

Medieval Peasants - Scratching a living in the countryside

Maureen James looks at the harvests of the past

As you read this the summer will almost be over, the harvest gathered in and fruit ripening on the trees and bushes. It is a time of plenty, of celebration and of Harvest Festivals. It is also nearly Michaelmas which, in Medieval times meant the end of the financial year. If you were a medieval peasant it was time to ensure that a substantial portion of the grain processing had been completed so the grain could be sold to raise cash to pay money rents and taxes due on the 29th September. The lords, to whom rents were paid, and the church to whom one tenth of the gathered crop would be given in tithes, could store grain until spring or early summer, to sell it when the price was at its highest.

At a time when almost nine-tenths of the population were engaged in agriculture, research shows that in the Midlands less than a quarter held full yardlands (12 hectares) and were self-sufficient. After a normal harvest a tenant with this amount of land, cultivated under a three-course rotation of wheat, spring-sown crops (barley, peas, oats) and fallow, could expect to sell only 36 per cent of his net output of grain after allowing for retained seed corn and the sustenance of his wife and children.

Forty per cent of the Midland peasants owned either half or quarter yardlands and would have needed some other source of food or income just to survive. The remaining landless peasants may well have been forced into begging, scavenging or crime in years when the price of food was high.

In each community the peasants, under the system of strip-farming needed to work in co-operation with others and grow versatile crops that could feed their households, their animals, and ideally provide a surplus. Many peasants chose to grow 'dredge' a mix of barley and oats, which produced high yields and was quite versatile but did not fetch a high price.

Always in the mind of the peasant was also the worry of having enough to survive through not just the winter but until the next harvest. When the crops were ripening in the fields, the barns at their lowest point and the grain bins empty, many people went hungry. With the price of grain and bread at its highest the coarsest of wheat bran and even old shrivelled beans and peas was ground to try to make some sort of bread to stave off hunger.

It has been theorised that peasants may even have ground poppies, hemp and darnel to make 'crazy bread' which would give an hallucinogenic lift to the starving people who would gather together during this 'hungry time'. It is this mood that Pieter Breughal the Elder captured at the end of the medieval period, in his portrayals of peasants enjoying crazed rural festivals.

Things would have eased a little by early August and the 'Feast of First Fruits' - Lammas, or Loaf Mass for this was the day on which loaves of bread were baked from the first grain harvest for consecration by the church. In Saxon times these first blessed loaves were broken into four and crumbled into the corners of the barn to make it safe for the grain to arrive.

By mid-September fruits and berries would be regularly collected for human consumption and the beechnuts and acorns would be ripening and falling in the woods

to be eaten by the swine. Pannage rights were generally paid for by a small cash fee on top of a peasant's normal dues, and provided a valuable means of fattening swine up for slaughter. Pannaging generally lasted for six weeks, ending in mid-November.

Many peasants had rights of common to gather logs in the woods for cooking and heating, making tools and repairing carts. They could also burn charcoal. Many also had the right to collect wood to repair houses and for the repair of gates or fences. For people who lived within a days reach by cart or boat from London, there was also a ready market for wood for the city dwellers who, in 1300 used 140,000 tons. But whilst in the woods or forests the peasant must not poach the venison.

Venison was, in medieval times, the term used to describe the larger beasts that were hunted in the forests by the lordly classes, and included red deer, fallow deer, roe deer and wild boar. The welfare of these animals was well protected by laws such as the charges levied upon anyone who wished to travel through the forest during the period from 9th June until 9th July when the female deer gave birth to their young and needed peace and quiet. Similarly in the winter months from November to April the food available for the deer in the forest was protected. In early medieval times the penalty for killing a deer could often be death or the loss of a 'member'. This severe punishment came to an end in 1217 though the crime still carried with it heavy penalties.

In every medieval village a high proportion of the women brewed ale, some just for their household, with a small surplus sold perhaps once or twice per year, others as their main income. Within each community there would be other craftspeople and tradesmen who would make and sell things such as leather items, metalwork and pottery.

Each peasant garden or yard would be tended by the woman of the house who would hawk any surplus produce such as beans, peas and apples at the local market or on the streets. Livestock were kept on some peasant holdings for wool, dairy produce and meat. Research also shows that though some peasants had horses and carts to take produce to market and could also use the horses as plough beasts on their land, there were a large number of peasants who had to dig their land repeatedly by hand to prepare it for sowing with seed.

It is no wonder that in the late thirteenth century when the population was at its highest just prior to the outbreak of the Black Death which reduced the population by at least a third over the next century, peasants were cutting down trees, digging out tree roots, putting up fences to keep out animals, and turning woodlands into arable land in a desperate attempt to grow 'a living', especially when, as was often the case, the landlords, who had to get Royal permission for this 'assarting' allowed them to rent this marginal land cheaply.

The poor population could not see that the ecological balance of the countryside depended on the pasture, woods, marsh and moorland on which the animals grazed or the value of the woods for fuel, building materials etc. In many areas this strip farming was unsuccessful as the ground was unsuitable and with the decline in population much of this land reverted back to woodland or heath used for grazing sheep, cattle and ponies. The reduced population meant that labour was scarce and the price of wages rose steeply. Land and property was plentiful and relatively cheap. The plight of the medieval peasant at Michaelmas was eased.

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