

## EXCAVATIONS AND DOCUMENTS: THE CASE OF CALDECOTE, HERTFORDSHIRE

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From the origins of medieval archaeology we have debated the difficult relationship between the material and written evidence. The source of information is only a small part of the problem, because archaeologists and historians, while apparently dealing with the same subject, have different goals, methods and cultures.

There is a danger of historians tyrannising the agenda by imposing their priorities on archaeologists. On the other hand, archaeologists tend to claim a monopoly of modernity and sophistication of thought. But the greatest difficulty is that both disciplines operate in ignorance of each other, and they could, if not in co-operative harmony but at least through working together in a state of creative tension, enhance and enrich our understanding of the past.

The difficulty of bringing the two disciplines together is demonstrated in an extreme form by the Caldecote report, which was published recently (Beresford 2009). Here is one of the flagship settlement excavations of the 1970s, from the age of Rescue archaeology, when a well preserved deserted village site was destroyed by agricultural ‘improvement’, but before deep ploughing began an area of 2.63 ha (6.5 acres) was fully excavated by Guy Beresford. From interim reports we knew about some of the main features of the site, notably that a settlement of about 15 households which had developed by c. 1300 was reorganised after 1350 into 6 large farms. A plan of ‘Croft B’ with a well-built house, two large barns and a square dovecot, was published in 1974 (MVRG 1974, 22–3). This group of buildings became a paradigm for the transformation of the countryside in the 14th and 15th centuries: it seemed to demonstrate higher living standards, an expansion in the scale of agricultural production, and the adoption by wealthy peasants of an aspect of aristocratic lifestyle (Astill and Grant 1988, 51, 219–20). Social and economic change was conveyed by historians in many pages of dull prose and complex statistical tables, but here the essential elements of the story were set before us in a single plan. Here was the ‘big picture’ in both meanings of the phrase.

Now, after three decades, the report has been published, and all manner of complexities emerge. A remarkable feature of the original excavation was its completeness. For the first time a substantial proportion of a village, not just a small sample as at Wharram Percy or other sites, has been completely explored. There was only a hint from the excavated area of a Romano-British background, and no middle Saxon occupation, but a scatter of 10th and 11th century pottery covered the site. Only a few traces of buildings – rectangular settings of post holes – survived, but the distribution of pottery suggested that the whole village had formed in that period. That is broadly compatible with the documentary evidence, as Domesday records 13 tenants and a priest,

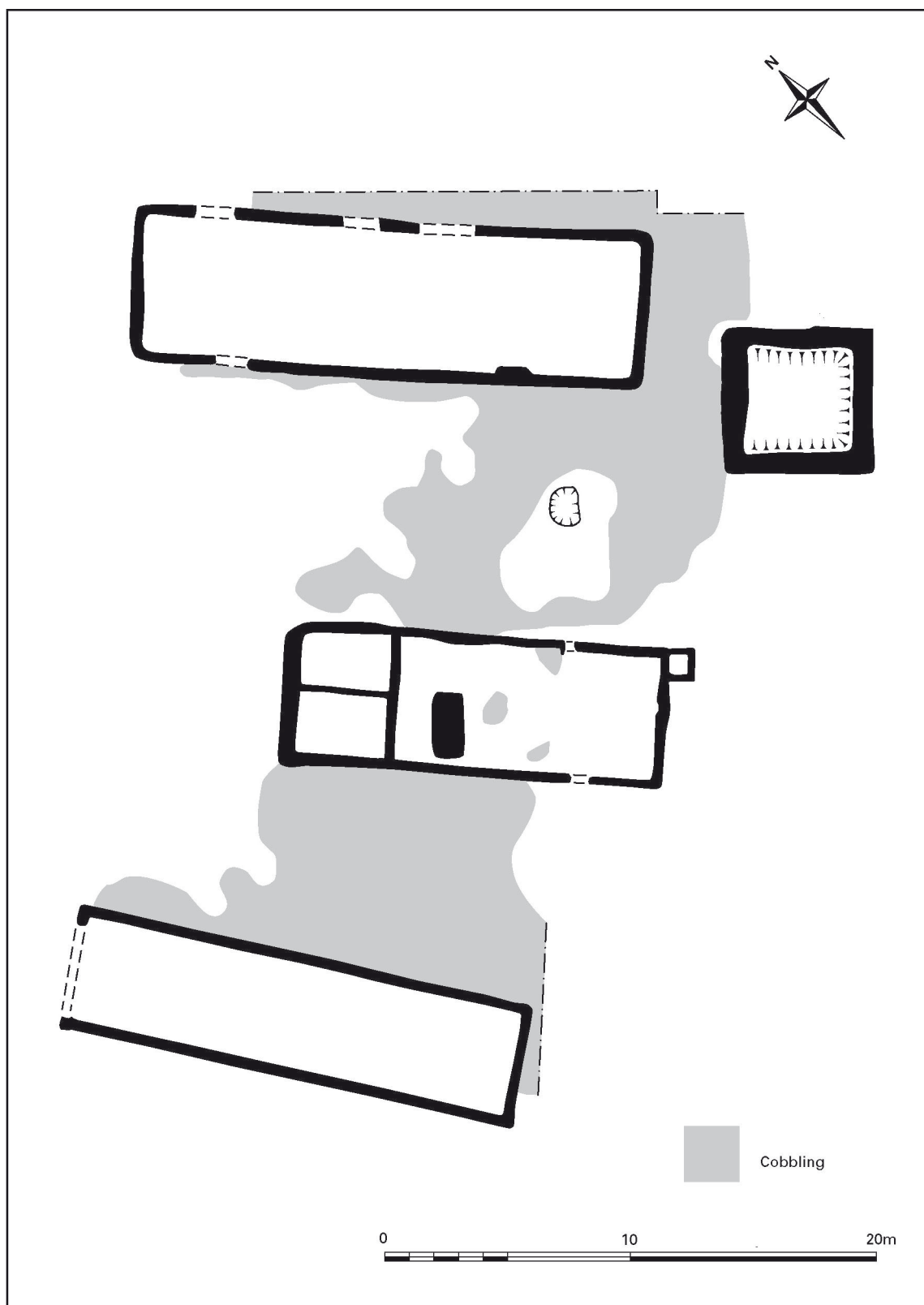
not much less than in 1321, when the numbers had grown to about 16 resident tenants (Beresford 2009, 30–4). The manor house was apparently not founded until the 13th century, though the church was probably first built in the 11th. All of this has implications for the debate on village origins, which is not pursued in the report, but Caldecote should now be incorporated in any discussion of the subject.

This comment on Caldecote is focussed on the later middle ages, and in particular the contribution that the manorial court rolls can make to the interpretation of the village’s development from the 14th century onwards. Manorial court rolls are the most detailed documentary source available, and they were written and hopefully preserved in series, which gives us a sense of change over time. These records are not available for most of the villages which have been extensively excavated, such as Wharram, the Milton Keynes sites, Barton Blount or Hound Tor. So the coincidence at Caldecote of a major detailed excavation and a run of court records, albeit discontinuous, provided an unusual opportunity. In the recently published report, however, the court rolls are listed in the bibliography among the relevant manuscripts in the Hertfordshire Record Office, and are cited once or twice, but their evidence is not employed systematically. There is a puzzling heading for Appendix 1: ‘Transcripts of Court Rolls, the Caldecote Extent, Wills and Inventories’, but what follows are extracts from the 1321 extent, and transcripts of probate documents from 1536 to 1746 (Beresford 2009, 239–46). No court roll is even mentioned, and one wonders whether they were considered for inclusion at some stage of the report’s long gestation, but then rejected.

Firstly, a brief comment needs to be made about the vocabulary used in this report. The term adopted for the more substantial dwellings of the late 14th and 15th centuries, ‘farmhouse’, would at this period be appropriate if the land was held at farm, that is on lease, but most of the land being transferred through the court was held in villeinage, at will, which is best described as a customary tenure. The only reference to land being held by leasehold was in 1488 when John Hukhill was described as farmer, presumably because he had leased the lord’s demesne which contained about a hundred acres. ‘Croft’ is not an appropriate term for the plots in which the village houses stood, as it was a word meaning a small enclosure, which normally did not contain a building. ‘Cot’ is not a word used much at any period, and smaller buildings and holdings are best called cottages.

Had the court rolls been taken into account, what influence would they have had on the framing of the report? They support the proposal made by Guy Beresford from material evidence that the number of households was substantially reduced in the 14th century. The number of ‘crofts’, the word he used for enclosures

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*Figure 1 Buildings in Croft B: a house flanked by two large outbuildings identified by the excavator as barns, and a smaller square building identified as a dovecot or granary. The structures were built c. 1350–c.1500.*

containing houses, declined from about 15 in the late 13th century to 5 or 6 in the late 14th (Beresford 2009, 24,27, 38). The 1321 extent, with its 16 ‘messuages’ confirms the excavator’s estimate, and in 1379, in the first

of the court rolls, instead of the usual 12 jurors there were 6, but the number of tenants could have been about 8 or 9 (HRO, 47283). Again judging from the names appearing in the court rolls, inhabited households may

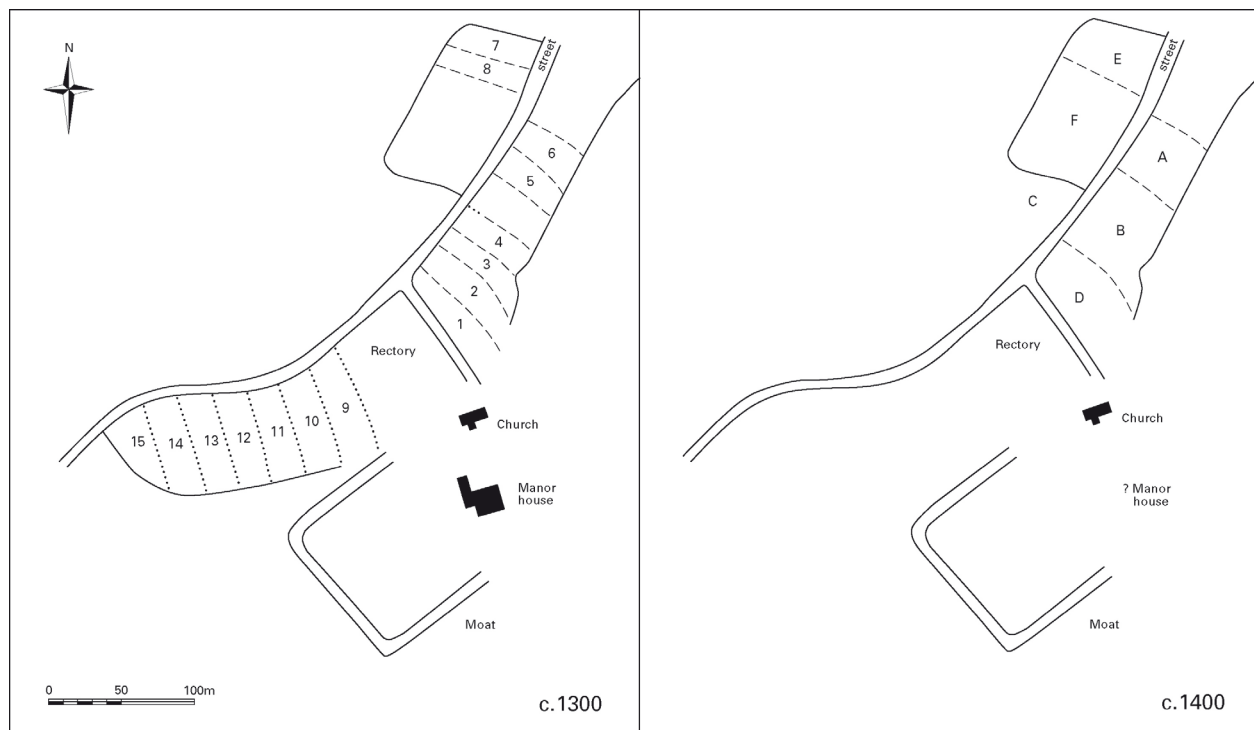


Figure 2 Plans of the village of Caldecote to show its development between c. 1300 and c. 1400.

have fallen to 7 by 1427, and 7 was the number of households in 1428 according to the Feudal Aids (HRO, 10556; Beresford 2009, 40).

Some of the tenants held cottages, like Geoffrey Broun who in 1379 surrendered his 'one cottage and curtilage' to Richard Clerk (HRO, 47283). Beresford believed that the land in the village was gathered into the 6 large holdings, but the transfer of Broun's cottage and other pieces of land, in particular a number of half yardlands (which contained about 24 customary acres, or 16 statute acres) suggests that some land was held and exchanged in relatively small units. Beresford excavated a small building of poor quality construction on the edge of 'Croft D'. Finds of pottery suggested that this had been a dwelling, and he called it a 'cot', which had belonged to a large holding and had housed an elderly relative or a labourer (Beresford 2009, 95–102). If it was a cottage it may have been a separate tenement, held from the lord of the manor rather than as a dependency of the tenant of 'Croft D'. It may even have been Broun's cottage, which was described in 1379 as lying between the holding of Richard atte Tounsend and the holding of William Wodewey: sandwiched we might say between the plots occupied by houses with relatively large holdings of land. Beresford also identified cottages in 'Croft C' and 'Croft E', the latter dating to the post-medieval period (Beresford 2009, 146).

Beresford believed that the 6 substantial 'farmhouses' with large amounts of land attached to them were created after a period when the village was abandoned in the mid 14th century. Only in these circumstances, he argued, could the whole pattern of landholding have been transformed, with the replacement of the half-yardlands and quarter-yardlands with much larger units, each cultivated from well-built houses, and provided with

substantial outbuildings (Beresford 2009, 119). The reorganisation in Beresford's view was an initiative of the lord of the manor, the abbot of St Albans, who had taken over in 1321. Only a decisive and wealthy lord could have afforded the investment in buildings, he reasoned, and the radical changes suggest a typical move by a great Benedictine monastery which arranged its estates in a systematic and rational fashion (Beresford 2009, 237). The date of 1360 was based on the likely elapse of time after the Black Death of 1348–9, and the transformation of the settlement must have been complete by 1428 when only 7 households were reported (Beresford 2009, 122). Such a sequence of events: near complete depopulation after the Black Death, radical reorganisation by a lord, and wholesale investment in tenant buildings in the late 14th century, would be very unusual. The effects of the Black Death on the St Albans estate is well documented, and after the severe mortality, in which no village was wiped out, new tenants took over the vacant holdings without any dramatic restructuring (Levett 1938, 248–86). Monastic lords tended to be rather conservative, and were mainly concerned with preserving the old pattern of tenancy. They are more likely to be found building tenants' houses in the 15th century rather than in the 1360s (Harvey 1977; Howell 1983, 56–7). Even then they showed caution, and built one house at a time.

The plausible explanation of events, in view of the court roll evidence, is to expect that Caldecote followed the same pattern of post-plague development as many other villages. Although the court rolls do not begin until 1379, from that time they show the usual succession of tenants by inheritance and through the land market (Harvey 1984). For example the 1379 roll records a holding being inherited and sold: after the death of Robert Nicholas, his

messuage and half-yardland came into the hands of Richard Nicholas, presumably Robert's son. Richard did not wish to keep it, perhaps because he held land elsewhere, and granted it, or more likely sold it, to Richard Lyton (HRO, 47283). The payment of money by buyer to seller is not normally recorded, so we are very fortunate to be told in 1433 that John Falywell paid Rosa Hale 66s.8d. (in 5 equal annual instalments) for a messuage and curtilage and a half yardland (HRO, 100558). Falywell was already the tenant of at least one holding, so he was evidently an engrosser who accumulated a number of holdings which had previously been separately tenanted. This was the normal way that land was concentrated in fewer hands (Whittle 2000, 85–177). The usual interpretation of the transfer of land at this period was that tenants took the initiative, and surrendered or took on holdings as suited their circumstances. The lord was a spectator, who sought to influence trends, for example by encouraging tenants to take or keep holdings by helping with building repairs, but he was not able to control events. The tenants who were acquiring land and cultivating it profitably would usually have been able to pay for the construction of their houses.

Caldecote in the late 14th and 15th centuries seems to have contained between 7 and 9 families. One or two of them were cottagers, and the rest of the land, mostly in 16 acre or 8 acre units, was transferred among the inhabitants, some being skilful or cunning enough to accumulate larger composite holdings with perhaps 3 or 4 of the 16 acre units at the expense of their less fortunate neighbours. Constant movement of land from hand to hand was encouraged by the tendency of people to migrate. In 1434 a holding which had once belonged to Edward Taylor and then Robert Clerk was surrendered by George Burwell to George Warde (HRO, 10558). All of the surnames were different, so the land was being transferred between families through the land market. Such was the rapidity of succession that only one surname recorded in 1379 appears in the court roll of 1486, so just one family survived in the male line during the intervening century (Dyer 2007, 14–22). The change in tenants' fortunes, in which an individual would have accumulated a number of half yardlands, amounting to 48 acres or more, is reflected in the archaeology of each holding. 'Croft B' had a large house and a barn capable of holding crops from 80 acres of land (Dyer 2005, 169), and seems to have grown even more opulent in the mid 15th century when the house was replaced, and another large outbuilding containing ovens and kilns was added, together with the square building which may have been either a dovecot or a granary (Beresford 2009, 102,108). 'Croft E' was provided with a large dwelling house of the late 14th century, and a substantial barn, but went downhill after 1500 when the house was replaced by a smaller cottage (Beresford 2009, 115). These ups and downs were a normal feature of late medieval rural society, as tenants made decisions about acquiring and buying land, or moving in or out of the village. The fluctuations in the distribution of land have rarely been so clearly visible in the archaeological record.

The court rolls complement the results of excavation, because they have much to say about boundaries, roads and ditches. Beresford thought that hedges defined the

edges of the 'crofts' (Beresford 2009, 81) and indeed a tenant in 1426 was ordered to control a hedge (though the Latin word is normally translated as 'fence') growing into the king's highway, which was probably the main street running through the village (HRO, 10555). Caldecote had some unusually long ditches. A ditch called 'Longdyche' of 40 perches (200 metres) was reported as neglected by the John Hukhill the farmer in 1488, and this may refer to a boundary ditch marking the edge of the large plot on which the manor house now stands. Alice Rolf's 100-perch ditch, also the subject of complaint in 1488, must have been out in the fields rather than defining the edge of her property along the village street. In the same court session, however, ditches in the village itself were subject to complaint – the ditch was blocked 'between the land and the curtilage of the messuage of Richard Benett', perhaps at the back of the village closes defining the boundary with the arable fields, which ran into the ditch 'between the land and curtilage of the messuage of Alice Rolf' (HRO, 10554). A road, a king's road, and a common path joining Caldecote and Newnham church are all mentioned, and their likely position can be located on the excavation plans. They appear in the court because they were being flooded, blocked or misused. We can see in these records, just as we can observe in the excavated features, a tension between public and private spheres. The hedges and ditches established the edge of properties controlled by individual tenants and their households, but if they did not maintain them properly they might damage the shared assets of the whole village, such as common fields and the roads and paths used by everyone. These cases were being held in the lord's court, but the tenants were the source of the complaints, and they were able to voice in the court their concern for the protection of collective interests.

Had the court rolls been available to those preparing this archaeological report, they would have contributed a sense of the vigour and morale of the Caldecote community. There is evidence of a village in decline as the population had halved, and one indication that the village became a less attractive place in which to live comes from the terminal decline in records of brewing of ale for sale – three brewers came before the court in 1379, but one lonely ale wife plied her trade in the 1420s, after which records cease (HRO 10556). The bakehouse and brewhouse which seems to have been built in 'Croft B' in the late 15th century (described as a barn in the report) could presumably have produced ale for sale. The disappearance of the enforcement of the assize of ale from the court rolls may have been a symptom of the declining power of the lord and his courts, so that the local trade in ale left no trace in the documents. Holdings of land in Caldecote seem to have been in some demand, as they did not lie untenanted for months or years as often happened elsewhere, and new tenants were prepared to pay a fine of 3s.4d. throughout the 15th century, which was a modest sum but not the pair of hens or other token payment sometimes recorded at this time. The constant turnover of inhabitants was possible because newcomers were always willing to step into the shoes of those leaving the village. The excavated evidence would support the suggestion derived from the court rolls that the village continued to uphold a sense of

the common good, for example by metalling the village street with cobbles in the late 14th century (Beresford 2009, 146).

The finds from the excavation reflect Caldecote's connections with a wider world, as the inhabitants bought pottery, probably in local markets (Ashwell and Baldock for example) which had been made as far afield as Buckinghamshire, Essex and Northamptonshire. Their hand mills had been imported from Germany, and some of their whetstones from Norway (Beresford 2009, 167–8, 187, 203). The court rolls confirm indirectly the villagers' connections with the market, as they paid cash for their land in rent and entry fines owed to the lord, and cash, with the help of loans, in the price of land paid to the seller. Wheat, their major crop, would have been sold in the local market towns (Riley 1867–9, vol. 2, 94–5). The people of Caldecote in the revolt of 1381 were in contact with other manors on the St Albans estate, and joined with them in advancing their cause against the Abbey in demanding a charter of liberty (Riley 1867–9, vol. 2, 330). The documents also show the importance of connections with nearby villages, as Caldecote people held land in Newnham and Hinxworth, and John Vincent, a young Caldecote serf who was not allowed to move without permission, was settled in 1433–4 at Guilden Morden, 4 miles away in Cambridgeshire (HRO, 10555; 10558; 40706).

In 1485 a war broke out between the villagers of Caldecote and those of neighbouring Newnham, which focussed on the common herdsman of Newnham, Robert Tildesley (HRO, 40709). He was assaulted by three Caldecote men, Hugh Rolff, Richard Hukhill and Thomas Hukhill, and apparently in retaliation a Newnham man beat and wounded Thomas Hukhill with 'a stick called a club' and a 'pike of iron' on Good Friday (1 April). Shortly afterwards on 4 May Tildesley drove the animals in his charge into a pasture called Caldecote marsh, and into Litolmede furlong (to the south west of Caldecote village), and the cows and bullocks ate peas and vetches worth 10s. The dispute may have arisen from some customary agreement that the two villages should share common pastures, which may have originated when the two village territories were divided, probably in the 10th century. The 1485 events show that both sides defended their interests robustly, and clearly common rights and trespass by 'foreigners' made Caldecote people, even in their shrunken settlement, fiercely loyal to the customs of their community. The details of the dispute show that Caldecote tenants were planting in the fields fodder crops for their livestock, which provided some solution to their shortage of animal feed because they had limited access to hay meadow. They may have been inhoking, that is taking part of the fallow field into cultivation for planting peas, beans and vetch, and the

Newnham people were annoyed because the acres under crop deprived them of their rights to pasture on the fallow. If this is the case then Caldecote cultivators like the Hukhills can be regarded as innovative in their agricultural techniques as well as active in protecting their rights. The relatively opulent house of 'Croft B', which had a number of rooms, two storeys, and a glazed window, sows in our minds doubt about the motives for the villagers' violent defence of their fields – were they really struggling for collective rights, or for their individual wealth? Perhaps they and we could regard the two goals as linked. But life was more complicated than these simple dilemmas suggest: we have to reconcile the rational economic men who seem to populate the documents, with the people who buried in the floor of their bakehouse, indoors, the complete body of a donkey, with iron shoes still attached to its hoofs.

Reading the Caldecote court rolls suggests that some of the conclusions in the excavation report need to be revised. In particular the changes in housing and landholding in the later middle ages were more likely to have been the result of initiatives taken by the villagers rather than by their lord. More important, the documents can do much more than modify the interpretation based on excavation. If the written sources are combined with the evidence derived from excavation a much fuller picture of Hertfordshire peasant life can be constructed.

#### Abbreviations

HRO	Hertfordshire Record Office
MVRG	Medieval Village Research Group Annual Report

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