

THE GROWTH OF A MIDDLE CLASS IN FRODSHAM MANOR, 1300 - 60

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The manor of Frodsham comprised three elements, the borough, the demesne lands, and the land of the free tenants and of the bond tenants. As Frodsham was an estuarine river port, and a bridge point controlling trade routes to East, West, and South, holders of burgages there were possessed of significant opportunities for advancement. This implies a degree of inequality between the privileged burgesses and the rest of the tenants of this Cheshire manor. Within the ranks of the latter, other differences could be distinguished: in particular between the smallholders, both free and bond, as compared with those bond tenants holding land and in receipt of a money stipend and food livery in respect of their employment as demesne servants. The fringe benefits appertaining to such demesne employment enabled the more opportunist of the servants to increase the economic gap between them and the other smallholders, and to join the middle class forming amongst the burgesses.

Much discussion of the incidence of change in the 14th century has centred on the events of the half century following the Black Death and the enactment of the Statute of Labourers. The antecedents of such change, as is well known, extend well back into the 13th century and probably even earlier. Thus Kosminsky, writing of the origins of the commutation of labour services in favour of rent dues, remarked: 'There are sufficient grounds for regarding the 13th century, and perhaps even the 12th century, as a period of the general growth of feudal rent.'¹ In the instance of Bampton Hundred, Oxfordshire, in 1279, it is possible to discern what may well have been the mid stage in the transition from labour services to a rendering of money in lieu. Of the manor of Witney it was said:

The basic obligation of each yardland of villeinage in this manor was reckoned in monetary terms at 5 shillings per year. It could be discharged either in money or in work; work (at the rate of every other day each week) for a whole quarter of a year . . . earned a discharge of 1s 3d. In 1279, as for nearly fifty years before, this meant in practice that the tenants of 36 yardlands worked only in the harvest quarter and paid 3s 9d per yard-

¹ E. A. Kosminsky, 'Services and Money Rents in the Thirteenth Century', *Economic History Review*, vol. 2, 1935, p. 26.

land; the tenants of 8 yardlands worked for three quarters of the year and paid 1s 3d per yardland; the tenants of 14 yardlands who worked for the lord as ploughmen throughout the year . . . paid nothing in money.²

In the rest of the hundred, both rent and work obligations were expressed in monetary terms, sometimes with the amount of aid or tallage separately expressed as at Weald, where 'Hugh de Ulmo holds 1 messuage and $\frac{1}{2}$ a yardland and renders for rent 5s 6d, for work and service 2s 7 $\frac{1}{2}$ d, for tallage 6 $\frac{1}{2}$ d'. With another lord, the whole is contained in a single payment: 'Walter Fouke holds (in Clanfield) 1 messuage and $\frac{1}{2}$ a yardland . . . and renders 7s 7 $\frac{1}{2}$ d a year.'

The latter arrangement, with no distinction made between rent and work, seems to have been fairly general in Cheshire. On Sir Peter de Thornton's extensive estates in Wirral and mid Cheshire, a rental of c. 1354 indicates that what was due from each tenant was rendered as a single payment.³ On the manor of Frodsham, held by the Black Prince from 1333, the demesne lands were worked by a small labour force in receipt of a money stipend and livery of corn. Bond tenants paid a rent charge for their land, but received a money wage for any work performed: thus in the 1350s, forty one persons were paid 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ d. per day for weeding,⁴ Emmote Pykenote received 6d. for milking cows for three weeks,⁵ and Alice Wallace was paid 2s. 2d. for winnowing 104 quarters of corn.⁶ Earlier still, in 1315, when the harvest dragged on over five weeks, it was necessary to recruit an auxiliary labour force which embraced at times as many as fifty eight persons paid at the rate of 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ d. per day for reaping.⁷

Such extra labour was only needed at peak periods; at other times the smallholders providing the labour supported themselves from their own holdings, too small for year round subsistence. 'Paid labour on the lords' demesnes was a more important component of the income of smallholding families than for those with adequate holdings.'⁸ The transition to a system of money rents and money wages acted as a catalyst to generate further changes, which operated to encourage and to heighten economic differences among individual smallholders, inasmuch as, freed of the obligation to perform manual labour service often at inconvenient times in the agricultural calendar, each family could concentrate its efforts on food production from its own holdings.

That they could profit from this is evident from their implied ability to maintain rent payments in lieu of customary labour service. In this lay the seeds of further

² E. Stone and P. Hyde, *Oxfordshire Hundred Rolls of 1279*, 1968, p. 14.

³ *Cheshire Sheaf*, 3rd series, vol. 1, 1896, pp. 53 ff.

⁴ Public Record Office, Special Collections: Ministers' Accounts, Ref. SC6 784/5 (dated 1354-55).

⁵ *ibid.*, SC6 784/2 (dated 1352-53).

⁶ *ibid.*, SC6 801/15 (dated 1351-52).

⁷ *ibid.*, SC6 801/12 (dated 1315).

⁸ R. Hilton, 'Reasons for Inequality among Medieval Peasants', *Journal of Peasant Studies*, vol. 5, 1978, p. 278.

change. Closer attention to the working of their own holdings, and an improved standard of agriculture, contributed to raise yields and to promote an upgraded standard of living, which in turn operated to raise the level of population. Such improvements can be discerned in Frodsham, where there is evidence of the tenants purchasing manure from the demesne bailiff,⁹ and also of taking cows at farm,¹⁰ which apart from the utility of the milk, increased the manure supply available on the holding.

An increase in family size eventually brought into play the subdivision of holdings, through the mechanism of partible inheritance. Possibly in some instances the heirs were able to avoid subdivision of the actual field strips, by organising among themselves division of the various family enterprises. The practice of taking cows at farm has been noted, and this presupposes the availability of sufficient meadow and pasture to provide adequate fodder. From the several references to the rental of herbage of the demesne crofts, but more particularly from the evidence such as contained in the arrentation roll of c. 1346,¹¹ it is clear that in the manor of Frodsham a considerable body of tenants had not only the means to rent parcels of the demesne of the manor, but further owned the live-stock with which to stock the meadows so rented, while payments to agist stock occur as early as 1315.¹²

Nonetheless, there are sufficient instances to suggest that partible inheritance was instrumental in splitting up holdings of the burgess tenants. Whereas at the beginning of the 14th century transactions commonly related to one acre parcels, by the 1340s transfers of half acres were frequent.¹³ In 1353, a one acre holding was actually in three parts distributed over three separate areas in the town field, i.e. half an acre in the Short Furlong, one perch in 'le Puhel', and another perch in 'le Moisty'.¹⁴ Similarly a two perch holding lay disposed in two fields.¹⁵

Burgages, too, evince the same trends: thus c. 1290 Adam le Botyler, presumably in possession of a burgage inherited from his father, granted half to his brother Henry. Henry Pyncke, the elder, c. 1320, conveyed half of his burgage to his son, and Henry le Heuster granted a half burgage to his daughter by way of dowry,¹⁶ a practice also noted by Hilton.¹⁷ By the end of the period under review, transfers of quarter burgages were taking place, and at least one instance of a one eighth burgage is recorded. In the course of time, the mechanism of subdivision would give rise to holdings too small to maintain a family, and the occupier would be

⁹ P.R.O., SC6 784/5 (dated 1354-55).

¹⁰ *ibid.*, SC6 784/4 (dated 1353-54).

¹¹ *ibid.*, Special Collections: Rentals and Surveys, Ref. SC11 896 (dated c. 1346).

¹² *ibid.*, SC6 801/12 (dated 1315).

¹³ Cheshire Record Office, Cholmondeley of Cholmondeley MSS., deeds and papers relating to Frodsham, Ref. DCH/F/29 (dated 1348).

¹⁴ *ibid.*, DCH/F/67 (dated 1353).

¹⁵ *ibid.*, DCH/F/79 (dated 1363).

¹⁶ *ibid.*, DCH/F/24 (dated 1319).

¹⁷ Hilton, 'Reasons for Inequality', p. 278.

forced to relinquish subsistence cultivation, and to become a full time wage labourer.

The process was inextricably mixed up with the contemporary development of aggregation of holdings. In 1334, John, son of Thomas Torfote, held half an acre in 'schortefurlong', which land lay between that of Henry, son of Walter and that of Robert Skinner. At Lady Day John Torfote's half acre was transferred to Robert Skinner, who then had two lands lying side by side.¹⁸ A more complex chain is to be seen in the operations of John, son of Nicholas, son of Robert. In 1319, Nicholas granted one of his inherited lands in Wellspring to his son John.¹⁹ The latter already held an adjacent parcel, and in the course of the next few years he acquired other strips, probably by inheritance. In 1341, he embarked on a systematic programme of aggregation by obtaining half an acre lying by the side of his existing land in the Bottom's field.²⁰ A further half acre was taken up in 1348,²¹ which meant that he had at least three parcels in a compact holding in the Bottoms. In the following year he was able to add a butt of land to the land he already occupied in the Ship Field.²² At the same time he secured a rood of land in Stonydelf, lying by the side of a parcel occupied by Walter, son of Nicholas, conceivably his brother.

Over the same period the engrossment of burgages could also be remarked. Prior to 1329, the same Nicholas of Frodsham had accumulated three burgages, which then passed to his children. In that year, John, son of Nicholas, relinquished his inherited share in favour of Margaret, wife of John de Boydel, the indication being that Margaret was the daughter of Nicholas. This transfer brought at least two burgages into the hands of the Boydel family, who went on to secure a second block of four burgages held by Adam de Camelsford, which passed first to his widow and then, in 1342, to the Boydel family, by transfer by the widow. Thus out of the total stock of 110 burgages in Frodsham, the Boydel family had managed to secure a total of eight.²³

Up to this point, events in the manor of Frodsham cannot be said to have been vastly different from those of many contemporary manors elsewhere. Instances of commutation of labour services are common enough, while for partible inheritance, Faith²⁴ lists some twenty four localities, and Spufford²⁵ has noted a number of variations on the theme of subdivision of holdings. What engenders difference

¹⁸ Cheshire R.O., DCH/F/40 (dated 1334).

¹⁹ *ibid.*, DCH/F/36 (dated 1319).

²⁰ *ibid.*, DCH/F/49 (dated 1341).

²¹ *ibid.*, DCH/F/29 (dated 1348).

²² *ibid.*, DCH/F/58 (dated 1349).

²³ *ibid.*, DCH/F/51 (dated 1342).

²⁴ R. J. Faith, 'Peasant Families and Inheritance Customs in Medieval England', *Agricultural History Review*, vol. 14, 1966, pp. 77-95.

²⁵ M. Spufford, 'A Cambridgeshire Community: Chippenham from Settlement to Enclosure', 1965, quoted by A. R. H. Butler and R. A. Butlin, *Studies in Field Systems in the British Isles*, 1973, pp. 650-51.

in the instance of Frodsham, is its history as a manor held by the son of the monarch or a prominent member of the ruling house, and who obviously could not exercise personal day to day supervision over the manorial economy. Administration of the Earldom of Chester was conducted by the local officials in Chester, the Justiciar and Chamberlain, subject, in the time of the Black Prince, to the supervision of his central administrators based in London. The economy of the manor and borough of Frodsham was more diversified than that of a simple agrarian estate. As a port linked to a major bridge crossing, the revenue from the tolls from the river port of Frodsham were a significant contribution to the revenues of the Prince, as were those from the bridge which carried the traffic Eastward from Chester and North Wales, and Westward to Chester from Northern England. Thus the advantages of becoming a burgess of Frodsham early became apparent to the officials and other persons associated with the Prince. Analysis of non local names concerned in land transactions in the borough from 1300-58 shows that five related to men based in Chester. Among these were Nicholas de Camera and Roger Throstele of Macclesfield, both servants of the Prince. Others almost certainly associated with the Prince's household included two men from Devon, and others emanating from Cornwall, Lincolnshire, Surrey, and Warwick.

A number of others such as John le Nobele, William de Lechton, and Nicholas de Aldelyn, may well have had similar distant origins, as did Adam de Rachedale, probably a Lancashire man. There were in addition a further ten burgesses who originated from other parts of Cheshire. The list is not exhaustive, but the point may be made that the presence of these persons directly engaged in the affairs of local government and trade must have served to stimulate and to promote and hasten the processes of change already discernible in Frodsham.

The purchase, sale, leasing, and mortgage of burgages and lands in the manor²⁶ are on record from c. 1290 and, together with the contemporary practice of leasing demesne meadow and pasture by the tenants, whether burgesses, freemen, or bond, were contributory to and materially facilitated the development of a middle class within the economic, political, and social framework of the manor and borough. One particular bond family may profitably be cited in illustration of men on the way up the economic ladder. Elias, earlier described as miller of the demesne mills, whose horse was agisted in the demesne's Yewe croft in 1350-51,²⁷ had at least three sons, John and William, each employed as a demesne shepherd, and Henry as a general day labourer.

In addition to receiving a stipend and livery of corn, the shepherds had the advantage of useful perquisites, as in the case of William, who received a lamb as fee for his services in tending the demesne's lambs.²⁸ John, presumably the

²⁶ P. H. W. Booth and J. Phillip Dodd, 'The Manor and Fields of Frodsham', in Jennifer I. Kermode and C. B. Phillips, eds., *Medieval Cheshire, T.H.S.L.C.*, vol. 128, 1979, pp. 27-58.

²⁷ P.R.O., SC6 783/17 (dated 1351-52).

²⁸ *ibid.*, SC6 784/10 (dated 1356-57).

youngest of the brothers, appears in the records from 1357, but the others obtain mention from 1349 onwards. In that year's accounts Henry was paid twelve pence for work over six weeks, but in 1351-52 he was noted as being in partnership with Robert Roter and sufficiently affluent to be able to pay £3 6s. 8d. for farm of the office of hayward.²⁹ In 1355-56, when the meadow acreage had diminished considerably, Henry paid £1 for the office, but now in association with Richard Skinner, while in 1357, Henry son of Elias was noted as holding a half burgage in the borough of Frodsham.³⁰

It is, however, with William that one is able to observe the processes involved in the upgrading of economic status. In 1349-50 he was employed as a demesne carter. However, in partnership with Thomas Hall he obtained farm of the herbage of the demesne gardens, orchard, Dayhouse croft, and Barnecroft of the Earl's manor house for seven shillings.³¹ By 1353, he was in a position to rent the herbage on his own account, and continued this for the remainder of the period. In 1351-52, William was described as shepherd in receipt of livery of corn. Two years later he paid 6s. 8d. for the farm of five cows, and, in partnership with Henry Panyermaker, paid ten shillings for a further ten cows. In 1354-55, William paid five shillings for the lactage of seven cows.³² In the same year he was also able to buy a culled cow for 6s. 3d. from the lord's stock keeper.

William, now receiving a stipend of eight shillings a year as a demesne shepherd, was further able to enter into partnership with Elene, wife of Andrew in 1356-57, and contract for the lactage of 240 sheep for £1 10s. 0d.³³ From this point mention of his own household begins to appear in the accounts. Thus in the same year, his wife received a bushel of wheat for winnowing all the corn, and similarly half a bushel in the following year. His son was employed as shepherd's boy during lambing in 1357-58, and again in the following year.

Some bond tenants, such as Hova Bedul, ploughman, occupied a quarter bovate of arable land; others like Richard Peacock, carter, had one third of a bovate,³⁴ but William, as in the case of several other bond tenants, probably cultivated a half bovate, although his true economic base rested on his livestock interests. As a shepherd, working on the demesne, he would have built up a small flock of his own, and as he does not appear in payments made for sheep agisted on the demesne lands, no doubt his own flock would run with the demesne sheep. It seems highly probable that he also engaged in rearing calves, and was cheese making from the lactage of the ewes. It was also current practice to employ ewe's milk to suckle calves, and the taking at farm of the 240 ewes previously mentioned is suggestive of either of these enterprises.

²⁹ *ibid.*, SC6 783/17 (dated 1351-52).

³⁰ Cheshire R.O., DCH/F/69 (dated 1357).

³¹ P.R.O., SC6 801/14 (dated 1349-50).

³² *ibid.*, SC6 784/5 (dated 1354-55).

³³ *ibid.*, SC6 784/10 (dated 1356-57).

³⁴ *ibid.*, SC6 783/17 (dated 1351-52).

If William, son of Elias was oustripping his fellow bond servants, there were also signs of a marked division of economic status on the manor in general. This is indicated by the arrentation roll of c. 1346, which lists seventy nine named tenants, who were renting some 590 statute acres of demesne meadow on Frodsham Marsh at that time. Five tenants between them rented 30.0% of this land and a further 30.0% was in the hands of another dozen tenants. In contrast, fourteen tenants rented between them no more than 1.32% of these meadows.

If the situation is examined more closely, of the top five tenants, two held 18.0%, these being Robert, son of Henry, and John, son of Nicholas. Each of these tenants rented some sixty statute acres of the meadows, in addition to whatever arable land they occupied. As arable land was somewhat restricted, their principal interest would be in livestock, and this is supported by reference to Robert's payments for agistment of sheep on the Marsh. From the amount paid each year, he probably maintained a flock of 160.

John, son of Nicholas, has been referred to earlier as accumulating burgages and consolidating his holdings in the town fields. Among the others may be noted Henry Wyter who rented 4.2% of the meadows, and founded a dynasty much in prominence in Frodsham from the 16th century onwards, by which time the family were among the more substantial yeomen, including Colonel Witter of Civil War fame. John Elton, who rented 3.6% of the demesne meadows, died in the following year, and at his death occupied three messuages and two and a half bovates of land, in addition to the twenty two acres of demesne meadow.

Not all of the rising men could be numbered amongst the good and the virtuous. The 1300s were rough and violent times, and in Frodsham one of the more unsavoury characters who prospered, was Robert, the bastard son of Richard de Frodsham. On Monday 12 June 1340, he abducted Alice, the wife of Hugh of Frodsham Bridge. He further stole Hugh's goods to the value of £66 13s. 4d., for which offence he was fined £13 6s. 8d. Robert was also tried for the rape of Alice, and for this incurred a fine of £13 6s. 8d., and was bound over in the sum of £20. He did not let these setbacks hamper his economic activities, but proceeded to take a three year lease of one third of an acre in Hollebroke in the town fields, and in 1341 leased one acre in 'le longfield' and another acre in 'le Mulnefield'. This latter acre was disposed between his existing holdings, and thus gave him a compact three acre block of arable.³⁵ Some time later he was reported as holding 'le Mulnefield' at a free rent of twenty shillings.³⁶

Between 1347 and 1349, his holdings increased to include one acre in 'le Schepfield',³⁷ a burgage in 'le kyrkestrete', and a piece of assarted ground in 'le Bentte',³⁸

³⁵ Cheshire R.O., DCH/F/50 (dated 1341).

³⁶ P.R.O., SC6 786/5 (dated 1364-65).

³⁷ Cheshire R.O., DCH/F/54 (dated 1347).

³⁸ *ibid.*, DCH/F/55 (dated 1347-48).

land in the Bonkes,³⁹ and one acre on Holbrok.⁴⁰ In 1350 further acquisitions comprised land in 'schirnsmedow',⁴¹ half an acre on Stanydelf,⁴² three perches on 'le schortefurlong', and half an acre on 'le bothom', all of which were within a short distance of one another. A further indication of his rising fortunes was the ability to lease, with his brother, some fifty seven or more acres of the demesne land of the manor at 1s. 3d. per acre.⁴³

After the Black Death, when some bond lands lay unoccupied, Robert in 1351-52 leased some of these,⁴⁴ and in 1353-54 took at farm the herbage of two acres of the manor land.⁴⁵ Previously, in 1352, in association with Henry Torfote, he had leased part of the manor for seven years at an annual rent of £55,⁴⁶ and by 1357 was described in deeds as co bailiff of the manor with Torfote.⁴⁷

New land was then being broken up, and Robert acquired some of the new assart land on Whabbemor.⁴⁸ To sum up, in the space of seventeen years, Robert became an occupier in ten of the town fields, also holding assart land in two areas, and at the time of his death in 1362, was co bailiff of the manor and co farmer of a considerable acreage of the demesne lands of the manor. At his death, his lands were escheated to the Earl, and in 1365-66 were sold to John Frodsham.⁴⁹

To conclude, it is obviously difficult to know where to make a division demarcating the upper, prospering group of tenants from the rest. However, there is little room for doubt that a middle class was forming, whose composition derived not only from the burgesses and freemen, but also from the more opportunist bond tenants. Some of the latter can be seen to be moving up into the ranks of the burgesses: thus Henry, son of Elias, some time prior to 1357 was in possession of a half burgage,⁵⁰ Robert the shepherd occupied a full burgage in Ship Street by 1363,⁵¹ while William, son of Elias, occupied a tenement in the borough by 1365.⁵²

Unfortunately, a break in the continuity of the records and notably a diminution in the volume of estate deeds which have survived, prevents further analysis at this point. By the time the deeds again appear in quantity c. 1600, it is too late to link most burgesses and tenants with these of the 14th century.

³⁹ *ibid.*, DCH/F/58 (dated 1349).

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, DCH/F/59 (dated 1349).

⁴¹ *ibid.*, DCH/F/62 (dated 1349-50).

⁴² *ibid.*, DCH/F/63 (dated 1350).

⁴³ P.R.O., SC6 801/14 (dated 1349-50).

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, SC6 783/17 (dated 1351-52).

⁴⁵ *ibid.*, SC6 784/4 (dated 1353-54).

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, SC6 784/2 (dated 1352-53).

⁴⁷ Cheshire R.O., DCH/F/69 (dated 1357).

⁴⁸ *ibid.*, DCH/F/82 (dated 1364-65).

⁴⁹ P.R.O., SC6 786/6 (dated 1365-66).

⁵⁰ Cheshire R.O., DCH/F/69 (dated 1357).

⁵¹ *ibid.*, DCH/F/79 (dated 1363).

⁵² *ibid.*, DCH/F/81 (dated 1364-65).

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