

66.08 Leighton and the 'ninth' of 1297

Evelyn Baker

A wider picture of the Leighton estate in the last decade of the 13th century, what it produced and how townspeople and tenants lived, can be obtained from the taxation returns for the 'ninth' of 1297. This was granted to Edward I by parliament, and levied on personal property or moveables owned by the inhabitants in every vill in the kingdom (Jenkinson 1924). Returns survive for Bedford, Dunstable (by then carved out of Houghton Regis), Leighton, and Luton; under Leighton the headings are *Letton, Prebenda, Bilendon, Hethe, Clipston* and *Ekendon*. Six years previously, in 1291, the manor of *Leythorne* was worth only £32 6s 8d. Assessments of agricultural produce, livestock, and household effects for taxation purposes allow production to be compared between most of the three adjacent royal manors, though religious houses and their inhabitants were expressly excluded from the tax. The collectors of the tax in 1297 were instructed 'to desist entirely from taxing and collecting the prior of La Grave's goods annexed to spiritualities'.

Leighton also had a young bullock and a cheap horse; the beasts of burden were affers. It seems that sheep were fairly evenly distributed over the population in 'flocks' of two or three. Luton and Dunstable were responsible for four-fifths of grain produced; Luton, with 82 ploughs at Domesday, grew most of the corn and nearly all the oats; now there were only 40 oxen, possibly five or six ploughs. [10.01] shows the number of possible traction animals in the non-demesne part of the manor, possibly up to five oxen-drawn ploughs, but a large number of affers and horses, even though some may have been for riding. It may reflect the assertion that peasants found horses a more convenient means of traction at a time when lords clung to traditional ox-power (Dyer 1998). Horse-drawn vehicles dominated transportation in Bedfordshire at the end of the 13th century, most often hauled by a single animal (Langdon 1998). Oxen hauled larger vehicles capable of carrying over a ton. The area was also dominated by the swing plough, the most versatile as well as needing the most skill to operate, exacerbating the skills shortage after the plague.

Bedfordshire returns for the 1297 'ninth' provide a context for Leighton, where 119 individuals were assessed, as compared with 121 in Dunstable, and 192 in Luton. Dunstable had 24 merchants or tradesmen including a butcher, fishmongers, spice and cloth merchants, smiths, and a tannery, possibly reflecting its geographical position on the crossroads of Watling Street and the Icknield Way. Leighton had only ten householders entered as having vessels or utensils of note, and two merchants with stock not exceeding 10s value. Their names suggest a spicer and a general merchant; there is also a 'Fina la Teynturesse', possibly a dyer. None of these returns could compare with the county town of Bedford; Leighton was not much more than a small village surrounded by arable fields. There is no comparable information for the exempt prebendal manor.