

THE SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CHANGES OF THE LATER
MIDDLE AGES, AND THE POTTERY OF THE PERIOD

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There is no uniformity of opinion among historians about the social and economic developments of the 14th and 15th centuries, but on some points there is agreement. The old notion that these centuries saw 'the dawn of a new era' in which the main feature was the 'rise of the middle class' has long been rejected by historians. We are agreed that an important feature of the period was an overall economic contraction, in which demographic decline is seen by many as a dominant influence. However, while some historians claim this recession as merely one episode in a cycle of recurrent growth and decay, this paper emphasizes the structural changes of the period. These meant that different social groups had a variety of experiences, which were by no means all disadvantageous to them, so that while the economy as a whole shrank, many individuals found themselves better off. Also out of the decline of old institutions new forms of economic organisation emerged.

The contraction

Current estimates, which are based on intelligent projection rather than mere guesswork, put the population of England in c. 1300 in the region of 5 or 6 million. The great famine of 1315-17 caused a major set-back, with mortality in excess of 10 per cent. In the next 30 years the overall trend is not known. A downward movement is certain after the Black Death of 1348-9, which killed about a half of the population, and any initial recovery was prevented by recurrent epidemics in the 1360s. From the late 14th century until about 1520 we can be quite confident that the population remained at the relatively low level of 2 to 3 million (Hatcher 1977: 68-71). A puzzling feature of the demography of the period is the great length of the post-plague stagnation, in which both repeated epidemics and reduced fertility played some part.

Whatever the causes of the population decline, the accompanying changes are well-documented, notably the retreat in settlement, resulting in both the desertion and the shrinkage of villages, and the reduction in the area of cultivation. Normally arable land was converted into pasture, but in some cases there is evidence of the spread of scrub and the regeneration of woodland.

The amount of land under cultivation fell less than the population, so that the amount of arable land per head increased. Accordingly the size of peasant holdings grew, and from 1375 corn and bread were usually plentiful and cheap.

As people were reduced in number, land values were depressed, and rents fell in the long term. Labour became sufficiently scarce for there to be a marked increase in wages, beginning in the early 14th century and continuing well into the fifteenth.

The commercial economy was inevitably affected by these movements, so the size and number of towns was reduced and the volume of trade slumped. This was not simply correlated with the reduction in population, so that something of a boom in trade, industrial production and the urban economy occurred in the decades around 1400, then followed by a commercial recession in the mid-15th century (1440-70), after which came a pronounced revival in some trades and industries.

The contraction was only one of a number of tendencies in a complex and varied society. Three developments deserve emphasis: a social redistribution of wealth, a shift in the balance between town and country, and regional shifts.

1. Social distribution of wealth

The late medieval upper class was very small in size, with no more than 10,000 noble and gentry families, and perhaps as many households of clergy with comparable wealth and social status, together forming less than 5 per cent of the population. The later Middle Ages were difficult times for landlords (and the upper classes drew the bulk of their income from land). The profits of large-scale cultivation were reduced by high wages and low prices, especially after 1375, and the aristocracy were caught in a price scissors when the price of the goods that they sold, such as grain, fell while they had to pay more for manufactured and imported goods, such as cloth, building materials and wine. Rents, which formed an increasing proportion of the income of landlords as they abandoned the hazards of agricultural production and leased out their demesnes, in general moved downwards. Lesser lords - the gentry - may have fared better at this time than the magnates, because of their more flexible estate management and ability to turn to such lucrative money-spinners as the law (Postan 1972: 174-81). Nor were the higher nobility reduced to penury as they manipulated marriages to merge formerly separate landed fortunes, so that individual magnates continued to enjoy very high incomes (McFarlane 1973: 83-101).

The peasantry gained from the weakness of the lords. The reduced rents, the easier terms of tenure, and the withering away of serfdom were all working in the favour of tenants in the 15th century. Peasants also gained from the more ready availability of land, so that the building-up of large holdings became more common, and the reduction in the cultivated area gave the peasantry the opportunity to develop pastoral farming in districts which had previously specialized, even over-specialized, in arable cultivation. This new balance between arable and pasture, by allowing the greater use of manure, may have allowed an increase in the productivity of land, so that each acre produced more grain. It is certain that the productivity of each man rose, as the unemployment and under-employment inevitable in a society of small-holders ended after 1349 (Bois 1976).

Those who remained as small-holders, and the greatly diminished ranks of landless labourers, enjoyed the benefits of increased wages, so that the real wages in 1500 were two or three times higher than they had been in 1300 (Phelps Brown and Hopkins 1956).

These developments had implications for social relationships and people's perceptions of society and their role within it. The upper classes resented the improved position of their social inferiors, while those at the bottom of society had their expectations raised, and demanded yet more advantages. These attitudes and responses are important because market forces were not always decisive in effecting change, and such movements as reductions in rents happened very slowly (Hilton 1973: 233-236).

2. Town and country

A major change in the English economy in the 14th and 15th centuries was the emergence of a cloth industry that was able both to supply the domestic market and provide an expanding export trade. Much of this industrial expansion took place in the countryside, leading to the emergence of small

towns and industrial villages like Lavenham and Castle Combe. From the older large urban centres at the same time comes evidence of decay, such as complaints of the inability of towns to pay taxes at the old levels, physical deterioration of urban housing, and a decline in civic consciousness. The larger towns shrank in size, and some of the smaller boroughs ceased to serve an urban function at all. Recently some historians have begun to identify an urban crisis or at least a series of urban crises, and some have even argued that a process of 'de-urbanization' was taking place (Phythian-Adams 1978).

This problem is still hotly disputed, and part of the difficulty in generalizing about urban society lies in the variety of individual towns, so that by far the largest English city, (the only big centre by continental standards), London, expanded, and so did many smaller towns, such as Birmingham and Lavenham, and some larger places, like Exeter and Ipswich, also did well.

We can safely say that many towns lacked economic vitality in this period; the main industrial expansion passed them by, and they were not all able to participate in the commercial revival of around 1500. Indeed one of the largest English medieval provincial cities, Coventry, went into deep recession in the early 16th century (Phythian-Adams 1979).

3. Regional shifts

The first of these involved England's relations with the Continent. In the 13th century England had in effect a colonial trading pattern, exporting raw materials (wool, tin) and importing manufactured goods. Much of the trade lay in the hands of foreign merchants. The development of industry, especially cloth making, meant that England exported finished goods, and English merchants to some extent supplanted the aliens in long-distance trade (Bolton 1980 : 287-319).

Within the country the main shifts, according to an analysis of taxable wealth, were from the Midlands and the northern counties of East Anglia towards the South-West and the South-East (Schofield 1965). Some of the towns noted earlier as expanding lay in these relatively prosperous regions, notably Exeter. London grew because it developed as a capital, and a growing quantity of imports were supplied to the provinces by London merchants; there was a danger that London could drain the life out of lesser towns, so that, for example, Southampton became more of an outpost for the capital.

Finally, if we turn to the more localized shifts, there was clearly more economic vigour in the woodland districts, like the Forest of Arden in Warwickshire, partly because of the greater flexibility of their land and society, lacking as they did the open fields, nucleated villages and powerful lordship of the champion areas (Dyer 1981).

One ingredient in these geographical changes was growing ease of migration, consequent on the removal of both economic and institutional barriers to movement.

Do all of these changes amount to a transformation of production? The answer must be that in spite of the social and geographical mobility of the period, the erosion of the powers of the nobility, and the development of rural industry, the social structure survived, with its disparities of power and wealth reduced but still present. If the 'middle class' is defined as the better-off townsmen, they, far from 'rising', faced the problems of urban crises. If capitalist economic organization is to be discovered in this

period, the towns, with their hierarchical and tradition-worshipping elites, are the last place to look. Rather we should turn again to the countryside, to the former lords' demesnes, now in the hands of middlemen called farmers; to the large enclosed pastures of the butcher graziers; and the newly created large holdings of the yeomen at the top of village society; and in industry to the clothiers who exercised an entrepreneurial role in the rural textile trade (Hilton 1976).

Consumption

The study of patterns of consumption is in its infancy. We can point to slumps in the trade or manufacture of luxuries reflecting a decline in the spending power of the nobility. For example the lead industry, making a very expensive building material used only in high quality buildings, went through a decline in the 15th century. But the history of consumption is complicated by subjective factors like changes in fashion and considerations of status. To take one example, squirrel fur, an expensive import from the Baltic and worn as an upper-class status symbol suddenly lost its attractiveness to the rich when a drop in price and the increased incomes of the lower orders in the 15th century brought it within the reach of urban artisans. Demand for all furs slumped in the 16th century, when they became unfashionable and were commonly worn by the elderly (Veale 1966, chapter 7).

Demand for some goods - iron, the cheaper grades of woollen cloth and perhaps linen - was sustained or increased as they were bought in greater quantities by the now wealthier peasants and artisans. All sections of the lower classes, including agricultural labourers, could afford to eat wheat bread, more meat and fish, and to drink ale regularly, all of which were comparative luxuries before 1349.

These changes, though of some significance, fall a long way short of the consumption revolution in the 16th century, which brought comfortable furnishings, glass windows, and large quantities of pewter, to mention only a few examples, into the houses of a wide section of society (Dyer 1973, chapter 13).

The scarcity of these luxuries in humbler households in the later Middle Ages may be partly explained in terms of the inhibitions on the incomes of the consumers. For example, the peasantry who formed the largest social group could not make really large profits from their holdings because of the low prices of grain and scarcity of labour. They had plenty to eat and drink, but no great quantities of cash to spend. It is also possible that peasants had conservative and rather low expectations of their consumption, and that the moral climate of the village community frowned on extravagance and ostentation (Blanchard 1978). Analogy with peasant attitudes nearer to our own times suggests that people in the Middle Ages put a high value on leisure and avoided drudgery (Chayanov 1966). A garnish of pewter, for example, may have been an attainable purchase for many peasants, but only at the unacceptable cost of many hours of drudgery. Wage earners, who may have been able potentially to earn large sums of money, decided in many cases to use their higher wages to finance longer holidays, preferring, in the words of a Bristol ordinance "to disport themselves in the streets" (Little Red Book of Bristol: 101-110).

The Pottery Industry

How does the pottery industry fit into this general pattern of social and economic changes? Any enquiry must involve some argument by analogy, even some speculation, and the difficult combination of historical and material evidence. The quantity of references to pottery-making in the written sources is slight. Mrs. Le Patourel's pioneering study of the documentary evidence has tapped some unusually informative material, and we are unlikely to be able to give any more detailed picture of the industry from the documents than she has provided (Le Patourel 1968). There is still scope for more historical research, particularly in the identification of centres of manufacture, but the bulk of the new evidence will come from archaeological research. This is partly because of the nature of the industry. Pottery was a relatively cheap commodity, made by artisans directly for a comparatively local and lower-class market, with no big profit margin to interest large scale merchant entrepreneurs. Consequently the manufacture, sale and use of pottery was of little concern to the rich and powerful sections of medieval society for whom documents were written.

Late medieval potting was located in the countryside; there is some evidence of urban or suburban kilns at Carlisle, Chester and York, but these must be regarded as unusual. Potters often combined their craft with peasant agriculture, having holdings of land that varied in size from as little as a cotland to as much as 33½ acres, so that they could at least have grown some crops and kept a few animals, or in the case of the few with 20 acres or more, have provided for the food needs of their own household and grown a surplus for sale. Such dual occupations were characteristic of rural industries such as mining, cloth-making, and the various woodland crafts (Birrell 1969). The normal pattern of work allowed the craftsman to fit his industrial work into the slack periods of the agricultural year (Blanchard 1972). Potting, like other crafts, had no doubt its own seasonal pattern of varying intensities of production.

Like most medieval economic activities, the basic unit of production can be identified as the household, in which wives, children and servants joined in work that was carried out in the house or its vicinity (Moorhouse 1981: 97-105). The presence of children and adolescents among the labour force may well be detectable in the finger impressions found on pottery. Potters working on a larger scale employed full-time servants, and may also have paid labour indirectly by buying fuel from wood-cutters or turf-diggers. By analogy with other medieval industries, each workshop or kiln would have been unlikely to have employed more than three or four men. Some of these were no doubt youths learning the trade. Outside the towns there would have been no authority capable of enforcing formal apprenticeship, which in other crafts usually involved a 7-year term, beginning around the age of 12. The frequent modern observation that at least some medieval pots are badly made, or aesthetically unsatisfactory - not judgements that are commonly made about the other products of medieval craftsmen - may be a comment on the uneven standards of training and quality control in rural industry. The argument could be further advanced by a comparison with the technically superior pottery of the Netherlands, made by urban potters. If so, it might be relevant to mention that urban craftsmen sometimes made complaints of poor workmanship against their rural competitors in such industries as cloth-making.

Once made, pots were either sold directly by the potters to the consumers at a market, or even in bulk to a seignorial household in response to a specific order. When pots are found travelling in quantity over long distances, a

likely explanation is that middlemen were acting as links between potters and customers; presumably these were the small-scale traders who appear in documents as chapmen, dealing in a wide range of goods (Swanson 1980, chapter 9). Pots were used at all social levels, and records of the royal household buying a thousand jugs at a time in the late 13th century might lead us to think of the wealthy as the most important consumers. However, the aristocracy's use of pottery was limited by their ability to afford more expensive metal containers. When we consider the sheer size of the lower end of the market, a million households in the late 13th century, each one perhaps buying an average of two or three pots a year, we must conclude that much pottery production was aimed at the lower classes. Excavators have sometimes noted that high status sites, like the moated site at Chalgrove (Oxon.), have produced quantities of good quality pottery such as Tudor Green wares, but such observations need to be more systematically analysed before the social hierarchy of pottery consumption can be fully understood.

The changes of the late 14th and 15th centuries would have made life easier for the potter. As a land-holder he was in a position to increase the size of his tenement, and significantly some of the largest potters' holdings are recorded in the 15th century. Some may have accumulated so much land that they dropped out of the industry altogether, hence some of the production centres ceasing to manufacture in the late 14th and early 15th centuries. Potting was no doubt a craft originally taken up by small-holders because their lands were neither large enough nor sufficiently productive, lying as they often did in areas of marginal land, to provide for the needs of a family from farming alone. Potting may well have fallen into that category of work regarded by some as drudgery, to be abandoned as soon as possible in favour of agriculture. Those that remained active in potting benefitted from the shift in the balance of power between lords and tenants. Their lands were rented on easier terms, and the extra charges paid to the lord for the use of clay and fuel diminished or even lapsed. Sometimes, as at Cowick in Yorkshire, clay rents rose at the end of the 14th century, but this was a short-lived development. Wood in general became more plentiful, and was no longer subject to such strict lordly control. On the other hand, the potter would have encountered the same problems of labour supply as any other producer of the period. The amount of available family labour was reduced because the numbers of children declined, and hired labour became more expensive, both labour for potting and for fuel preparation. The potters, like other manufacturers, passed on their increased costs to the consumer in the form of higher prices. Just as the price of ceramic roof-tiles rose from 2s.0d.-3s.0d. per thousand before 1350, to 4s.0d., 5s.0d., or more in the 15th century, so the price of pottery seems to have increased (Thorold-Rogers 1866-1902: i, 521; ii, 434-439; iii, 427-436; iv, 468-470). The variations in the size and decoration of pots make the calculation of prices difficult, but my impression is that cooking pots were normally sold for $\frac{1}{4}$ d. or at most $\frac{1}{2}$ d. in the period 1250-1350, but that they had risen to $\frac{1}{2}$ d. or 1d. in the period 1350-1500. A very large pot for storing ale or carrying water - presumably a cistern - could cost as much as 4d. in the late 15th century (Magdalen College, Oxford, Libri Compoti: 1481-2). Presumably the greater wealth of consumers meant that the market could bear the increase in price.

Did pottery production expand or contract in the later Middle Ages? It would be tempting to suggest that, as the number of potential consuming households decreased, from about a million to about half a million, that pottery production would have declined to a comparable extent. But there is no reason to assume that this is the case, as the spending power of the consumers grew so much that they would have been able to afford the new prices, and increase the numbers of their purchases. This may well have

been the case with the iron industry, which was supplying a comparable market, and which seems to have maintained its output in the later Middle Ages (Schubert 1957, chapter 9). A glance at the budgets of consumers suggests the causes. In the Midlands in c. 1300 more than a third of tenants held either a quarter or a half yardland, that is $7\frac{1}{2}$ acres or 15 acres of arable. This land was not sufficient to provide them with much more than foodstuffs and rent money; they certainly would not have disposed of large sums of cash to spend on pottery or other goods.

The great-grandsons of these tenants in the early 15th century would in many cases have combined under their control two or three tenements, making a yardland or so - about 30 acres. The sale of the surplus produce of this land would have given them in a normal year a cash income of £2 or more. Likewise a skilled wage earner such as a carpenter, after buying food and paying his rent, could have disposed of a similar sum.

The spending power of these potential purchasers of pottery did not increase so much that they were able to buy superior substitutes. As Blake has recently reminded us, the demand for pottery was elastic, and metal, wood and leather could be used instead of pottery (Blake 1980). In the later Middle Ages the main competition came from metal, in particular in the form of the cast bronze cooking pot, the olla enea of the documents. The potter was already facing widespread use of the brass pot before 1350, and by the late 14th century all households, even those of cottagers, were equipped with one (Field 1965). So we may suspect that in the later Middle Ages the ceramic cooking pot had already been relegated to subsidiary roles in the preparation of food, or was used for storage and those other multifarious functions documented by Moorhouse (1978). The other threat from the metal trade came in the form of ewers and jugs. These were owned by many upper-class households. In exceptional cases a very rich peasant is found owning one, but the normal peasant or artisan household would not aspire to this refinement. Cast bronze was very expensive, so that a pot or ewer would cost in the region of 3s.4d., a fortnight's wages for a carpenter in the later 14th century. The brass cooking pot could have been regarded as a worthwhile investment in view of its constant use and durable qualities, but a ewer would have been a much greater extravagance. So within the period 1350-1500 there was no widespread extension of the use of metal as a substitute for pottery.

At the other end of the market pottery seems to have won for itself new customers at the expense of wood. Treen was of course very cheap, so that cups, plates, and dishes could be bought at six for a penny. In the late 14th and 15th centuries the increased production of cups and drinking vessels by potters suggests that the industry was making inroads into the wood turners' traditional market (Moorhouse 1979). Also the great numbers of shallow forms, bowls or dishes, may also have been substitutes for wooden vessels. In addition, the cisterns which became more plentiful in the same period could have replaced small wooden casks.

So the growing wealth of the consumers, and the partial substitution of pottery for treen may have prevented any major shrinkage in the scale of the industry. A likely development would have been that a reduced number of potters coped with the demand for their products by increasing the scale of their individual operations. There are parallels for such a development in agriculture, peasant holdings increased considerably in size, and other industries, such as iron, in which individual forges raised their output. This was another aspect of the rising productivity of labour mentioned above, but the industry would still have been conducted within the traditional confines of the household-based small-scale labour force, again judging by analogy with other industries of the time.

Archaeologists are understandably preoccupied with changes in the form and fabric of pottery, on which historians can scarcely comment at all, but it is possible to make some speculation on the basis of indirect evidence or arguments by analogy. To begin with the influence of the market on pottery, the most striking development of the 15th century was the spread of Tudor Green over a large area. The manufacture of varieties of Cistercian ware at different centres in the Midlands and the North might also be mentioned. The implication is that some of the former regional differences in pottery were being eroded. This could reflect the broader horizons of people who moved around more, and the growth of the wider marketing areas of regional centres as some local markets disappeared, and as London extended its commercial tentacles over the whole country.

The potter was also influenced by specific changes in the needs of consumers. The more widespread and regular drinking of ale was presumably responsible for the increased production of some forms of pottery, cisterns and large jugs to store and carry ale, and cups from which to drink it. The growth in production of pots for the preparation of meat and fish, dripping pans and frying pans, may be connected with the greater availability of these foods even in relatively poor households. Did consumers also exercise some control over the quality of pottery? One temptation for a potter in an age of high labour costs would have been to skimp on the work and turn out badly made and badly finished goods. Clearly this course was taken, for example in some Oxfordshire kilns (M. Mellor, pers. comm.). Consumer choice would have worked against the shoddy products; after all, customers were paying $\frac{1}{2}$ d., the equivalent of two loaves of bread or four pints of ale, for a mundane pot, while the better table ware was intended for display and as a rival to treen. Success for the potter lay in manufacturing efficiently wares of reasonable quality; the best policy for him was to reduce unit costs by producing on a larger scale for a wider market.

Some late medieval ware show signs of technical innovation, in such features as harder firing and new glazing techniques; others, with characteristic conservatism, preserve older forms and production methods. This is entirely typical of the technological innovations of the later Middle Ages. Major mechanical advances were few, the most important being the (labour-saving) diffusion of the use of water-power in iron forging and smelting; of course, mention should be made of the introduction of printing, though this was of little immediate economic significance. Most changes in techniques, for example in agriculture, involved adaptations and modifications of existing methods, and these were adopted only patchily.

Potting might be regarded as an industry more receptive to change than most. As a rural industry it was not subject to the institutional restraints found in many urban crafts. The industry was mainly located near woodlands and wastes in order to gain access to fuel and raw materials; such areas are well-known for their lack of restrictions imposed either by lords or village communities. The industry depended for its success on skill and ingenuity rather than major investment in equipment or buildings. And yet the part-time activity of peasant cultivators may well have been subject to the same slowness of change that we notice in the farming techniques.

To what extent did potting change in the late medieval period, either along the lines suggested here, or in other ways? The answer to this question can only come from a more detailed analysis of the pottery itself, regarding it as primary evidence for the nature of the medieval economy and society, and not just as an aid to archaeological dating.

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