% of population, while the Black Death of 1348-49 killed probably 40-50%; population was reduced to 2½-3 million by 1377; it remained low in late 14th and 15th centuries; upturn c.1500.

This pattern of population growth and then decline is reflected in many aspects of the economy.

- *Landscape*. 1000-1300: assarting and reclamation; new settlement; expansion of older settlements. After the Black Death: abandonment of land; desertion of some settlements.
- *Commercialisation*. Lots of new markets and fairs were granted 1150-1300; transport infrastructure and bridge building improved; most modern river crossings in place by 1250. After 1348, the number of markets and fairs shrank.
- *Food prices*. As population increased, prices generally rose. After the Black Death (at least, by 1375) they fell and then remained low.
- *Peasant standards of living*. Worsened to 1300. But, for survivors of the Black Death, standards of living generally improved.
- *Greater landlords*. Leased demesnes up to late 12th century; adopted direct demesne cultivation c.1180-1220, as prices rose and commercial opportunities expanded; in contrast to peasants, many landlords were basically doing very well in c.1300. As prices fell in late 14th century, they adopted leasing once again; their incomes generally fell.
- *Agriculture*. Generally mixed farming; increasingly arable to 1300. Pastoral emphasis after 1348. In terms of techniques, evidence from lords' demesnes suggests agricultural production intensified as population grew and became less intensive in the later middle ages.
- *Non arable production*. Wool exported to 1300; native cloth production grew in later middle ages. Tin-working productive, especially in certain phases (c.1150-1220, early 14th century, late 14th century, late 15th century).

III DARTMOOR THEMES

How does the development of Dartmoor fit into this picture? Picked out four themes, based on chapters by John Hatcher and Harold Fox in the *Agrarian History of England and Wales* (volumes II and III). Broadly similar development, but some really interesting differences.

1. *Settlement and buildings*

- Settlement already high on Dartmoor by 1086 e.g. Natsworthy (near Widecombe).
- Assarting and reclamation is clear e.g. Lydford manorial account rolls: assarting 'in the King's waste' on Dartmoor.
- Growth in numbers of settlements late 12th-early 14th century, partly reflecting the rapid expansion in the tin industry in c.1150-1220 & in early 14th century.

- Some desertion in later middle ages (e.g. Hound Tor fields finally abandoned in late 14th century) and some manor houses ruinous in mid-15th century (as lords concentrated resources on particular properties). However, tenant houses often remained: there was not desertion on the scale that there was in midland England (deserted medieval villages): a flexible landscape?
- By 1500, building size had changed: in 13th century and early 14th century, longhouses were c. 50 feet × 13½ feet, and shared with livestock; by late 15th century, farmhouses were c. 53 feet × 18 feet, with separate barns and byres.

2. People and society

- In 1086: lots of slaves (in Devon generally) and no free tenants.
- Increase in freedom 1086-1300: because land was carved from waste; because tin-working effectively bestowed freedom; and because of the emergence of different types of rental agreement.
- Occupations: farming; farming & tin; farming & craft. Surnames are a useful guide (to both occupation and geographical origin) until c.1300, as there was no fixity of surnames until the 14th century.
- Very mobile population: grazing; migrant tanners; turf-cutters; and harvest workers (e.g. in harvest of 1436 labourers go from mid Devon ‘usque lez Southammys’).
- Later middle ages: engrossment and enclosure of holdings; live-in servants?

3. Agriculture

- Lots of good, accessible material in Domesday Book, especially on livestock: goats and pigs prominent (not least at Hound Tor); though decline on demesnes thereafter.
- Cattle rearing emerged as an important element of demesne agriculture by 14th century. At Hurdwick, an ox sent to the cellarer’s larder in 1450 was called ‘Babe’!
- Summer grazing of cattle: many from 10-20 miles away; if close, grazing from sunrise to sunset and return to fallow arable fields at night to make use of the manure.
- Arable in moorside communities and in pockets on the moor: rye (for bread) and oats (for ale) appear to have been the main crops, as suggested by a late medieval demesne inventory for Lustleigh and tenant payments of multure at South Teign.
- Distinctive arable techniques in Devon: convertible husbandry; beat-burning; sanding (with shells for liming or just sand for smothering weeds). Sand taken up R. Taw to Tawstock, R. Torridge to Monkleigh, and R. Tamar to Maristow and Morwhellam, then by pack-horse to mid-Devon. Too expensive to cart up to Dartmoor?
- Other produce: gorse/furze packed with nutrients; turves; rabbit warrens by 1300; granite for millstones; horses? Also tin, of course, which helped shaped Dartmoor’s development in distinctive ways.

4. Fortunes during this period

- 1086-1300: lots of evidence for exploitation of late 11th century Dartmoor; expansion of tin 1150-1220; by 1300, economic and social strain, but seemingly no crisis of overpopulation because of extensive grazing and expansion of tin.
- 1348-1500: immediate impact of Black Death (e.g. at Lydford mortality of ‘the greatest part’ of tenants and landless); but quick recovery and a significant amount of

resilience (tithe returns at Widecombe stable 1380s-1440s and $\frac{2}{3}$ ancient tenements remained). Why so resilient? Highly commercialised: tin-mining and all it entailed (turf-digging, itinerant tanners, merchants); also impact of cloth-producing to south and west of Dartmoor, which saw significant growth in 1430s/40s & 1480s/90s. All this provided a continued market for food producers.

IV SOURCES

1. *Secondary sources*

- Generally very rich: settlement; society; farming; tanning; fortunes; and, although not mentioned here, religion. This is the absolutely the place to start, for information, for references, for guidance.
- 1st important message: don't set out to replicate from scratch what others have spent years doing (and are still doing); instead, build on their work. E.g. Dartmoor Tin-Working Research Group: communicate with them; utilise what they've done; and build on it to develop a local picture for a particular parish - and a broader interpretation that helps contextualise the story of that parish's development.

2. *Primary historical sources*

- Domesday Book (1086) is unusually detailed for Devon and relatively accessible.
- Manorial sources: surveys; account rolls; court rolls. These are variable: fantastic for central Dartmoor (Duchy of Cornwall records 1337-); very good on the western fringes (Hurdwick, Werrington, Lydford); otherwise pretty scattered. That said, I suspect a huge amount of information about surrounding parishes can be found in the Duchy accounts for central Dartmoor. A great resource!
- Tin records are also good (and unique for England): stannary accounts; coinage rolls. Also lists of potential contributors to royal taxes from 1334. Another great resource!
- Government records perhaps less widely appreciated but definitely worth looking at: taxes (for example, 1332, 1377, 1520s); Feet of Fines; Inquisitions Post Mortem (IPMs). All kept at the National Archives (Kew), but calendars available (Exeter UL?).
- 2nd important message: ask manageable questions. There is no point spending five years searching for the answers to questions that medieval sources can't answer.

There are, of course, many other sources: maps; the landscape; buildings; and archaeological remains. Archaeology can include extended digs (as at North Hall Manor), but can also include test-pitting, which I can certainly recommend (after, of course, seeking the requisite permission from landowners!).

- It's exhilarating (you never know what's there), productive, useful for working out settlement patterns at different periods, and leaves little trace on the surface.
- It's also relatively quick and flexible, and requires little equipment (tape measure, 4m twine, spade, hand spades, trowels, buckets, tarpaulin, sieve, finds trays, plastic bags, and labels).
- Essentially: 1 metre square site; carefully remove turf; 10 cm spits, separate finds for each level (pot, metal, clay pipes, charred material, the odd coin perhaps, and

sometimes much earlier material such as worked flint); if possible, sieve earth (and perhaps metal detect at this point); clean off and photograph each 10 cm layer; and stop digging at natural soil. After carefully cleaning the finds, you will need to seek expert advice on identifying many of them. Test-pitting is a good joint enterprise, can involve children as well as adults, and is historically informative whatever you do or don't find.

This is not intended to be a comprehensive guide to the medieval economy and society, to medieval Dartmoor, or to the various means of approaching the medieval past; it is simply an introduction to each of these areas. More detailed information, including primary and secondary source material and tangible avenues of enquiry, will be forthcoming as soon as possible!