

MEDIAEVAL PEASANT FARMERS

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For many of us the expression 'medieval agriculture' evokes an image of demesnes cultivated on a large scale by serf labour, and owned as often as not by the Church. The record of the life and work of the multitude of peasant husbandmen rarely extended beyond their tenurial obligations, what custom decreed they ought to do. What they actually did is another matter. Such mundane topics as the crops raised and animals kept on their own tiny holdings are too often ignored, so much so that our knowledge about the great majority of the people amounts to little more than a set of legal concepts, illuminated only fitfully by precious scraps of information about their private affairs. In Buckinghamshire the gap is partially made good by some of the returns for the Fifteenth levied in 1332 which constitute the bulk of those few fragments of its early taxation records that have survived.¹ By some lucky accident the taxers in 38 townships compiled complete lists of the worldly goods of every taxpayer which, supplemented by the Twentieths of 1327 for eleven others, provide a rare opportunity of penetrating the veil of obscurity which in the ordinary way conceals the daily toil of the common folk.

I

The tax was almost certainly levied on a minority of the community. The relatively high threshold of ten shillings excluded a very large, though uncertain number of poor and generally landless peasants, indeed there were several villages where almost everyone worth less than a pound managed to escape the net. The fact that only half as many taxpayers were returned in Blackbourne hundred, Suffolk, in 1327 as in 1283 (when, to be sure, the threshold has been only 6s 8d) may well be indicative of a general trend for the number to diminish.² Evasion must always be allowed for. The effectiveness of medieval taxes tended regularly to decline, presumably as a result of taxpayers becoming more sophisticated, and by the reign of Edward III the assessment of personal property had been practised for upwards of a century. Over ninety percent of the Buckinghamshire assessments were under £3; only the odd four out of 704 reached double figures, the highest being £13 9s 4d for the demesne of Merton Hall, Oxford, at Cheddington. Naturally the bigger ones belonged to landowners, though the figures portray them as neither a large nor a well defined group. Conditions were similar in contemporary Suffolk, but back in 1283 almost ten percent there had been taxed on more than £5, while the ten-pound men amounted to 3.7 percent and formed a clearly

1. Printed by A.C. Chibnall, *Early Taxation Returns*, Buckinghamshire Record Society, 14 (Aylesbury, 1966).

2. E. Powell, *A Suffolk Hundred in 1283* (Cambridge, 1910); S.H.A. H[ervey], *Suffolk in 1327*, *Suffolk Green Books*, ix, vol II (Woodbridge, 1906), 180-95. The highest assessment in 1327 was £22 compared with almost £45 in 1283, and a dozen more exceeding £20.

differentiated class headed by several assessed at £40 or more. Over the next half century the median assessment dropped from 35s to less than 25s, and it is perfectly feasible that a comparable decline produced the median of exactly 22s 6d in north Bucks to which most of the extant returns belong.

The fact that the settlement made in 1334 substantially increased the aggregate sums paid by most vills suggests that the allegations of deception levelled in 1332 were well founded. For all that, in Bucks the increment averaged an undramatic 17½ percent, if rather more – up to 25 per cent or so – in nearly half the places under consideration. Overall the revision may have achieved little more than making good any leeway lost since 1327.³ But while the substitution of a fixed quota for each township in place of individual assessments was justified by the claim that mounting abuses had undermined the system, it could equally have been true that assessments could no longer be agreed because the underlying assumptions had become obsolete. These taxes had evolved in parallel with the growth of material wealth, but the peak had now been passed, and progressive impoverishment of the peasantry, who necessarily shouldered the main burden, rendered it increasingly unrealistic.

In consequence of Professor Postan's pioneering study of 13th century subsidies⁴ we need not harbour serious doubts as to the credibility of these assessments, the contents of which are tabulated in an appendix. Nevertheless, the adverse contemporary criticisms warn against unreserved acceptance of them. Irrespective of cause, the Bucks data do indeed look a trifle threadbare in comparison with the earlier Suffolk material, as also that from south Wiltshire in 1225 and part of Huntingdonshire in 1291. Briefly stated, average holdings of grains, and of cows and young cattle were appreciably smaller in Buckinghamshire; an Eastertide assessment explains the low level of corn in Wiltshire. Direct comparison of isolated tax returns is not of course without its hazards, but it is nonetheless undeniable that at first sight the earlier ones pitilessly expose the alleged defects of those for 1332.

3. Chibnall, *op. cit.* pp. 100-07. In Sussex the gross valuation of £13,631 in 1332 was almost 20 percent down on that for 1327, and almost exactly twelve percent less than the Eleventh of 1296: *The Three Earliest Subsidies for the County of Sussex*, ed. W. Hudson, Sussex Record Society, x (Lewes, 1909), *passim*.

4. M.M. Postan, 'Village Livestock in the Thirteenth Century', *Economic History Review*, 2nd series, sv (1962), 219-49.

TABLE 1: Summary of Assessments⁵

District	Tax-payers	Horses & Oxen		Cows & young		Sheep		Pigs		Grain	
		No.	Av.	No.	Av.	No.	Av.	No.	Av.	No.	Av.
Ashendon	205	327	1.6	181	0.9	665	3.2	79	0.4	5237	26
Buckingham	104	196	1.8	93	0.9	481	4.6	13	0.1	3603	35
Cottesloe	227	355	1.6	212	0.9	1542	6.8	63	0.3	6404	28
Newport	94	98	1.0	118	1.3	397	4.2	12	0.1	2486	27
Chiltern	74	99	1.3	119	1.6	1532	20.7	49	0.7	2453	33
Suffolk	1339	1432	1.0	4298	3.2	14041	10.5	1842	1.4	64552	48
Huntingdon	177	416	2.4	790	4.5	1102	6.2	679	3.8	9392	53
South Wilts	960	1859	1.8	2645	2.8	14987	15.6	382	0.3	5000	5.3
Sussex (1332)											
Holmestrowe	109	76	0.7	77	0.7	1817	16.7	36	0.3	2692	25
Rotherbridge	100	147	1.5	388	3.9	1537	15.4	104	1.0	3172	32

There is no evidence that these Buckinghamshire returns were unrepresentative, for the Sussex data are very similar,⁶ and furthermore there was some justification for letting the taxpayer down lightly in 1332 which was a year of dearth following two that had been even worse. Average wheat prices (in shillings per quarter) at Exeter over a twelve year period ran as follows:⁷

1326	3.86	1330	7.30	1334	4.78
1327	4.75	1331	8.35	1335	4.60
1328	6.13	1332	6.39	1336	3.64
1329	6.42	1333	5.11	1337	2.92

Assessments made in 1327 for four townships record significantly bigger stocks of grain, comparable with amounts listed in Suffolk in 1283, and reflecting the contrast between a good average harvest and a poor one; in addition the many variants in the tally of livestock absolve the taxers of 1332 from the suspicion of attempting to pass off earlier returns, or indeed scaling them down.

TABLE 2: Comparison of 1327 and 1332

Village	Tax-payers	Horses & Oxen		Cows & young		Sheep		Pigs		Grain	
		No.	Av.	No.	Av.	No.	Av.	No.	Av.	No.	Av.
Creslow											
1327	19	37	1.9	8	0.4	198	10.4	8	0.4	664	34
1332	22	37	1.7	16	0.7	164	7.8	7	0.3	337	15
Linslade											
1327	17*	63	3.7	38	2.2	184	10.8	19	1.2	587	35
1332	22	43	1.9	41	1.9	164	7.5	14	0.6	512	23
Doddershall											
1327	27	16	0.6	30	1.1	91	3.4	5	0.2	768	28
1332	27	38	1.4	22	0.8	84	3.1	1	—	356	13
Kingsey											
1327	19	22	1.2	36	1.8	106	5.6	8	0.4	1043	55
1332	16	19	1.2	25	1.6	105	6.6	14	0.9	796	50

5. Postan, *loc. cit.*, Table 1, 2 and 3; L.F. Salzman, 'Early Taxation in Sussex,' *Sussex Archaeological Collections*, 99 (Lewes, 1961), 10-16.

In general I have adopted Postan's arrangement of the data, varying it only in points of detail. For grain I have used bushels throughout rather than the conventional quarters, in order to avoid fractional quantities; fractions which result from averaging are rounded off.

6. These are evidently the collectors' work sheets, and in many cases arrive at sums higher than were eventually levied on the persons concerned. The figures for the important cattle rearing district of Rotherbridge are clearly weighted by several very big taxpayers. The many subsequent emendations must be corrections made in the course of checking: the number of wrongly totalled assessments in the final Buckinghamshire roll remitted to the Exchequer prove that mistakes must have been legion.

7. B.R. Mitchell and P. Deane, *Abstract of British Historical Statistics* (Cambridge, 1962), p. 484.

The wretched conditions of 1332 are sharply highlighted, demonstrating that evasion was not necessarily the only factor at work.

The rule with foodstuffs was that corn in the barn was taxed, but the contents of the larder and cellar were exempt. From this J.F. Willard deduced that all assessed stocks represented a marketable surplus over and above subsistence requirements.⁸ But if this were so it would mean, all other indications to the contrary, that the peasantry were relatively prosperous. The most we can concede is that wheat and barley might have been grown for sale since it is for them that price series have been preserved; pease, beans and mixed corns can only have been consumed on the farm itself. Moreover, it is difficult to believe that peasant cabins contained larders and cellars; everything but what was required for immediate use must have been stored in outhouses. Manor houses, on the other hand, would certainly have had these amenities, and consequently it is much more likely that it was on the largest farms that the taxed stock may have been intended for disposal. Besides, the tax was frankly regressive. The gentry were not assessed on the armour and valuables which dignified their status, and in practice this relief may also have been extended to the provisioning of the great households they were expected to maintain. So far as the peasants were concerned the quantities involved seem to place the matter beyond dispute. Inadequate though they might have been for subsistence, as disposable surplus they would have represented something approaching affluence, particularly after a disappointing harvest. All factors considered, the conclusion must be that, with few exceptions, these stocks were simply what the farmer was able to retain for the consumption of his family after outgoings such as rents and tithes had been paid,⁹ just as in 1341 the *Nonae* were specifically levied on produce after the tithes had been deducted.

Livestock was by any reckoning thin on the ground; in relation to area it had formerly been five times more numerous in Suffolk, three times in Wiltshire. However, generalisation is exceptionally misleading at this point. The ratio of working (i.e. capital) beasts remained at least as high. Individual holdings of sheep in the Vale region compare not unfavourably with those found in the mainly arable 'woodland' parts of Suffolk, while on the more pastoral Chilterns the average was higher than on the basically similar Wiltshire Downs. It was the numbers of stock bred for consumption – cows, bullocks and pigs – which had shrunk dramatically. A general decline is consistent with the retreat of the grassland 'frontier' before the advancing tide of crops which had been in progress upwards of two centuries, and lends substance to the thesis that by 1300 pasture (and with it livestock) had contracted to the point at which the health of mixed farming was endangered.¹⁰ Since dung was the only regular fertiliser, and even in the 13th century the animal population had been far below the levels achieved in the nine-

8. J.F. Willard, *Parliamentary Taxes on Personal Property, 1290-1332* (1934), p. 85

9. Willard, *op. cit.* pp. 77-82. The statute of 1302 exempted dues to lords on which they themselves would be taxed. After 1319 the provision was dropped, having probably been introduced to obviate misunderstandings. Tithe was allowed for, and probably seed corn. It is just conceivable that there was no allowance for outgoings in Suffolk in 1283.

10. Postan, *op. cit.* 326-8. Only a rough comparison with his detailed calculations is attempted: see *infra* p. 68. Cf. also Postan, *The Medieval Economy and Society* (1972), pp. 58-9; B.H. Slicher van Bath, *The Agrarian History of Western Europe, A.D. 800-1850* (1963), pp. 132-7.

teenth, this extreme shortage of stock goes far to account for the seemingly deficient yield of crops, especially on peasant holdings. It was the reverse side of the growth of human population which attained its peak in the years 1300-49, and necessitated the extension of the cultivated area by plowing up waste land which had hitherto provided grazing.¹¹ The process must have been accelerated by the appalling famine of 1315-17 when desperation drove people to devour unwholesome food, even to cannibalism.¹² To what extent, we may ask, had stock been recklessly slaughtered, and had it recovered by 1332, especially since the disaster had been followed immediately by a murrain among cattle? The plowing up of still more land as an insurance against renewed dearth must have impeded restocking, and there is abundant testimony that reclamation continued apace throughout the first half of the century.¹³ An even more recent setback is implied by the excuse of John de Pultney, lord of Beachendon, that he had 'of oxen nothing because they died in the murrain'.

If evasion was practised systematically it would have tended to produce stereotyped assessments. At Turweston, for example, the only animals ascribed to more than half the inhabitants were one cow and (normally) one mare. In Ashendon cum Pollicot the great majority were credited more or less uniformly with an aver, an ox, a pig, and (less commonly) a cow, together with one quarter each of wheat, beans and drage. Nevertheless, the handful of beasts owned by most peasants severely restricted the possible combinations, while if plot acreages and husbandry methods were standardised the resulting quantities were liable to be very similar. Again, certain types of animal were uniformly ignored, chiefly young beasts such as heifers, calves and lambs. But allowance must also be made for possible misapprehension of the law by local tax gatherers relying on simplified summaries of it.¹⁴ The tools of a man's trade were customarily exempt: for the husbandman this clearly embraced plows and other gear. No doubt a case could also be made for extending the concession to the plow oxen, and, to judge from the slender evidence of two townships only, this could have been the regular practice in Desborough hundred. Carts were infrequently listed, and household ignored more often than not, though probably with no more than a marginal effect on most assessments.

There is no final answer. The alleged contents of most demesne farms look suspiciously like blatant under-assessment of landowners, unless of course they had already turned over extensively to a rentier existence. Smaller assessments can less easily be evaluated. Proportionately they appear to have declined less, but at the same time the ratios of corn, non-working cattle and pigs stand finely balanced at levels which permit them to be used with equal justice as *prima facie* evidence of evasion and a stark re-

11. G. Duby, 'Medieval Agriculture, 900-1500', in C.M. Cipolla, ed. *The Fontana Economic History of Europe, i, The Middle Ages* (1972), p. 182; B.F. Harvey, 'The Population Trend in England between 1300 and 1348', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th ser. xvi (1966), 23, 42..

12. H.S. Lucas, 'The Great European Famine of 1315, 1316 and 1317', in *Essays in Economic History*, ed. E.M. Carus-Wilson, ii (1962), 57.

13. Slicher van Bath, *loc. cit.* D. Roden notes that even in the more pastoral Chilterns there was very little permanent grass, even on demesne farms, and that waste grass was poor: 'Demesne Farming in the Chiltern Hills', *Agricultural History Review*, xvii (1969), 11-12.

14. This problem is examined by Salzman, *op. cit.* p.6.

minder of the progressive impoverishment of the peasantry.¹⁵ There remains only the reason why these lists were remitted to the Exchequer. None was in fact given, but although there was ample precedent, we may well surmise that on this occasion at least the purpose was to furnish unequivocal evidence of the inability of the people to pay any more.

II

The general character of agriculture may be judged from the relative value of each item of stock.¹⁶ The arable side embraces corn together with the horses and oxen (the capital) used to produce it. Other livestock — cows, young cattle, pigs and sheep — count as consumables, or consumer durables, and constitute the pastoral element. The total value of crops represents one year's produce of the soil, but since livestock go on from season to season it would be incorrect to reckon its full stated value. Adopting Postan's estimate of a life of five years for beasts of burden and three for others,¹⁷ I have divided their values by five and three, respectively.

TABLE 3: Value of Stock, in shillings

Area	1. Grain	2. Horses and oxen	3. Total	4. Consumable animals	5. Ratio 3:4
Ashendon	2489	341	2830	543	5.2 : 1
Buckingham	1375	189	1564	365	4.3 : 1
Newport	1009	64	1073	378	2.8 : 1
Cottesloe	2272	364	2636	952	2.8 : 1
Chiltern*	943	107	1050	733	1.4 : 1

*Ellesborough (Aylesbury hundreds) counts as a Chiltern parish on account of its location astride the Chiltern scarp.

The bias towards arable husbandry on the western side of the Vale country is clearly marked in the hundreds of Ashendon and Buckingham. The sheep population was noticeably small, as might be expected on land that is generally low lying and damp, and inevitably in those days ill-drained. Newport and Cottesloe hundreds, tending to be higher and dryer, were more hospitable to sheep. On the Chiltern uplands, where sheep grazed in large numbers, the pastoral and arable elements were almost exactly balanced.

Essentially, most medieval farming was mixed, with the two branches interdependent. Crops were grown for subsistence, and to a limited extent for the market, on ground manured by livestock.¹⁸ Although it is necessary to make do with data from only 33 out of 187 townships it can safely be assumed that they form a reasonably representative sample of the range of conditions obtaining in Buckinghamshire at the time. Comparable conditions prevailed in Suffolk where, in the 'fielding' (pastoral) villages, the ratio of arable to livestock was approximately 2.5 : 1, while in the more obviously arable 'woodland' ones it reached 4.75 : 1.

15. See J.Z. Titow, 'Differences Between Manors and the Effects on the Peasantry in the Thirteenth Century', *Ag. Hist. Rev.* x (1962), 1-13; A.N. May, 'An Index of Thirteenth Century Peasant Impoverishment? Manor Court Fines', *Econ. Hist. Rev.* 2nd ser. xxvi (1973), 389-402; G. Duby in *Fontana Economic History of Europe*, i. 200, 209.

16. The fact that they were conventional, well below market prices (Willard, *op. cit.* pp. 129-41), need not impair their usefulness as indices.

17. *Op. cit.* in *Econ. Hist. Rev.* 2nd ser. xv, 241.

18. *Ibid.* Postan emphasises this essential characteristic of Wiltshire downland farming even though the record of grain is too limited to permit a full comparison to be made.

Given that the inventories of grain were what was retained for home consumption, they compare poorly with what 18th-century social investigators reckoned a farm labourer's family consumed in breadcorn — six bushels per head per year; if we estimate the average husbandman's family as five persons — probably it was slightly smaller¹⁹ — the average stock of grain ought to have been some thirty bushels. By any reckoning the average in most villages in this particular year can barely have sufficed to satisfy demand. Moreover, drage and barley cannot be counted as breadcorn as its main purpose was for malting. Much necessarily hinges on the precise timing of the assessment, whether executed at Michaelmas immediately following the harvest — the grant having been voted on 9 September — or closer to Christmas after stock had started to run down.²⁰ But on this occasion the quality of the harvest proved the deciding factor. In four villages (see Table 2) the average of 23 bushels per taxpayer was 38 percent down on the 37 bushels of 1327. Broader comparison is limited by the small number of returns available for the earlier year, but nonetheless there is still unambiguous evidence of a serious shortfall, some 22 percent overall.

TABLE 4: Average grain stocks (Bushels) for all places

Year	Taxpayers	Grain	Average
1327	221	8098	37
1332	704	10283	29

The average values assigned to grains in the assessments confirm the difference between the two years.

TABLE 5: Average values (pence) of grains

Year	Wheat	Barley	Oats	Peas/beans	Drage
1327	33.8	25.5	18.8	29.7	22.1
1332	43.3	37.0	19.1	33.8	34.1

The fluctuations in the sensitive prices of wheat and barley are unmistakable even though they were well below current market rates. However, the movement is comparable, a rise of 28 percent as opposed to 34.5 percent in the Exeter wheat series. The data for barley is extremely limited, but the movement in drage may reflect that of barley which was its constant constituent.

III

The crops most generally cultivated were wheat, drage, and beans to which pease were a less popular alternative. Oats were also widely grown but less consistently. Barley ranked very much as a secondary crop, the great bulk of it coming from just three parishes. The textbook three-field succession of wheat-barley-fallow was not employed except at Whitchurch in 1327. In practice rotations were always far more elastic.²¹

19. Cf. J.T. Krause, 'The Medieval Household: Large or Small?', *Econ. Hist. Rev.* 2nd ser. ix (1950), 420-32.

20. *Rotuli Parliamentorum*, ii, 66. Willard, *op. cit.* pp. 82, 18506, assumes grain stocks to be as of Michaelmas, but considers that collection regularly dragged on into the next year thanks to the dilatoriness of the officials. The Incipit of the Sussex roll — the Bucks one is missing — says merely: 'to be assessed and collected in the sixth year of Edward III' which ended on 24 January 1333; the roll was returned to the Exchequer in May 1333: *Sussex Record Society*, x, 225, 334.

21. Postan, *The Medieval Economy and Society*, p. 85.

Wheat grew everywhere, forming the largest crop in two out of three places, and since its chief use was for payment of rent and other dues it must have occupied the greatest acreage. Elsewhere it almost always ran second to drage, though only by a small margin in several villages. In the Ashendon hundreds its lead over all other crops was very marked. Although it is something of a commonplace that peasants grew other crops for their own subsistence,²² in Buckinghamshire at least they must have eaten a good deal of wheaten bread. Rye was certainly not greatly cultivated, and then almost entirely in a limited area near Linslade where there was correspondingly little wheat. In Cublington there was more rye than wheat, though at Soulbury the situation was reversed. A very small quantity was grown by two farmers at Ellesborough on the edge of the Chilterns.

Maslin — wheat mixed with rye²³ — attracted relatively few farmers, mostly in the Chilterns where it was the largest crop at Medmenham and was prominent in one or two other places. In the Vale it was negligible.

Cultivation of barley was sporadic. In the small township of Kingsey it was the principal crop in both years; it equalled wheat at Whitchurch in 1327, but in 1332 it must have failed. Drage, a mixture of barley with oats and/or pease was clearly the local source of malt, and hence ale,²⁴ easily ranking second to wheat almost everywhere. Kingsey, the principal source of barley, Cublington and Quainton were the only villages where none was grown in 1332.

The popularity of oats varied greatly. None at all appears in the returns from as many as nine places, very little in several more. In general it was neglected in the northern Newport hundreds, while conversely it was easily the largest single crop on the light Chiltern soils.

Except in the Chilterns legumes were widely grown,²⁵ usually in quantity, though not always regularly. While moderate amounts of both pease and beans were harvested at Doddershall in 1332, wheat and oats had been the only crops in 1327; conversely there was very little at Linslade in 1327 and none whatever in 1332. In Ashendon and Cottesloe beans were preferred, but northwards they were progressively displaced by pease. 'Pulse', which reads rather like an alternative to the common entry 'pease and beans', occurs in a few places, notably Weston Turville in 1327. It could include vetches, but these would have been cultivated for fodder only and thus more appropriately comprehended in the category 'hay and fodder', other than which only food for human consumption ranked for assessment. Pease and beans provided a valuable source of protein, indeed almost the only one at times since meat, even bacon, must have been an exceedingly rare dish on the husbandman's table.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 123.

23. I have interpreted a few entries 'wheat and rye' as meaning maslin.

24. Roden, *op. cit.* p. 4. Oats were also malted: C. Parain in *Cambridge Economic History of Europe*, ed. M.M. Postan, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, 1966), I, 162.

25. Roden, *loc. cit.*, found that they were common on Chiltern demesne farms.

This widespread cultivation of legumes should dispose of any lingering belief that agriculture centered exclusively on cereals, with fallowing every second or third year to restore the soil.²⁶ With animal manure desperately inadequate it is virtually certain that fertility declined to a point at which the impoverished soil could barely support the population. That this happened, especially on peasant holdings confined to poorer land and carrying little livestock, is well attested,²⁷ but the inference that nothing was attempted to arrest, or at least retard, deterioration is open to challenge.

Pease and beans were sown on the fallow, largely replacing this course in the rotation; the question is, were they intentionally used as a cleaning crop?²⁸ The Buckinghamshire peasant regularly varied his fallow with them, primarily, no doubt, to feed his family, and possibly his animals too, perhaps oblivious, or at best only half aware of their property of restoring nitrogen to the soil. The effect was the same; whether by accident or design the fertility of the land did not go entirely uncared for. It is tempting to carry speculation a stage further and suggest that the paucity of livestock went hand in hand with legume cultivation on peasant holdings, with periodical reversion to bare fallow, as must have occurred at Doddershall in 1327 when only cereals were recorded. Even though the practice was not to be theorised until the 18th century it is hard to believe that earlier farmers were completely blind to the subsequent improvement in cereal yields. It is all too easy to equate unsophistication with ignorance: medieval peasants may have been poor and downtrodden, they were certainly not stupid. On Chiltern farms, with their much denser animal population, sheep and cereal husbandry was clearly practised, rendering catch crops superfluous. Until the agricultural revolution brought new techniques this was the preferred system except on land that was too damp for sheep. Certainly, compared with Chiltern farmers, the peasants of the Ashendon hundreds combined the largest quantities of pulses – 27.5 percent of their stocks – with the fewest sheep, an average of 3.7 per man. Nevertheless, it would be premature to generalise before all factors have been ascertained: at 4.6 per man sheep were not much more numerous in the Buckingham hundreds, but the percentage of legumes was less than half as much.

IV

If the raising of crops was the prime object of husbandry, livestock must be viewed from the standpoint of its place in this scheme.

First in importance came the plow team, but what does this mean? Only three men, all naturally lords of manors and demesne farmers, possessed a full team of eight oxen; a fourth who owned seven had perhaps lost one in the murrain that wiped out John Pulteney's. Not a few gentlemen owned no more than a couple. As for the peasants, the sprinkling who owned from two to six beasts were outnumbered many times by those with only one, while the great majority had none at all. Not one was recorded in

26. Pease were also the main crop in 16th century Leicestershire: W.G. Hoskins, *Essays in Leicestershire History* (Liverpool, 1951), p. 16.

27. Postan, *Medieval Society and Economy*, pp. 57-71.

28. *Ibid.* pp. 51-2. It is singular that the definitive *Agrarian History of England and Wales*, vol. iv, 1500-1640, ed. J. Thirsk (Cambridge, 1967) nowhere considers the use of legumes as a cleaning crop, even in a period of considerable progress.

Medmenham and Wycombe. In all there were only five villages where most farmers boasted an ox; more typically there would be not more than one or two in the whole place. Horses were even rarer, recorded in less than half the townships. One pair of 'plow horses' was specified at Beachampton, another at Hardwick; cart horses were rather more common, mares still more so. Nearly every taxpayer, however, owned an aver. This archaic term customarily indicated any draught animal other than a member of a plow team but the fact that at Turweston it seems to have been completely replaced by 'mare', also that an aver's foal was listed at Linslade, confirms that locally it meant some sort of horse.

This modest tally of horses and oxen may well be comprehensive. Co-operative teams were the basis of peasant cultivation and determined the social organisation, the concentration of the people in tightly knit village communities throughout the corn producing regions. However, the large number of people without regular plow animals raises the possibility of contract work. Several examples of ox owners who held very small stocks of food give it the appearance of a well established occupation. One of these was actually a woman – Margaret Daumery of Thornborough who had four oxen and not a bushel of corn. As she was unlikely to have driven them herself, she must either have employed a man or rented them out. Certainly the paucity of animals in most villages made teams of eight very much the exception; two yokes, even one, must have been the rule. The many demesnes on which there were four oxen, in contrast with the handful where there were eight, would appear to settle the matter. Peasants can often have had no choice but to harness avers to the plow, perhaps even young cattle as well, provided that they had any, in short teams composed of whatever miscellaneous stock happened to be available may have been no uncommon sight.

Save in a few favoured townships plowing had to be done with the most wretched means, resulting probably in dependence on implements that were too light for the stronger clays, or alternatively attempting to use the heavy carruca with a team that was too feeble to make it bite into the soil. Either way only the top layer could be turned, and shallow plowing was one possible cause of low yields.²⁹ Also we must remember that many smallholders escaped taxation. Men whose goods totalled less than 10s can hardly have possessed any animals at all, certainly not oxen, which cost not less than 6s 8d apiece, possibly not even a low grade aver which might be had for two or three shillings. Many of the poorest, occupying minute plots, may scarcely have risen above hoe cultivation – a potato economy without potatoes! Finally there is always the possibility that in a society in which labour was plentiful, cheap, and almost certainly under-employed, the sight of men dragging plows and harrows may not have been all that strange.

Essential though they were to cereal cultivation, sheep were far from plentiful outside the Chilterns. In the western villages especially most peasants owned none at all. Nor indeed did the demesnes of Ashendon and Ludgershall, unless their absence was

29. Postan, *Medieval Economy and Society*, p. 62.

temporary. In contrast, some men owned nothing but sheep, always assuming that they were the real owners. Geoffrey le boue, taxed on a flock of 45 head which outnumbered the combined stock of the rest of the Chearsley people, is described as shepherd to Isabel Carbonel, lady of the manor. Others might have tended common flocks. The Creslow men John Wylegod and Henry Mauncel kept 50 and 80 head, respectively, but as several other men also owned a few head apiece the notion looks somewhat fanciful; specialised graziers could have existed – three Maids Moreton men, for instance, who owned 30, 40 and 46 head, respectively.

With so many peasants keeping no sheep at all, actual flocks tended to be bigger than the simple ratios would imply. In Ashendon hundreds the raw distribution of 3.2 per person conceals the fact that half the 34 flocks contained ten or more head. In Cottesloe the median was eight, but ownership there was more widely diffused. In the Chilterns three exceptional flocks of a hundred or more resulted in the individual ratio, 20.7, actually exceeding the median which was 18; for the most part, however, fifty was the maximum. In the Vale the biggest was 82 at Cheddington.

Most entries refer simply to sheep. Lambs were enumerated occasionally, but most of the time it is impossible to determine whether they were ignored, or if ewe and lamb counted as a single unit, so that the true total would have been higher than what was recorded. Only in Ellesborough and Taplow and Penn was anything resembling a comprehensive range of stock (lambs included) detailed, and even then some of the particulars are bizarre. Three men allegedly kept nothing but lambs; one Ellesborough man had 20 rams out of 62 head, another ten out of 28 – none were recorded anywhere else.

Pigs are soon disposed of. Although the overall ratio of 0.3 per person was the same as in Wiltshire, it embraces a range extending from the insignificant one tenth per person in northern districts to 0.7 in the Chilterns. But even in Ashendon, the best stocked village, the ratio of 1.1 fell short of the the Suffolk mean of 1.4, and it was offset by those places which had scarcely any pigs at all.

It is difficult to account for this shortage, especially in the Chiltern beechwoods at a time when pig keeping was a characteristic forest occupation.³⁰ It could be that some substantial number lay concealed below the exemption limit and that the lower threshold in 1283 accounted for the higher density in Suffolk. Yet pigs were more frequently found on larger farms: the high ratio in one part of Sussex is clearly produced by demesne herds. The later ubiquity of the labourer's pig depended on the cultivation of the potato to nourish it.³¹ At this period the small man may also have been deterred by the problem of control, of preventing them rooting in precious patches of unfenced cultivated ground. In any case, even allowing for several Medmenham people who kept 'pigs for the larder', pork does not look to have been a popular dish.

30. Roden, in *Ag. Hist. Rev.* xvii, 14, dealing chiefly with demesne farms, states that pigs were numerous in the Chiltern where pannage was abundant, although there were none at Penn in 1372-3. He also (p. 22) suggests that pigs were common among the tenantry.

31. A.M. Everitt, 'Farm Labourers', in *Agrarian History of England and Wales*, iv, 416.

Many farmers kept a cow, but calves were even scarcer than lambs, twenty in all being listed in a total of six villages. Perhaps it was only at Emberton that a systematic count was attempted: the tally of nine calves to twenty cows may indicate a normal proportion and enable us to rectify the omission elsewhere. Nonetheless, since feed was certain to have been scarce it is legitimate to speculate that calves were sold off as early as possible, whether for veal or for rearing in specialised grazing districts, with the added advantage of retaining the cow's milk. In this instance it is also possible that young animals were consciously overlooked with a view to further emphasising the poverty of the farming community. Perhaps more to the point, the assessments may have been deliberately postponed until after the annual Martinmas slaughter of inessential stock.

If inability to feed them was a major cause of the general paucity of young beasts, it may be less than the whole truth. Heifers seem far too few to provide the succeeding generation of cows. Inclusive of odd single entries they are found at ten places only in 1332, and once again the figures are baffling. At Ravenstone they outnumbered cows by twenty to six, while at Kingsey and Linslade the five-year interval between the two censuses hardly justifies the seemingly irrational fluctuations in contrast with the relatively constant numbers of cows:

TABLE 6: Composition of Cattle

Village	1327		1332		
	Cows	heifers	Cows	heifers	calves
Kingsey	11	8	12	-	2
Linslade	12	3	15	10	2

In principle bull calves, as future oxen, enjoyed a better chance of survival. Steers were widely distributed, recorded in considerable numbers in many villages. Bullocks were much less common: wherever the term occurs steers are also listed, but there is no hint of any real distinction between them. Once again we notice them at, for instance, Linslade in 1327, but not five years later. There were none at Leckhampstead, while Medmenham, incredibly, had no cattle of any description.

Bulls receive two mentions only, including a couple at Over Winchendon in 1327 where they belonged to persons who had no other cattle of any description. Their absence from inventories of lay owned livestock is not, however, remarkable since the village priest was commonly expected to keep one of these otherwise unproductive animals for the benefit of his parishioners.³²

Unless the figures are wholly arbitrary no conclusion is possible other than that the livestock of most small and middling farmers was seriously inadequate. A sprinkling of calves and lambs is the most we can conjecturally restore to the lists. An ox, value 8s - 10s nearly always ruled out a cow, worth usually 6s 8d, and vice versa, while several sheep at a shilling a nob could exclude both. And, finally, many smallholders could run to nothing better than an aver, the minimum requirement for working a little plot of arable land.

32. A.G. Dickens, *The English Reformation* (rev. ed. 1967), p. 75.

V

The ultimate question must be, how did the ordinary farmer manage? In the first place his resources were slender. Three-quarters of the taxpayers owned assets totalling less than 35s, a figure which sharply demarcates the line dividing them from the more prosperous peasants. In the Vale hundred the median assessment occurred between 20s and 25s, though it was slightly higher for the county as a whole, including the Chiltern hundreds where the local figure exceeded 30s, rising even higher in Burnham and Desborough where large farms were normal.³³ The median of the detailed personal assessments, however, works out at precisely 22s 6d which provides a worthwhile sample of sixteen.

This average, or typical peasant almost certainly owned one aver, and possible an ox as well, though the odds against it were two to one. There was an even chance that he owned a cow, as also a young beast – a steer rather than a heifer. The three men who owned both an ox and a cow had much less corn than the others, 8-12 bushels, compared with the usual 16-24, chiefly wheat and drage. On any reckoning this could hardly justify the expense of the ox, and it could be that these particular men's farms were actually on the large side, but that the crops had largely failed. At the same time such men may have lived by their animals, perhaps making up for a lack of arable acres by energetic, even illicit exploitation of common grazing rights, selling butter and cheese, and doing the plowing for other farmers. In marked contrast Matilda Howes of Kingsey had 40 bushels of produce, but only a single bullock for livestock. Sheep were unlikely to be kept except in a district where they were numerous anyway: in Cottesloe the odds slightly favoured our man doing so. Similarly, if pigs were popular in the village there was a one in four chance that he owned one; however, in general the incidence was somewhat less. Like most farmers he had a supply of hay and other fodder, worth in his case between one and three shillings: actual quantities were nowhere specified.

The only man who owned a cart was Roger Gerbray of Emberton. However, the listing was arbitrary, and in most parishes the taxers must have classed them as implements exempt from taxation. In Kingsey a third of the inhabitants were owners; six vehicles were listed, of which four remained in the same families throughout. Nevertheless, there were unaccountable inconsistencies. Richard de Upton didn't have one in 1327 when he was the richest man apart from the lord, but he did five years later when his assessment had been cut by a third. His place in the hierarchy was now held by Richard Godlake who likewise had no cart, even though John Geydlac (Presumably his father) had owned one previously.³⁴ Not surprisingly the evidence shows that owners were likely to be men of at least average wealth – landlords, demesne farmers and the richer peasants, although in the poor village of Ludgershall this last category covered men assessed at less than a pound. How widely carts were diffused is impossible to determine, but the infrequent references may in fact be a reminder of the primitive state of peasant farming. Even in its simplest form the wheel is a relatively sophisticated device.

33. The number of assessments in the range 35-39s is just a third of the number at 30-34s. These figures are based on all extant assessments, including those which provide no details.

34. It could of course have passed unrecorded to Alice Godlake, John's widow.

Some type of sled may often have served for moving things around the farm, while on longer trips the size of load can rarely have made a vehicle necessary. In after years Clement Paston, an up and coming farmer, was accustomed to ride to the mill perched astride the single sack of corn that was all he had for grinding at a time.³⁵

Domestic effects were similarly treated, so that only six of the sixteen assessments included them. When they were not ignored altogether a small and apparently random selection was given. Arguably the sample could be enlarged to bring in assessments of about 21s since the average value of household stuff works out at slightly less than 2s, but this is speculative.³⁶ Most 22s 6d men may indeed have owned nothing worthy of notice, for in the majority of cases it was a single item only that was taxed: in Creslow, uniformly, a brass pot, a relatively costly utensil which many peasants might not have been able to afford. With clothes and food stored in the house exempt, the few sticks of rude furniture and simple pieces of pottery were scarcely worthy of valuation.

The tendency for livestock and grain to be mutually exclusive is well marked among the poorest taxpayers, 35 percent of whom were assessed at less than a pound. Fifteen men on the minimum of ten shillings held a total of 165 bushels of corn. Four in fact had none at all and were probably artisans who kept animals only; the trades of Gregory the carpenter of Wotton Underwood and Adam the smith of Wingrave are unmistakable. As a result the remaining eleven averaged little less than the minimum stock of the median taxpayers. What these men lacked was animals. Two who owned three quarters of grain apiece had no livestock at all, a third had just a pig. Of the four who owned cows only one held any corn, a negligible two bushels of beans and one of wheat.

The condition of taxpayers in the range 25s - 35s, differed comparatively little in most essentials, and tended to confirm the rough guideline that it was exceptional for the peasant to be well provided with both foodstuffs and livestock. In Mursley, to take a single case, five out of the six men who were rated at 30s had approximately three quarters of grain apiece, i.e. they were near or below the danger line. The sixth owned as much as 48 bushels, but to balance this he had no sheep, in contrast to the others who owned eight or twelve head each: at a shilling a head these just about made up the difference. Naturally, men of this rank did tend to have rather more corn than the average, but on the whole they were distinguished more by the numbers and values of their animals. And since in many villages a rough equality in the size of holdings seems implicit in the fact that inventories of corn conformed to something of a norm, it would appear that these were the more successful members of the community. The bigger farms of the Chilterns did not depart significantly from the rule. Although the local median was higher – as much as 37s 10d – it depended largely on sheep. John le Wyte

35. The Paston Letters, ed. J. Gairdner (1901), Introduction, p. xxxv.

36. Local variants in the prices of corns, chiefly of wheat, make the median an approximation. However, the effect can only affect the total assessment by a shilling or so either way, which is not sufficient to make any significant difference to the actual possessions of the men in question.

and John atte Heche of Wycombe owned 22 and 14 respectively, and Joan atte Penn of Penn 19. Two indeed were amply provided with grain, but Wyte, who owned the most sheep, had only eight bushels of maslin and four of oats. He also owned a mare, the others had a cow each, and all three had an aver.

Nothing less than an assessment approaching 50s could cover a realistic minimum stock for a balanced farm which might include an aver, an ox, a cow and a young beast, half a dozen or so sheep, and two quarters each of wheat, beans and drage, with some allowance for corn and fodder. The lower corn prices of a more plentiful year than 1332 would reduce the total by a few shillings, the addition of a pig and a brass pot would similarly increase it. Such a farm would almost certainly fall within the range 45s - 55s, a level of wealth which excluded eighty percent of taxpayers, including nearly all peasants. Clearly marked off from the mass of the peasantry, people assessed between £2 and £3 pose something of a problem, for it is only above this level that the gentry – lords of manors, demesne farmers and the like – can be clearly identified. They seem to represent a medley of minor gentlemen, franklins (or small independent proprietors) and the upper crust of the peasantry, the tenants of comparatively large farms.

Without direct evidence it is hazardous to venture an estimate of the acreages cultivated by any of these people. The problem is complicated by the question of personal status, which, though immaterial for most fiscal purposes, possessed wide economic implications. Villein holdings were burdened with much heavier monetary payments to their lords than free tenements; where labour services had been commuted for cash, dues were larger than where they had not, and they were not necessarily exacted at uniform rates. The payments rendered from a servile holding of middling size – the half yardland, or 10-15 acres – tended to average as much as half the value of the gross output, or even more, while if the tenant performed the full schedule of works he would almost certainly have had to hire a man, either as a substitute or to tend his own land.³⁷

With the assistance of contemporary treatises supplemented by the findings of modern research, we can, however, attempt to construct a model. Allowing for tithes and seed saved for the next sowing at the rates recommended by Walter of Henley, 1.25 acres would be required for a net yield of one quarter of wheat, barley or beans, and 1.0 for oats or drage. A family of five would need at least thirty bushels of food corn, exclusive of malting grain, while additional quantities, mainly of the better grains, would have had to be grown to discharge all liabilities in the nature of rent: it is assumed that week works have been commuted.

37. Postan, *Medieval Economy and Society*, pp. 124-6.

MODEL OF A PEASANT FARM

Crop	Net yield bushels	Acres	Value s d
Subsistence			
Wheat	16	2.5	6 8
Drage	16	2.0	5 0
Beans	<u>16</u>	<u>2.5</u>	<u>6 0</u>
	48	7.0	17 8
Rent			
Wheat	24	3.75	10 0
Drage	<u>24</u>	<u>3.0</u>	<u>7 6</u>
	48	6.75	17 6
Totals	96	13.75	35 2
Summary of acreage			
Cereals		11.25	
Fallow (beans (bare, say	2.50 <u>3.00</u>		
		5.50	
Total		<u>16.75</u>	

Estimates of rent and the quantity of drage needed for home consumption are unavoidably rough; the values are the conventional ones used for tax purposes, and naturally a harvest of average quality has to be assumed. The supposed rates of yield may well be optimistic, given that the tenantry generally occupied poorer ground than the demesnes to which most records relate. Yields would also have been affected by different types of soil.

Speculative though it is this model bears an uncanny resemblance to the half yardland of 10-15 acres generally assumed to have formed the standard holding of the villager of the middle rank. This acreage could provide minimum subsistence for a family of four or five in average conditions. Ten acres, or slightly less was the irreducible minimum, a holding which Kosminsky contends was capable of yielding a bare subsistence only in years when the harvest was good.³⁸ The effect of these factors would appear to be to establish beyond question the precarious condition of the median peasant taxpayer in Buckinghamshire – a ten acre man rather than a fifteen acre one. The evidence points to a deficient harvest in 1332, but since we do not know what constituted an average one we cannot realistically estimate the shortfall. On the one hand the Exeter wheat price series was less than 17 percent above the average for the eleven years 1327-37, yet on the other, it was 35 percent higher than the 1327 price, and the Phelps Brown & Hopkins 'basket of consumables' stood 36½ percent higher.³⁹ Allowing for a 25 percent shortfall – and in terms of local tax values the price was 28 percent up – an average harvest would leave our man with no more than 32 bushels of foodstuffs of all kinds to see his family through to the next. Other possible factors governing the record of produce, for example soil exhaustion or delay in completing the assessments, point to a somewhat larger acreage, although conversely a clear tendency for holdings to get smaller has also been observed in some district during the 13th century.⁴⁰ It is important to remember that most conclusions about peasant conditions have been drawn

38. *Ibid.* pp. 127-31; S. Pollard & D.W. Crossley, *The Wealth of Britain, 1085-1966* (1966), p. 29.

39. E.H. Phelps Brown & S.V. Hopkins, 'Seven Centuries of the Prices of Consumables', *Economica*, n.s. xxiii (1956), 311.

40. J.Z. Titow in *Ag. Hist. Rev.* x, 1-13.

from 13th-century sources, at least one generation, sometimes two or more, before 1332, with the result that comparisons necessarily suffer. If, nonetheless, we accept the evidence at face value, the situation was unmistakably deteriorating.

Classification of the peasantry on the basis of the amount of land they held sheds further light on the problem. Subject to a great variety of local conditions, about one third (33 percent) were middling men occupying half yardlands; 22 per cent who held a whole yardland or more formed the upper stratum, while no less than 45 per cent of them were smallholders managing on less than 10 acres.⁴¹ In Buckinghamshire taxpayers at less than 25s amounted to one half of the total number, confirming the suspicion that the median man on 22s 6d was little better than a smallholder. If we restrict the definition of peasant to assessments under £3 the situation in the Vale hundreds was that 42 per cent consisted of men worth less than 20s. The middling type perhaps corresponded with the 20s - 34s range which formed 43 percent of the total, while the top stratum, 35s - 59s came to 15 percent. The deficiency of sub-£1 assessments made the middling men appear to outnumber the smallholders, but once again comparison is imprecise since Postan's figures, drawn from manorial records, must include among the lowest class men who could not have reached the tax threshold. Our boundary between middle and upper men is arbitrary and quite possibly too high; a point just above 30s would bring the local proportions more into line with the general averages.

The conclusion must be that one man in three could, under ordinary conditions, just manage to sustain his family through the year but, having no room for fodder crops other than hay from the common meadow, could keep only as many animals as the shrinking common wastes could support, with the inevitable consequence that his ground never got anything like enough manure to keep it in good heart; indeed saving up for the purchase of stock must often have proved a well nigh insoluble problem. In a poor year the family simply went short, while starvation hovered over them as an ever present threat. A minimum livelihood could be reasonably assured only from something in the order of twenty acres, while (as H.S. Bennett has concluded) cultivation of fodder crops such as vetches, plus some marketable surplus, was scarcely practicable on less than a whole virgate of approximately thirty acres.⁴² On this reckoning only the topmost fifth of the peasantry — in Buckinghamshire perhaps not so many — enjoyed anything like security, let alone prosperity. Three out of four certainly owned possessions worth less than the 35s which roughly divided the upper peasantry from the rest.

The resultant standard of living can only be inferred in the most general terms. A mixture of cereals and beans must have formed the nucleus of cottage diet; possibly in Buckinghamshire more wheat was consumed than in some other districts. Vegetables must have bulked large even though the choice was fairly limited at that time, for the cultivation of tofts, or house plots, was intensive and probably used up most, if not all,

41. Postan, *loc. cit.*

42. H.S. Bennett, *Life on an English Manor* (Cambridge, 1937), p. 95.

of the farm yard manure.⁴³ As meat was virtually beyond the reach of most families, eggs must have provided most of their protein, supplemented by the occasional scrawny fowl. (Poultry did not come within the taxman's purview.) Could the truth be known, illicit flesh may not have been all that uncommon – rabbit, hare, even venison on occasion, for the game laws were probably enforced with savagery rather than efficiency. Finally, the wall of silence which obscures the life of the peasants rules out any estimate of their consumption of fish, which might have included both stockfish and locally caught freshwater varieties.

VI

In reaching a verdict on these returns the evidence relating to the landowning class must be treated with reserve, for it seems only too clear that they were undertaxed. At the same time it is not proved that the scale of their farming operations was seriously misrepresented, for these might have been contracting if the practice of letting off demesnes in smaller units was already a well established form of estate management.

The same cannot be said about the assessments of small farmers. If they were scaled down it was less obvious, and since such people could have claimed no special privileges there is a correspondingly strong assumption that their circumstances were more rigorously delineated. The intriguing side of them, as we have already observed, is that the lists of goods and chattels attributed to most individuals appear to be neither one thing nor the other – not quite convincing and certainly not contemptible. While it is inconceivable that any of them could have owned fewer animals or less grain than what was listed, there is no way of ascertaining whether in fact they owned more. The problem is perhaps more apparent than real. If assets were systematically understated the possibility of fraud cannot be ruled out, but then neither can poverty. If, however, the lists are authentic, they present a picture which conforms with, and bears out the theory of peasant impoverishment and an impending Malthusian crisis. Shortage of livestock – draught animals excepted – is explicable as the consequence of encroachment on the pastures by the plow. Deficiencies in food-stuffs reflect the cultivation on marginal land, inadequate manuring, and the enforced abandonment of worked-out soils. The immediate local context included a poor harvest, and a murrain which almost certainly left its traces on the assessments even where it was not alluded to.

Any concept of a flourishing peasant society would be difficult to substantiate. The *Nonarum Inquisitiones* of 1341 blamed the low yield of the tax in many villages on the amount of land that had gone out of cultivation, either as a result of soil exhaustion, as at Linslade and Thornborough, or because 'the parishioners were so impoverished that they were not able to till their lands as they should have done'. This was the excuse at Ilmer which, combined with Aston Sandford, could produce only a handful of middling or largish farmers fit to tax in 1332. Impoverishment left thirteen farms – the equivalent of two carrucates – untenanted at Cublington, and at Cheddington nine virgates which had reverted to the lord of the manor. The Ilmer return strongly implies that

43. Postan, *The Medieval Economy and Society*, p. 54.

many men were short of both plow animals and seed, especially, I suggest, the latter. Debility of the soil denotes the failure of marginal land, and in addition we may suspect that many holdings were too small to be successfully cultivated except under the most favourable conditions, that is, to produce both this year's subsistence and next year's seed. The probable story may have been somewhat along these lines: in a good year the small farmer hoped to be able to take some surplus wheat to market, and feed some of the oats and beans to his livestock, but in average seasons or worse almost everything he produced was needed to keep his family alive and, if possible, healthy. If the inhabitants of Long Crendon, Chearsley and Nether Winchendon had no wheat to fall back on, what can have become of them in 1341 when 'the wheat, beans, pease, oats and barley were sown late and failed because of the summer drought'?⁴⁴

If the state of affairs which emerges from this handful of assessments in any way resembled the actual condition of the better-off type of husbandman, the inability of the majority of the peasantry to qualify for taxation is sufficiently explained. It is entirely probable that population pressure had brought about not merely over-extension of the cultivated area, exacerbated by predatory tillage, but also the sub-division of holdings into uneconomic units.⁴⁵ The parallel with Ireland before the Famine of 1845 will not be overlooked; the consequence might well have been much the same had the Black Death not arrived first.

APPENDIX: Summary of Livestock and Grain

Hundred	Ashendon	Buckingham	Cottesloe	Newport	Chiltern
Township	11	6	9	3	4
Assessments	205	104	227	94	74
Horses	21	29	10		5
Avers	180	100	218	93	86
Oxen	126	67	127	5	8
Steers	58	22	70	33	43
Bullocks	14	6	9	8	24
Cows	97	64	108	42	48
Heifers	9	1	21	26	
Calves	3		4	9	4
Sheep	665	481	1542	397	1532
Pigs	79	13	63	12	49
Wheat	2050	1201	1938	852	634
Rye			460		24
Maslin	52		60		558
Barley	516	64	276		88
Oats	267	741	772	104	634
Drage	985	1130	1654	1070	471
Pease	188	186	204	460	
Beans	975	101	925		44
Pulse		181	52		

44. *Nonarum Inquisitiones* (Record Commission, 1807), pp. 326-40.

45. Partible inheritance was the rule in many parts of England and was also effectively practised in areas of primogeniture by means of peasant wills. In periods of land hunger peasants clung to family inheritance of holdings: R.J. Faith, 'Peasant Families and Inheritance Customs in Medieval England', *Ag. Hist. Rev.* xiv (1966), 77-96.