

The Free Peasantry of East Anglia in Domesday

BY

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The social organisation of East Anglia in the eleventh century has not yet been studied in great detail. The work of Professor Douglas, whose name is most closely associated with this region, deals mainly with the thirteenth century, and there is for East Anglia no work comparable with the detailed studies on the Northern Danelaw by Professor Stenton.¹ In 1926 Professor Stenton published tables based upon an analysis of the Domesday surveys of the Northern Danelaw shires to show "the relative numbers of sokemen on the one hand and *villani* and *bordarii* on the other" in each wapentake.² By this method the importance of the free peasantry is most clearly revealed, and the main purpose of the present paper is to provide a similar set of figures relating to the hundreds of Norfolk and Suffolk.

The social organisation of East Anglia in many respects resembles that of the Northern Danelaw, but is even less rigid in nature. Characterised by a

¹ The author wishes to thank Professor F. M. Stenton for kindly reading this article in an earlier form.

² F. M. Stenton, *The Free Peasantry of the Northern Danelaw* (Bulletin de la Société Royale des Lettres de Lund, 1926), pp. 77-9.

complexity of rights and obligations, it possesses a fluidity which is emphasised by the rather haphazard arrangement of the Little Domesday. Whereas in the surveys relating to the Northern Danelaw the scribes distinguish carefully between the manor, berewick and soke, in East Anglia there is no such careful distinction. Although there are in the Little Domesday many estates specifically called manors, there are also many others apparently identical in type which have no title. Berewicks are fairly well defined, but the soke is rarely so called. In the place of the heading "Sokeland" and the marginal letter "S," we have the formula that certain sokemen and free men "belong to" a particular manor. Occasionally it is stated that their soke "lies in" a certain manor. There are, however, large numbers of sokemen and free men who do not appear to be attached to any manor. East Anglia differs from the Northern Danelaw in another respect. In the latter region the free peasants are termed *sochemanni*, whereas those of Norfolk and Suffolk fall into two classes *sochemanni* and *liberi homines*. The distinction between these two peasant classes has not yet been drawn with certainty, but the question is too involved for discussion here. It is sufficient to note that the term *liber homo* was used in the Little Domesday to denote both peasants and men of obviously higher rank, for it could be applied to both the holder of a few acres, and a wealthy thegn holding land in several counties. The sokeman, on the other hand, is seldom if ever a man of wealth. The distinction between the two classes is brought out by the different methods used to record the value of their holdings. The land of the sokeman is generally included in the value of the manor to which he belongs, whereas the holding of the free man is often reckoned separately. Moreover in several fiefs, the demesne manors together with the appurtenant sokemen are first set down, to be followed by an account of the land of the free men.

Taken together, the free men and sokemen formed a remarkably large proportion of the rural population

of East Anglia. A comparison of the East Anglian tables¹ with those of Professor Stenton is instructive. In the Lincolnshire wapentakes of Ludborough and Bolingbroke the sokemen formed over 70% of the population, but nowhere does the percentage rise to 80 as in East Anglia. This high figure occurs in Suffolk in the half hundred of Parham (87%) and in the hundred of Wilford (82½%). Though the East Anglian hundreds were relatively small, there is no noticeable disparity between their populations and those of the Lincolnshire wapentakes.² As in Lincolnshire, the highest percentages come from the hundreds close to the east coast. Of the two Suffolk hundreds mentioned above, Wilford lay by the coast, and Parham, although inland, was adjacent to it. By the coasts, too, lay the hundreds of Colneis (68%), Plomesgate (66½%) and Lothingland (52%).³ Similarly in Norfolk high percentages occur on the east coast and round the mouth of the river Waveney. In the two coastal hundreds of East and West Flegg and the hundred of Happing the percentages are 74, 65 and 57 respectively. By the mouth of the Waveney lie the hundreds of Clavering and Blofield, each with 59%, and Walsham with 50%.¹ The free peasantry of East Anglia occur in two main areas: the upper area consists of the eastern Norfolk hundreds, together with two of the more northerly Suffolk hundreds, while the lower area is a belt stretching across the centre of Suffolk from the east coast.

Although found side by side, free men and sokemen are seldom recorded in equal numbers. This dispro-

¹ See Appendix.

² The half hundred of Parham, covering only five villages and with a population of no more than 161, was an exceptionally small district. This hundred is, however, paralleled by the wapentake of Ludborough, which contained six villages and had a population of a little over 200. Similarly Wilford with its population of 881 spread over 31 villages can be compared with the wapentake of Bolingbroke with its 23 villages and 800 peasant inhabitants.

³ The two small hundreds of Lothing and Lothingland have been reckoned as one hundred. This is partly due to the difficulty of finding the division between the two.

portionate distribution is one of the most striking features of East Anglia. There were in Suffolk many more free men than sokemen,¹ and though the totals of the two classes are more equal in Norfolk,² there is here likewise much variation in distribution. In both counties the free men tend to occur mainly in the east and the sokemen in the west. It follows therefore that the districts with the largest free population were inhabited more by free men than by sokemen.

In Suffolk large numbers of sokemen are found in only a few hundreds, the greatest number being recorded in the double hundred of Samford, where there were 224 in 1066. Two hundred and ten of these were attached to Gurth's manor of Shotley. Other hundreds in which a fair number of sokemen occur, are Blackbourne, Bradmere, Thingoe and Thedwastre where the sokemen belong to St. Edmund; and Stow and Hartismere where the majority of sokemen are men of the King, or of his thegns. Further east, sokemen are recorded only sporadically and in small numbers. In Norfolk sokemen are not confined to the west to the same extent, and we find a large number in the north-east. The distribution in this county is more uniform than in Suffolk, and in no fewer than fourteen hundreds situated in all parts of the county do sokemen rather than free men form the bulk of the free population.³ Moreover in contrast to Suffolk, many of the Norfolk hundreds each contained more than a single soke. For example in the hundred of South Erpingham the chief groups are the 124 sokemen attached to Harold's manors of Marsham and Cawston,⁴ the 60 sokemen belonging to Gurth's manor of Aylesham, and 31 belonging to Godwin's manor of

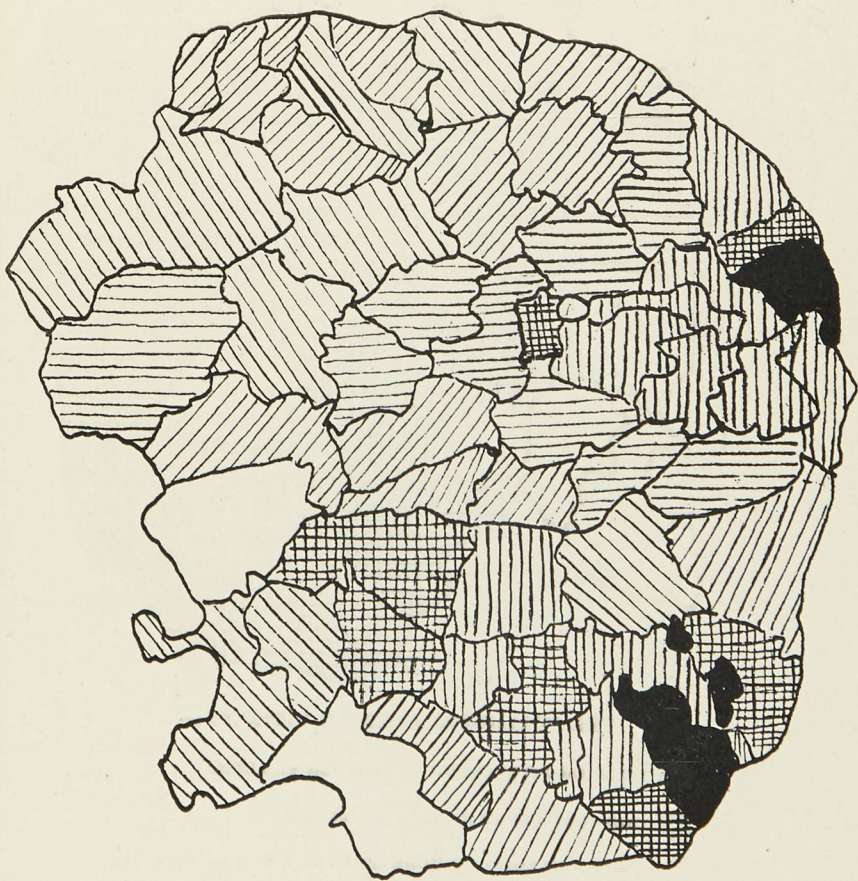
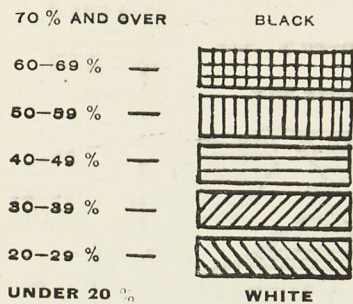
¹ 8144 free men to 1003 sokemen.

² 5544 free men to 5651 sokemen. Among the free men are included groups of customary tenants and *homines*.

³ Brothercross, South Erpingham, Eynesford, Forehoe, Freebridge, Gallow, North Greenhoe, Guiltcross, Holt, Launditch, Tunstead, Walsham, Wayland, and Smethden.

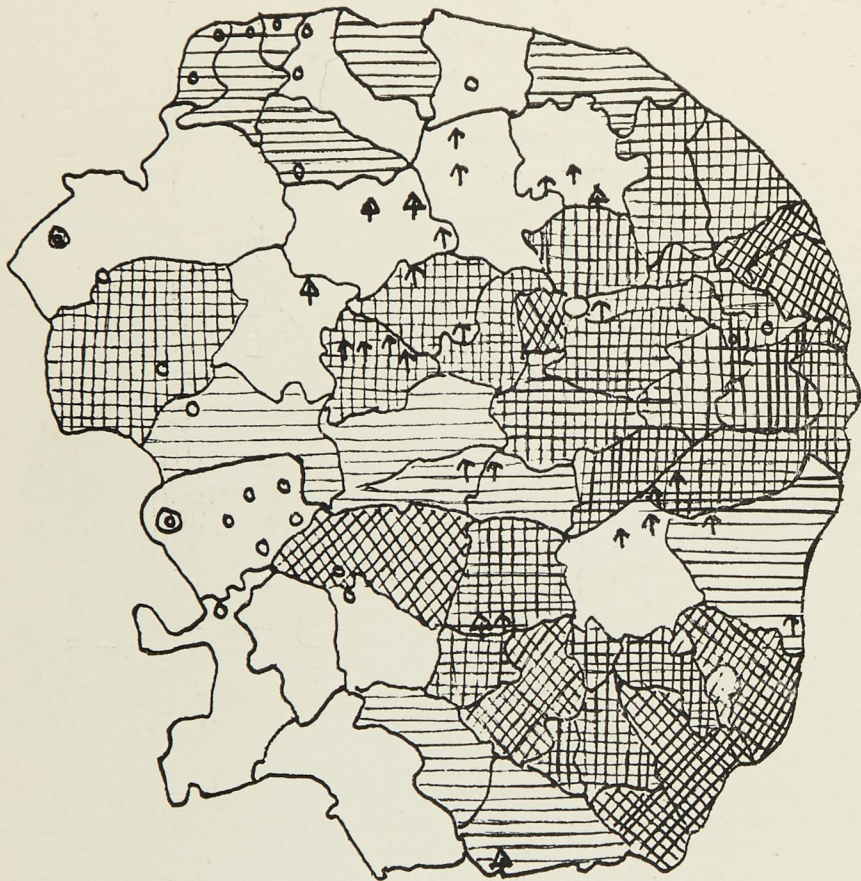
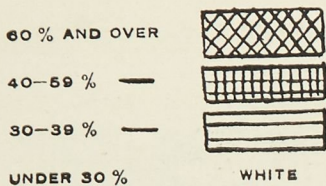
⁴ The soke of 95 sokemen lay in Marsham and that of 29 in Cawston.

THE PERCENTAGES OF FREE POPULATION ARE SHOWN
AS FOLLOWS:—







MAP 1. DISTRIBUTION OF FREE PEASANTRY IN 1066.

THE PERCENTAGES OF FREE POPULATION ARE SHOWN
AS FOLLOWS:



THE FOLLOWING SYMBOLS INDICATE:—

-  1,000 OR MORE SHEEP IN A SINGLE VILLAGE.
-  400-999 SHEEP IN A SINGLE VILLAGE.
-  WOOD FOR 1,000 OR MORE SWINE IN A SINGLE VILLAGE.
-  WOOD FOR 400-999 SWINE IN A SINGLE VILLAGE.

MAP 2. DISTRIBUTION OF FREE PEASANTRY, SHEEP,
AND WOODLAND.

Saxthorpe. Moreover to Ralph Stalri and Stigand belonged 36 sokemen, most of whom were attached to Hoveton. There remain the sokemen of St. Benet of Holme in the same hundred, these numbered 30, but four of them are valued at Aylesham.

The free men of East Anglia, although sometimes attached to manors, were generally independent in 1066. The more wealthy free men are entered individually in Domesday Book, for they frequently held large estates. These men are rarely commended to a lord, for they were themselves lords of lesser free men and sokemen. The poorer free men are, in many cases, recorded in large groups, generally with a common lord, for example in one entry relating to Alderton,¹ 31 men are commended to Edric, a powerful thegn in east Suffolk. Rarely were all the peasantry in a particular village commended to the same lord, and it was no uncommon thing for the commendation of an individual free man to be divided between two lords.

In seeking to explain why the free peasantry formed so large a part of the rural population of East Anglia in the eleventh century, we may consider first the possibility that there is some connection between the social organisation and agricultural pursuits. Later evidence would suggest that the free peasants of Domesday paid rents and possibly performed occasional labour services, but owed to no lord heavy services involving several days' labour for every week of the year. It is probably permissible to argue that the need to exact such heavy services—weekwork—would not arise in areas where farming was chiefly pastoral. If therefore we could prove that the sokemen and lesser *liberi homines* of East Anglia were engaged in the main in sheepfarming we might possibly feel that the numerical superiority of these classes over the *villani* and others was adequately accounted for. We must first discover whether it is possible to establish a direct connection between the distribution of the free peasantry and the pastoral areas.² There appear

¹ *V.C.H.*, Suffolk, vol. i., p. 437.

² See sketch map.

to have been in Suffolk three main pastoral districts; that part of the county north of Lowestoft, the hundred of Carlford in the south, and the district in the extreme west and south-west. The largest flocks of sheep come, surprisingly, not from the salt marshes below Carlford hundred, but from the coarse grass-lands of the north-west, where flocks of a thousand sheep¹ are recorded in 1066. It is in the west, however, that the villages are manorialised and the proportion of free peasants at its lowest. In the hundred of Lackford they formed only 12% of the population, and here the sheep totalled 7,455 in 1066. In Risbridge hundred large manors assessed at ten or more carucates were not unknown, and, although the number of sheep recorded in that hundred was not large in 1066, it had been greatly increased by 1086. In this semi-manorialised hundred the free element is again small. In the other two pastoral areas, where however the sheep occur in far smaller numbers, the percentage of free peasants is higher, in both instances over 50. It is clearly impossible to argue from the Suffolk evidence that the distribution of free peasants was determined by sheepfarming. The Norfolk evidence on the whole leads to the same negative conclusion. Here there were also three main sheepfarming areas, and in the two main districts, the north coast by the Wash and the land along the Cambridgeshire border the proportion of free peasants is low. However in the region by the mouth of the river Waveney where sheep farming was carried on to a lesser extent the sokemen and free men formed a higher percentage of the population than elsewhere in the county. It is likewise impossible to argue that free peasants occur in large numbers where men were required to look after swine. Although East Anglia was well wooded at this date, the exact amount of woodland is difficult to determine from Domesday for it is as a rule recorded not in

¹ *V.C.H.*, Suffolk, vol. i., p. 428., Mildenhall (1,000 sheep); p. 539, *Coclesworda* (1,200 sheep). As this place has not been identified, these sheep do not appear on the map.

acres, but as "wood for x swine." Such information however indicates which were the most wooded parts of the two counties.¹ These were, in Suffolk, Bishop's hundred, part of Hartismere and the west side of the hundreds of Wangford and Blything; and in Norfolk the hundreds of Launditch and Midford. The wooded districts in both counties tend to be manorialised, and so the free element is small. The free element increases, moreover, in those hundreds which were only partially wooded.

The absence of free peasants in both pastoral and wooded areas is significant. That they were essentially arable farmers is shown by the surprisingly large number of oxen which they possessed. Although no parallel can be found to the free men of Essex who had three plough-teams on nine acres,² numerous small tenants in Norfolk and Suffolk possessed a whole team of (presumably) eight oxen. In this connection the six sokemen of South Walsham who had a whole plough-team on six acres may be cited.³ Generally, however, there is one team to between 20 and 40 acres. This proportion of plough-teams to acreage is considerably larger than that found on manorial estates. Just as the free peasants as a whole appear to be mainly arable farmers, so too the duties of the sokemen of Ely, as given in the Ely *placitum*,⁴ are those which concern arable farming. We arrive therefore at the conclusion that the presence of large numbers of free peasants in East Anglia cannot be explained by reference to sheepfarming.

As in the Northern Danelaw, the peculiarities of the social organisation are explicable only in the light of the Scandinavian settlement of the ninth century. Signs of Scandinavian settlement in Norfolk and Suffolk

¹ For further information see Dr. Darby's note accompanied by a map in *Antiquity*, vol. viii., p. 213. My own map was compiled independently.

² *V.C.H.*, Essex, vol. i., p. 493, Broxted.

³ *V.C.H.*, Norfolk, vol. ii., p. 57.

⁴ *Inquisitio Comitatus Cantabrigiensis*, ed. Hamilton, pp. 192-5.

are seen in place-names, in the personal names recorded in Domesday and in the monetary system. Though Scandinavian place-names in East Anglia are not numerous in comparison with parts of Lincolnshire, their distribution is highly significant. In Norfolk, where the Scandinavian element is much stronger than in Suffolk, "we can draw a distinction between the hundreds in the east, on the lower Waveney and the Broads, especially Flegg, Loddon, Clavering, Henstead, North and South Erpingham Hundreds and the rest of the district. In the east names in -by are frequent," whereas "in the remaining hundreds names in -by are remarkably scarce."¹ Professor Ekwall lays emphasis upon the difference in character between the Scandinavian elements in the east and the rest of the county. "The former is characterised by *bys*, the latter by *thorpes* and hybrids of the type Thurston."¹ In Suffolk there are fewer Scandinavian names and these occur "mostly in the low-lying districts at the mouth of the Waveney."¹ That there is a close correspondence between the regions where Scandinavian place-names are to be found and those where the free peasantry form a very high proportion of the population needs no emphasis. Professor Ekwall's explanation of the distribution of place-names would account, at least in part, for the distribution of the free peasantry. "The Scandinavians settled about equally thickly all over (or over most of) the district. But in most parts there was a considerable English population, and the Scandinavians were not numerically strong enough to affect the place-nomenclature very seriously, except in the very low-lying district of the lower Waveney which was probably not much inhabited before the Scandinavian time. In most of the districts the Scandinavians to a great extent adopted names already in use, but when new settlements were founded, probably at a somewhat later period, these often got names with suffixed Thorpe."¹

¹ *Introduction to the Survey of English Place Names*, vol. i., pt. i., pp. 81-3.

The personal names recorded in Domesday Book can be but a fraction of the names in use in the eleventh century, but their number is sufficient to show how widespread was the use of those of Scandinavian origin. In all but a few instances, the names of peasants recorded in large groups are not given in the Survey, and the names of others, both great and small, seem to appear only at the whim of the scribe. The names of free peasants are more often recorded in Suffolk than in Norfolk, for in the latter large groups of free men and sokemen are more numerous. The number of Scandinavian personal names borne by men of all ranks of life in East Anglia is however large, among them Broder, Scula, Anant, Schett and Bundo, in addition to such common names as Turchil, Foui and Toli. These, whether or not the names of peasants, throw light on the character of the region. Moreover, we have in the survey compiled for Abbot Baldwin, the names of many of the free men belonging to the abbey of St. Edmunds in the late eleventh century and Professor Douglas has calculated that no fewer than $8\frac{1}{2}\%$ of these names are Scandinavian in origin.¹ There can be little doubt that many of the free peasants of East Anglia were descendants of the Danish settlers of the ninth century.

Danish influence has been traced in the tenemental organisation of medieval East Anglia. Professor Douglas holds that the *tenementa* of the thirteenth century "are derived from a single primitive holding and . . . this was a Danish bovate whose normal size was $12\frac{1}{2}$ acres."² Eight of these bovates went to make the 100 acre carucate of East Anglia. It is in charters and surveys of the thirteenth century that he is able to trace this peasant holding, the manloth of $12\frac{1}{2}$ acres. At the time of the compilation of Domesday Book, a $12\frac{1}{2}$ acre holding does not, however, appear to be the normal peasant tenement. On

¹ Douglas, *Feudal Documents from the Abbey of Bury St. Edmunds*, Introduction, p. cxx.

² Douglas, *The Social Structure of Medieval East Anglia*, p. 50.

the contrary, there seem to have been several types of holdings. Besides those of 12, $12\frac{1}{2}$ and 13 acres, which may be regarded as evidence of the existence of the tenmanloth at this time, there are numerous tenements of 8 and 16 acres, of 20 and 40 acres and even more of 15 and 30 acres. The villein holdings are not revealed in Domesday Book, and it is the information relating to the tenements of the *operarii* of later times which supports Mr. Douglas's view. He does not base his theory on the lands of the free men of the thirteenth century as these are more given to partition and may quickly lose their original size. For this reason an investigation has been made into the lands assigned to the Domesday churches of Suffolk, as being less liable to subdivision. Nearly a third of these holdings are of twelve or of a multiple of twelve acres. Among the remaining two-thirds are holdings assessed at 20, 15 and 8 acres. There is apparently no average free tenement in the latter half of the eleventh century. Instances of the use of the Danish monetary system are found in Domesday itself, mainly in the valuation of estates. The amounts payable from the larger manors are, probably, the sums due to the holder from the bailiff farmers. In the case of peasant holdings, these are possibly part of the customary payment owed to the lord. There are many entries in which the *ora* was the basis of calculation, although the term was employed in only a few instances. The payments which are reckoned on this basis are generally those of small peasant holdings, and tenements valued at 32d, (2 *orae*) $5/4$ (4 *orae*) and 8/- (6 *orae*) occur frequently. For example five acres held by a free man in Weston rendered 16d,¹ and the 40 acre holding of a free man in Hovingham was valued at $5/4$.² There are, especially in Suffolk, many holdings of 8 acres which owed 16d, and of 16 acres rendering 32d; it is not certain that these should be cited as examples of the reckoning in

¹ *V.C.H.*, Suffolk, vol. i., p. 458.

² *V.C.H.*, Norfolk, vol. ii., p. 60.

orae, for they may be merely instances of the common valuation of 2d an acre. The use of the ora is also seen in the payments due from groups of free peasants, as in the Suffolk entry "over all these men Edith the Fair had sake and soke and commendation, T.R.E. and they rendered £4 to the farm of Norton."¹ Such payments cannot have been the total of small sums due from each man, but must have been sums fixed by the lord of the manor to which the men belonged. The valuations of the larger manors were less frequently calculated on a unit of 16d. Many manors in both Norfolk and Suffolk are valued on a decimal system; but as this is also true of a number of Lincolnshire estates it need not cause undue concern. There are, moreover, several instances in which the manor is valued at £5 or £10, while the free men belonging to it render payments based on the ora. In addition, many of the manors of the abbey of St. Edmund are valued by a duodecimal system, but the holding of the free men and sokemen are not infrequently reckoned by the ora. The sedecimal system is not, however, confined to the free parts of East Anglia; even in the manorialised areas estates valued at £8 or £16 occasionally occur.

It is thus evident that the exceptionally large number of free peasants, *liberi homines* and sokemen, recorded in the Domesday Surveys of Norfolk and Suffolk and the peculiarities of their distribution, as seen in the table which follows, are most easily understood when regarded as the result of Scandinavian influence. Many problems raised by these figures require elucidation by further study, but it is unlikely that this general conclusion will need serious modification.

¹ V.C.H., Suffolk, vol. i., p. 421.

APPENDIX.

Table of Percentages. T.R.E.

SUFFOLK.					NORFOLK.				
	I.	II.	III.	IV.		I.	II.	III.	IV.
PARHAM (1)	87		141	21	EAST FLEGG	74.4	102	250	121
WILFORD	82.4	13	712	156	WEST FLEGG	65.4	89	289	200
COLNEIS	67.9		328	155	HUMBLEYARD	63.7	169	396	323
BLACKBOURNE					BLOFIELD	59.3	105	241	237
& BRADMERE (3)	67.3	220	564	380	CLAVERING	58.8	121	267	271
PLOMESGATE	65.9	6	435	228	HENSTEAD	57.3	162	346	378
THEDWASTRE	61.6	56	661	446	LODDON	57.4	239	335	421
BOSMERE	60.3	32	622	430	HAPPING	56.9	256	281	409
LOES	59.7	13	495	342	WALSHAM	50.4	282	43	319
CLAYDON	59.3	4	432	299	WAYLAND	48	217	82	323
HARTISMERE	57.3	73	815	661	CLACKCLOSE (2)	47	71	561	711
CARLFORD	54.9	12	418	352	TAVERHAM	46	122	129	294
LOTHINGLAND					MIDFORD (2)	44.8	136	169	376
& LOTHING	52.9		306	272	FOREHOE (2)	42.3	282	171	618
STOW	50.4	98	290	381	EARSHAM (1)	42.5	65	173	322
WANGFORD	46.3	30	397	495	DEPWADE	42.4	126	396	707
SAMFORD (2)	31.4	224	97	700	TUNSTEAD	40.9	235	65	432
BLYTHING	31	9	478	1077	N. GREENHOE	38.3	214	70	456
COSFORD (1)	30.6	13	170	415	DOCKING	38.3	65	66	210
THINGOE	29.9	63	86	349	BROTHERCROSS	37.4	180	28	347
BISHOP'S	29.7	41	213	600	SHROPHAM	37.3	193	114	515
RISBRIDGE	24.3	37	244	874	GRIMSHOE	35.9	157	135	520
BABERGH (3)	16.3	31	191	1139	S. ERPINGHAM	35.9	344	70	737
LACKFORD	12.9	28	37	437	DISS (1)	34	94	95	366
					N. ERPINGHAM	33.3	163	115	556
					GULTCROSS	32.9	116	52	344
					EYNESFORD	31.1	264	92	788
					SMETHDEN	30.2	134	37	395
					FREEBRIDGE (2)	29.6	399	281	1615
					LAUNDITCH	28.4	200	87	723
					GALLOW	27.5	151	30	477
					S. GREENHOE	25.7	77	152	659
					HOLT	20.5	121	36	607

Column I. shows what percentage of the recorded rural population consisted of free peasants.

„ II. shows the number of sokemen.

„ III. shows the number of free men.

„ IV. shows the total number of villeins, bordars and slaves.

¹ Half hundred.

² Hundred and a half.

³ Double hundred.

NOTE.—The figures given here are based on totals of holdings of tenants termed *liberi homines* and *sochemanni*. The holders of small tenements are generally recorded in large groups, and are usually unnamed, but it does not seem likely that in very many instances a man had several holdings and so has been counted more than once. It is significant that in the lists of the abbot's free men and sokemen in the third part of the survey of Abbot Baldwin of Bury St. Edmunds only the commoner names occur more than once, though there are a few exceptions such as Almar son of Gode who held land in both Welnetham and Rushbrook. The wealthier peasants of Domesday however do occasionally possess more than one tenement. As it is not possible to discover the frequency with which this occurred the present figures are admittedly open to question, but it is probable that they are substantially correct.
