



3

THE LORD

EVERY VILLAGE HAD A LORD, BUT ONLY RARELY was he in residence. A resident lord was usually a petty knight who held only one manor, like Henry de Bray, lord of Harlestone (Northamptonshire), whose account book has survived. Henry had twenty-four tenants sharing his five hundred acres, contributing annually twelve pounds in cash rents, a pound of pepper, and eight fowls, and performing harvest services.¹ At the other end of the spectrum was the earl, count, abbot, or bishop, whose "honor" was composed of manors scattered over a quarter of England.

On the Continent such a magnate—a count of Champagne or Flanders—might rival kings in exercising political authority. In Norman England, where William the Conqueror and his successors monopolized political power, the great lords began as generals in an army of occupation, their military role softening over time into an economic one. A "tenant-in-chief" like the earl of Warenne, lord of scores of villages in a dozen counties, collected all kinds of rents and services at first- and second-hand without ever setting eyes on most of his sixty-five knight-tenants, hundreds of freeholders, and thousands of bondmen.² Between

THE LORD 45
the two extremes of Henry de Bray and the earl of Warenne were middling lords who held several manors and sometimes traveled around among them.

Besides great and small, lords divided more definably into lay and ecclesiastical. The abbot of Ramsey, whose twenty-three villages included Elton and who held parts of many others, is a good example of the ecclesiastical lord, whose numbers had steadily increased since the Conquest. The old feudal theory of lordship as a link in the legal chain of authority running from serf to monarch had lost much of its substance. The original basis of the feudal hierarchy—military service owed to the crown—had dissipated, owing partly to the objections of knights and barons to service abroad, and partly to the complexity wrought by the accidents of inheritance. It was easier to extract a money payment than to induce an unwilling knight to serve, and money fees, with which soldiers could be hired and equipped, were easier to divide into fractions when a property owed a third or half of a knight's service.

To the village, such legal complications hardly mattered, any more than whether the lord was great or small, lay or ecclesiastical (or male or female, since abbesses, prioresses, widows, and heiresses held many manors). A village might be comfortably shared by two or more lords. Tysoe (Warwickshire) was divided among five different manors, belonging to Baron Stafford, his son, two priories, and the local Knights Templar.³ Often, however, as in the case of Elton, a village constituted a manor, and was one of several belonging to a single lord.

Whatever the technicalities, the lord was the lord, the consumer of the village surplus. The thirteenth-century manor was not a political or military enterprise but an economic one, with the lord its exploiter and beneficiary.

It already had a history. In the twelfth century, "farming," or leasing, the demesne or even the whole manor had been popular. An entrepreneur paid a fixed sum, assumed control of the day-to-day operation, and profited from the difference between the fee he paid and the revenues he collected. The farmer might be a local knight or rich peasant, or a businessman from a

nearby town. Sometimes the villagers themselves banded together in a consortium to farm their manor.⁴ One lord might farm another's land when geography made it more convenient. The abbot of Ramsey farmed King's Ripton, a crown manor lying next to Abbot's Ripton. The farm normally comprised land, animals, implements, personnel, labor services of the villeins, and even the fines levied in the manorial court. The farmer usually held the privilege of making land transfers to maintain production, as when a tenant died without a direct heir.⁵

Beginning about 1200, the farming of manors went out of style. The thirteenth century was an age of population expansion, and as town markets for agricultural products grew, more and more lords decided to exploit their manors directly. Some manors continued to be farmed (as was Elton at intervals), but the trend was toward direct and active estate management. To increase demesne production, villeins were often saddled with new labor services, or resaddled with old ones from which they had bought exemption. But the tenants, including the villeins, also began selling in the market. The pendulum swung back, with the lords accepting higher rents and other money payments and using the cash to hire labor to work the demesne. It was an era of prosperity for all, but especially for the lords, who saw their incomes, especially their cash incomes, rise rapidly.

They had no trouble spending them. By his nature the feudal lord was a dedicated consumer. His social status imposed a life-style of conspicuous consumption, which in the Middle Ages meant mainly consumption of food and drink. The lord was "the man who could always eat as much as he wished," says Georges Duby, and also "the man who provided others with food," and was consequently admired for his openhandedness. The very yardstick of his prestige was the number of people he fed: staff, armed retainers, labor force, guests.⁶

The abbot of Ramsey's requirements from his manors included grain, beef, flour, bread, malt for ale, fodder, lard, beans, butter, bacon, honey, lambs, poultry, eggs, herrings, and cheese. Like other lords he also received cash to make the many purchases outside the estate that were needed to keep his household

going: horses, cloth, coverlets, hangings, robes, candlesticks, plate.

Thus as consumer the lord needed revenues both in kind and in cash. As a consumer, he also required services, especially carrying services, to bring the produce from his manors to his castle or monastery. He needed even more services in his other economic capacity, that of producer. Here disparity existed not only among greater and lesser lords, but among their manors. Some were large, some small, some contained much demesne land, some little (a few none). Elton's thirteen hides were probably close to average, as was also its proportion of about one quarter demesne land. The precise size of the demesne was never regarded as of great moment. Extents for the Ramsey manors of Warboys and Holywell state disarmingly, "The demesne of this manor consists of many furlongs, but it is not known how many acres are contained in them."⁷ The acre itself varied erratically even among manors of the same estate.* On Ramsey manors the hide ranged from four virgates to seven, the virgate from fifteen to thirty-two acres, and the size of the acre is uncertain.⁸

Demesne land might lie in a compact parcel, separate from the villagers' fields, or it might, as it evidently did in Elton, lie scattered in strips like those of the tenants with which it was intermingled.

Where the demesne was large, a large labor force was needed, usually meaning that a substantial proportion of the tenants were villeins owing week-work. Where the demesne was small, most of the tenants were likely to be free, or if unfree, paying a money rent rather than rendering work services.

To his economic roles as consumer, producer, and landlord, the lord added certain others. He had an important, centuries-old judicial function, his manor courts (hallmotes) dealing in a range of civil and criminal cases that provided him with fines,

*Conversion among variant acres was none too easy for medieval mathematics, which lacked plural fractions. The author of one treatise, attempting to express the quantity of one acre, three and nine sixteenths rods, gave it as "one acre and a half and a rod and a half and a sixteenth of a rod."

fees, and confiscations. In addition to dues exacted from his tenants on a variety of occasions—death, inheritance, marriage—the lord enjoyed the “ban,” a monopoly on certain activities, most notoriously on grinding everybody’s grain and baking everybody’s bread. The ban was resented and sometimes evaded, though rigorously enforced by the manor court. So were the lord’s other privileges, such as folding all the village sheep so that their manure could improve his demesne. In Elton in 1306 Richard Hubert and John Wrau were fined because they had “refused to allow [their] sheep to be in the lord’s fold.”⁹ The same offense brought Geoffrey Shoemaker and Ralph Attwych penalties of sixpence each in 1312, and in 1331 nine villagers were fined for the infraction, in addition to Robert le Ward, who was penalized for harboring the flock of one of his neighbors “to the damage of the lord.”¹⁰ On the other hand, an animal that roamed too freely risked the lord’s privilege of “waif and stray”: “One female colt came an estray to the value of 18 pence, and it remains. Therefore let the reeve answer [let the reeve sell the colt and turn over the money].”¹¹ A villager who recovered his impounded animal without license was fined for “making a rescue,” as were Thomas Dyer in 1294 and Isabel daughter of Allota of Langetoft in 1312.¹²

One of the lord’s most valuable privileges aroused little resentment: his right to license markets and fairs, granted him by the king or sometimes by another overlord. The abbot of Ramsey’s fair of St. Ives was internationally famous, patronized by merchants from Flanders, France, Italy, and Scandinavia.¹³ Such fairs and markets enriched both lord and tenants, at least the luckier and more enterprising. (In 1279 the abbot of Ramsey contemplated a weekly market at Elton, and successfully negotiated an agreement for it with the abbot of Peterborough, but for some reason the project was never carried out.)¹⁴

Yet despite all his collections, enforcements, and impingements, perhaps the most arresting aspect of the lord’s relations with the villagers is the extent to which he left them alone. The once popular picture of the lord as “an omnipotent village tyrant” was, in George Homans’s words, “an unrealistic assump-

tion.”¹⁵ The medieval village actually lived and worked in a state of near autonomy. The open field system exacted a concert of the community at every point of the agricultural cycle: plowing, planting, growing, and harvesting. It is now virtually certain that the village achieved this concert by itself, with little help or leadership from outside. To Marc Bloch’s observation that there was never any “necessary opposition” between the lord’s manor and the peasants’ village, Homans added that “the manor could be strong only where the village was strong.”¹⁶ More recent scholarship has stressed the primacy of the village over the manor in historical development.

The lord could have little objection to village autonomy. What he wanted was the certainty of rents and dues from his tenants, the efficient operation of his demesne, and good prices for wool and grain. The popularity of treatises on estate management is an indicator of what occupied the minds of the great lords of the late thirteenth century. Walter of Henley’s *Husbandry* advised its noble readers to “look into your affairs often, and cause them to be reviewed, for those who serve you will thereby avoid the more to do wrong.”¹⁷ It was prudent counsel because there was no way for an absentee lord to supervise his scattered manors except through appointed officials.

These officials, in fact, constituted the lord’s material presence in the village. Three of them, the steward, the bailiff, and the reeve, were the key executives of the manorial system.

Originally a household servant or majordomo, the estate steward (sometimes called a seneschal) had in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries accomplished a progression paralleling that of Joseph, the Pharaoh’s cupbearer who became chief administrator of Egypt. On estate after estate the steward became the lord’s deputy, chief executive officer for the vast complex of lands, rights, and people. Bishop Robert Grosseteste (1175–1253), author of another widely read treatise, *Rules of St. Robert*, defined the steward’s duty as to guard and increase the lord’s property and stock “in an honest way,” and to defend his rights and franchises.¹⁸ A slightly later writer, the anonymous author of *Seneschaucie*, stipulated legal knowledge as a principal qualifica-

tion, since the steward now represented the lord in court both on and off the estate. His main function, however, was supervision of all the manors of the estate, which he did primarily by periodic visitation.¹⁹ It was hardly possible for a lord to be too careful in his choice, thought the author of *Seneschaucie*: "The seneschal of lands ought to be prudent and faithful and profitable, and he ought to know the law of the realm, to protect his lord's business and to instruct and give assurance to the bailiffs." It was useless to look for wisdom from "young men full of young blood and ready courage, who know little or nothing of business." Wiser to appoint from among those "ripe in years, who have seen much, and know much, and who . . . never were caught or convicted for treachery or any wrongdoing"²⁰—something that often befell officials, according to many sermons and satires.

Typically the steward of a great lay lord was a knight, that of a great ecclesiastical lord was a cleric. In the latter case, he was sometimes known as the cellarer, the traditional title of the person in charge of a monastery's food and drink supply. At least two stewards of Ramsey Abbey in the late thirteenth century were monks.²¹ Where a knight-steward received his compensation from his fee (land holding), a clerk-steward usually received his from his living, a parish church whose services were conducted by a vicar. Like most such officials, the steward of Ramsey Abbey, in company with his clerk, made periodic tours of the abbey's manors to review the management of the demesne. He did not, as many stewards did, himself audit the manorial accounts. This function was performed on Ramsey manors by a separate clerk of the account who made his own annual tour and who in a hand that reflected an excellent education recorded the details of the year's transactions. This clerk, who received a rather modest stipend of five shillings, thus provided an independent check for the abbot on the management of his estate.²²

The steward appeared in each village only at intervals, usually no more than two or three times a year, for a stay of seldom

more than two days. The lord's deputy on each manor throughout the year was the bailiff. Typically appointed on the steward's recommendation, the bailiff was socially a step nearer the villagers themselves, perhaps a younger son of the gentry or a member of a better-off peasant family. He could read and write; seigneurial as well as royal officialdom reflected the spread of lay literacy.²³

The bailiff combined the personae of chief law officer and business manager of the manor. He represented the lord both to the villagers and to strangers, thus acting as a protector of the village against men of another lord. His overriding concern, however, was management of the demesne, seeing that crops and stock were properly looked after and as little as possible stolen. He made sure the manor was supplied with what it needed from outside, at Elton a formidable list of purchases: millstones, iron, building timber and stone, firewood, nails, horseshoes, carts, cartwheels, axles, iron tires, salt, candles, parchment, cloth, utensils for dairy and kitchen, slate, thatch, quicklime, verdigris, quicksilver, tar, baskets, livestock, food. These were bought principally at nearby market towns, Oundle, Peterborough, St. Neots, and at the Stamford and St. Ives fairs. The thirteenth-century manor was anything but self-sufficient.

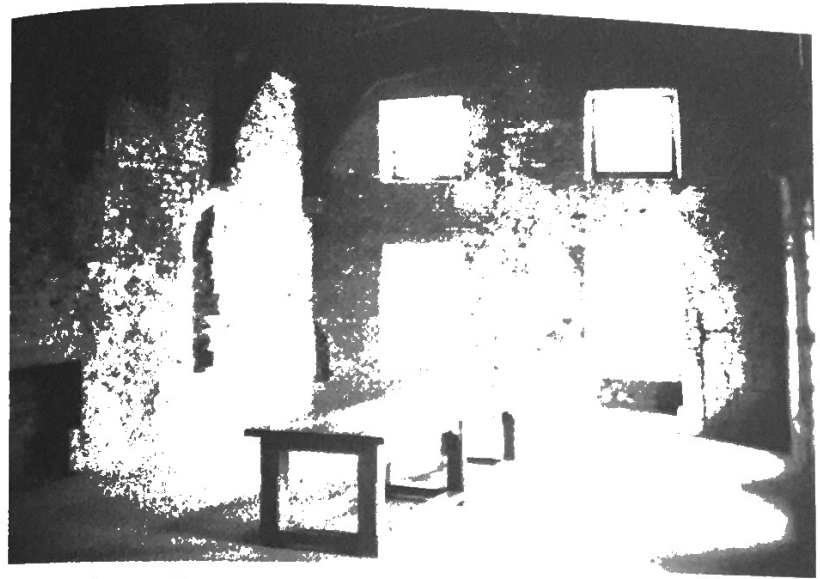
Walter of Henley, himself a former bailiff, advised lords and stewards against choosing from their circle of kindred and friends, and to make the selection strictly on merit.²⁴ The bailiff was paid an excellent cash salary plus perquisites, at Elton twenty shillings a year plus room and board, a fur coat, fodder for his horse, and twopence to make his Christmas oblation (offering). Two other officials, subordinate to the bailiff, are mentioned in the Elton accounts: the *claviger* or macebearer, and the serjeant, but both offices seem to have disappeared shortly after 1300.²⁵

The bailiff's residence was the lord's manor house. Set clearly apart from the village's collection of flimsy wattle-and-daub dwellings, the solid-stone, buttressed manor house contrasted with them in its ample interior space and at least comparative comfort. The main room, the hall, was the setting for the manorial court, but otherwise remained at the bailiff's disposal.

There he and his family took their meals along with such members of the manorial household as were entitled to board at the lord's table, either continuously or at certain times, plus occasional visitors. A stone bench at the southern end flanked a large rectangular limestone hearth. The room was furnished with a trestle table, wooden benches, and a "lavatorium," a metal washstand. A garderobe, or privy, adjoined. One end of the hall was partitioned off as a buttery and a larder. The sleeping chamber whose existence is attested by repairs to it and to its door may have been a room with a fireplace uncovered by the excavations of 1977. A chapel stood next to the manor house.²⁶ For the entertainment of guests "carrying the lord's writ," such as the steward or the clerk of the accounts, the bailiff kept track of his costs and submitted the expenses to Ramsey. Visitors included monks and officials on their way to the Stamford Fair, or to be ordained in Stamford; other ecclesiastics, among them the abbot's two brothers and the prior of St. Ives; and royal officials—the justice of the forest, the sheriff of Huntingdon,



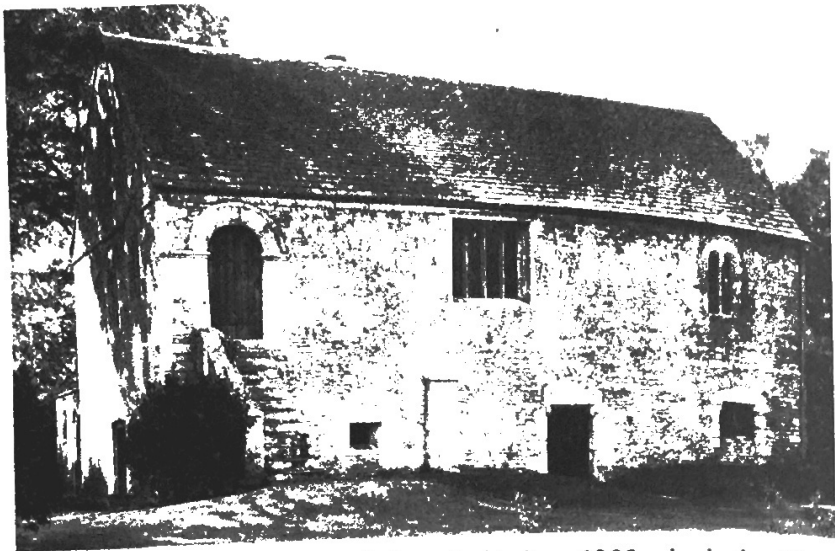
Manor house, c. 1170, at Burton Agnes (Humberside): ground-floor undercroft.



Manor house, Burton Agnes: upper hall.

kings' messengers, and once "the twelve regarders," knights who enforced the king's forest law.²⁷ The guests' horses and dogs had to be lodged and fed, and sometimes their falcons, including "the falcons of the lord abbot."²⁸ In 1298 when the royal army was on its way to Scotland, a special expense was incurred, a bribe of sixpence to "a certain man of the Exchequer of the lord king . . . for sparing our horses."²⁹ On several later occasions expenses are noted either for feeding military parties or bribing them to go elsewhere.

Assisting the bailiff was a staff of subordinate officials chosen annually from and usually (as in Elton) by the villagers themselves. Chief of these was the reeve. Always a villein, he was one of the most prosperous—"the best husbandman," according to *Seneschaucie*.³⁰ Normally the new reeve succeeded at Michaelmas (September 29), the beginning of the agricultural year. His main duty was seeing that the villagers who owed labor service rose promptly and reported for work. He supervised the formation



Manor house at Boothby Pagnell (Lincolnshire), c. 1200, also built with an undercroft and an upper hall. Royal Commission on the Historic Monuments of England.

of the plow teams, saw to the penning and folding of the lord's livestock, ordered the mending of the lord's fences, and made sure sufficient forage was saved for the winter.³¹ *Seneschaucie* admonished him to make sure no herdsman slipped off to fair, market, wrestling match, or tavern without obtaining leave and finding a substitute.³² He might, as occasionally at Elton, be entrusted with the sale of demesne produce. On some manors the reeve collected the rents.

But of all his numerous functions, the most remarkable was his rendition of the demesne account. He produced this at the end of the agricultural year for the lord's steward or clerk of the accounts. Surviving reeves' accounts of Elton are divided into four parts: "arrears," or receipts; expenses and liveries (meaning deliveries); issue of the grange (grain and other stores on hand in the barns); and stock. The account of Alexander atte Cross, reeve in 1297, also appends an "account of works" performed by the tenants.

Each part is painstakingly detailed. Under "arrears" are given the rents collected on each of several feast days when they fell

due, the rents that remained unpaid for whatever reason, and receipts from sales of grain, stock, poultry, and other products. Under "expenses and liveries" are listed all the bacon, beef, meal, and cheeses consigned to Ramsey Abbey throughout the year, and the mallards, larks, and kids sent to the abbot at Christmas and Easter. Numerous payments to individuals—carpenter, smith, itinerant workmen—are listed, and purchases set down: plows and parts, yokes and harness, hinges, wheels, grease, meat, herring, and many other items. The "issue of the grange" in 1297 lists 486 rings and 1 bushel of wheat totaled from the mows in the barn and elsewhere, and describes its disposal: to Ramsey, in sales, in payment of a debt to the rector, and for boon-works; then it does the same for rye, barley, and the other grains. In the stock account, the reeve lists all the animals—horses, cattle, sheep, pigs—inherited from the previous year, notes the advances in age category (lambs to ewes or wethers, young calves to yearlings), and those sold or dead (with hides accounted for).³³

With no formal schooling to draw on, the unlettered reeve kept track of all these facts and figures by means of marks on a tally stick, which he read off to the clerk of the accounts. Written out on parchment about eight inches wide and in segments varying in length, sewed together end to end, the account makes two things clear: the medieval manor was a well-supervised business operation, and the reeve who played so central a role in it was not the dull-witted clod traditionally evoked by the words "peasant" and "villein."

The accounts often resulted in a small balance one way or the other. Henry Reeve, who served at Elton in 1286–1287, reported revenues of 36 pounds, $\frac{1}{4}$ penny, and expenditures of 36 pounds 15 $\frac{3}{4}$ pence, which he balanced with the conclusion: "Proved, and so the lord owes the reeve 15 $\frac{1}{2}$ pence."³⁴ His successor, Philip of Elton, who took over in April 1287, reported on the following Michaelmas receipts of 26 pounds 6 shillings 7 pence, expenditures of 25 pounds 16 shillings $\frac{1}{4}$ penny: "Proved and thus the reeve owes the lord 10 shillings 6 $\frac{3}{4}$ pence."³⁵

For his labors, physical and mental, the reeve received no cash

stipend, but nevertheless quite substantial compensation. He was always exempted from his normal villein obligations (at Elton amounting to 117 days' week-work), and at Elton, though not everywhere, received at least some of his meals at the manor house table. He also received a penny for his Christmas oblation.³⁶ On some less favored manors, candidates for reeve declined the honor and even paid to avoid it, but most accepted readily enough. At Broughton the reeve was given the privilege of grazing eight animals in the lord's pasture.³⁷ That may have been the formal concession of a privilege already preempted. "It would be surprising," says Nigel Saul, "if the reeve had not folded his sheep on the lord's pastures or used the demesne stock to plow his own lands."³⁸ There were many other possibilities. Chaucer's reeve is a skillful thief of his lord's produce:

Well could he keep a garner and a bin,
There was no auditor could on him win.³⁹

Walter of Henley considered it wise to check the reeve's bushel measure after he had rendered his account.⁴⁰

Some business-minded lords assigned quotas to their manors—annual quantities of wheat, barley, and other produce, fixed numbers of calves, lambs, other stock, and eggs. The monkish board of auditors of St. Swithun's Abbey enforced their quotas by exactions from the reeve, forcing him to make up out of his pocket any shortfall. It might be supposed that St. Swithun's would experience difficulty in finding reeves. Not so, however. The monks were strict, but their quotas were moderate and attractively consistent, remaining exactly the same year after year for long stretches—60 piglets, 28 goslings, 60 chicks, and 300 eggs—making it entirely possible, or rather probable, that the reeve profited in most years, adding the surplus goslings and piglets to his own stock.⁴¹

The reeve in turn had an assistant, known variously as the beadle, hayward, or messor, who served partly as the reeve's deputy, partly in an independent role. As the reeve was traditionally a villein virgater, his deputy was traditionally a villein half-virgater, one of the middle-level villagers.

The beadle or hayward usually had primary responsibility for the seed saved from last year's crop, its preservation and sowing, including the performances of the plowmen in their plowing and harrowing, and later, in cooperation with the reeve, for those of the villeins doing mowing and reaping. Walter of Henley warned that villeins owing week-work were prone to shirk: "If they do not [work] well, let them be reproved."⁴² The hayward's job also included impounding cattle or sheep that strayed into the demesne crop and seeing that their owners were fined.⁴³

Many manors also had a woodward to see that no one took from the lord's wood anything except what he was allowed by custom or payment; some also had a cart-reeve with specialized functions. One set of officials no village was ever without was the ale tasters, who assessed the quality and monitored the price of ale brewed for sale to the public. This last was the only village office ever filled by women, who did most of the brewing.

At Elton the titles "beadle" and "hayward" were both in use. Both offices may have existed simultaneously, with the beadle primarily responsible for collecting rents and the fines levied in court. The beadle's compensation consisted of partial board at the manor house plus exemption from his labor obligation (half the reeve's, or 58½ days a year, since he owed for a half rather than a full virgate). At Elton a reap-reeve was sometimes appointed in late summer to help police the harvest work, a function otherwise assigned to two "wardens of the autumn."⁴⁴

The primary aim of estate management was to provide for the lord's needs, which were always twofold: food for himself and his household, and cash to supply needs that could not be met from the manors. Many lay barons collected their manorial product in person by touring their estates annually manor by manor. Bishop Grosseteste advised careful planning of the tour. It should begin after the post-Michaelmas "view of account," when it would be possible to calculate how lengthy a visit each manor could support. "Do not in any wise burden by debt or long residence the places where you sojourn," he cautioned, lest

the manorial economy be so weakened that it could not supply from the sale of its products cash for "your wines, robes, wax, and all your wardrobe."⁴⁵

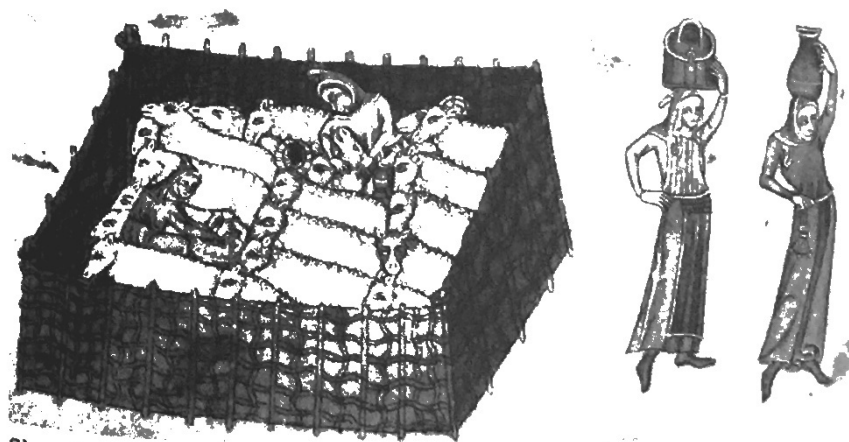
For Ramsey Abbey and other monasteries, such peripatetic victualing was not practical. Instead, several manors, of which Elton was one, were earmarked for the abbey food supply and assigned a quota, or "farm," meaning sufficient food and drink to answer the needs of the monks and their guests for a certain period.⁴⁶

Whatever the arrangement for exploitation of the manors, the thirteenth-century lord nearly always received his income in both produce and cash. The demesne furnished the great bulk of the produce, plus a growing sum in cash from sales at fair or market. The tenants furnished the bulk of the cash by their rents, plus some payments in kind (not only bread, ale, eggs, and cheese, but in many cases linen, wool cloth, and handicraft products). Cash also flowed in from the manorial court fines. Only a few lords, such as the bishop of Worcester, enjoyed the convenience of a revenue paid exclusively in cash.⁴⁷

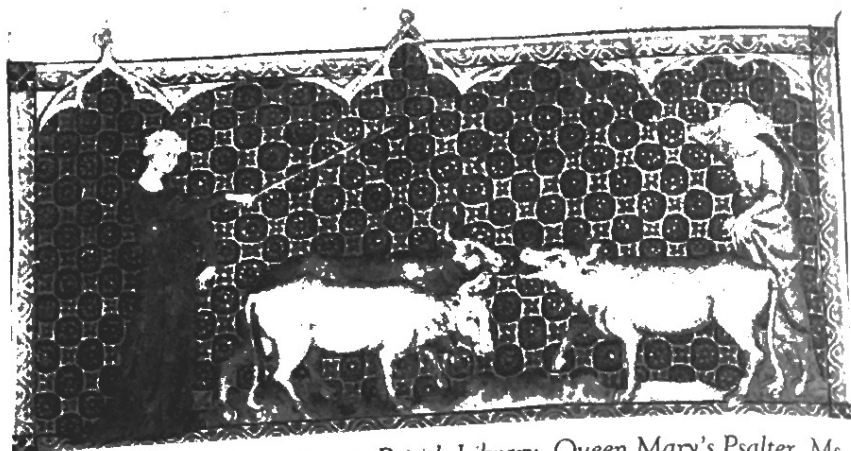
Cultivation of the demesne was accomplished by a combination of the villein tenants' contribution of week-work and the daily labor of the demesne staff, the *famuli*. In England the tenants generally contributed about a fourth of the demesne plowing, leaving three fourths to the *famuli*.⁴⁸ At Elton these consisted of eight plowmen and drivers, a carter, a cowherd, a swineherd, and a shepherd, all paid two to four shillings a year in cash plus "livery," an allowance of grain, flour, and salt, plus a pair of gloves and money for their Christmas oblation.⁴⁹ Smaller emoluments were paid to a cook, a dairyman or dairymaid, extra shepherds, seasonal helpers for the cowherd and swineherd, a keeper of bullocks, a woman who milked ewes, and a few other seasonal or temporary hands.⁵⁰ On some manors the *famuli* were settled on holdings, one version of which was the "sown acre," a piece of demesne land sown with grain. Ramsey Abbey used the sown acre to compensate its own huge *familia* of eighty persons.⁵¹ Another arrangement was the "Saturday plow," by which the lord's plow cohort was lent one day a week to plow the holdings of *famuli*.⁵²

The manorial plowman was responsible for the well-being of his plow animals and the maintenance of his plows and harness. *Seneschaucie* stressed the need for intelligence in a plowman, who was also expected to be versed in digging drainage ditches. As for plow animals, Walter of Henley judiciously recommended both horses and oxen, horses for their superior work virtues, oxen for their economy. An old ox was edible and, fattened up, could be sold for as much as he had cost, according to Walter (actually, for 90 percent of his cost, according to a modern scholar; in the 1290s, about 12 shillings). Pope Gregory III had proscribed horsemeat in 732, and though most of Europe ignored the ban, in the Middle Ages and long after, in England horsemeat was never eaten. Consequently an old plow horse fetched less than half his original cost of ten to eleven shillings.⁵³

Elton's bailiff or the Ramsey steward may have studied Walter of Henley, because the eight Elton demesne plowmen and drivers used ten stots (work horses) and eighteen oxen in their four plow teams. Horses and oxen were commonly harnessed together, a practice also recommended by Walter. In the Elton region (East Midlands) a popular combination was two horses and six oxen.⁵⁴



Sheepfold. Man at center is doctoring a sheep, while woman on the left milks and women on the right carry jars of milk. British Library, Luttrell Psalter, Ms. Add. 42130, f. 163v.

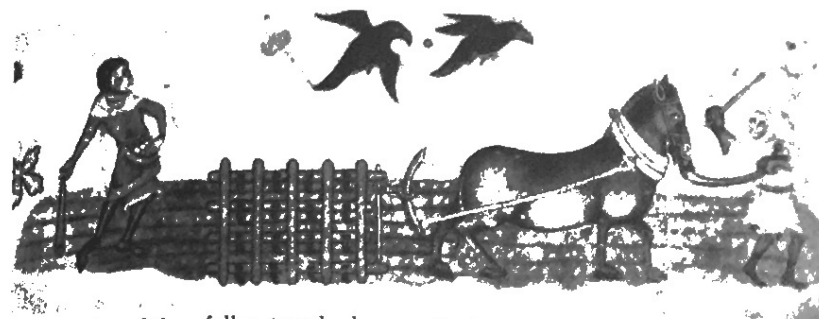


Cattle being driven by herdsmen. British Library, Queen Mary's Psalter, Ms. Royal 2B VII, f. 75.

On every manor the tenants' labor was urgently required in one critical stretch of the annual cycle, the boon-works of autumn and post-autumn. To get the demesne harvest cut, stacked, carted, threshed, and stored and the winter wheat planted before frost called for mass conscription of villeins, free tenants, their families, and often for recruitment of extra labor from the floating population of landless peasants. At Elton, two *meiatores*, professional grain handlers, and a professional winnower were taken on at harvest time.⁵⁵

Threshing, done in the barn, was a time-consuming job, winnowing an easy one. Hired labor was paid a penny per ring of threshed wheat, a penny per eight rings winnowed.⁵⁶

The staple crops at Elton were those of most English manors: barley, wheat, oats, peas, and beans, and, beginning in the late thirteenth century, rye. The proportions in the demesne harvest of 1286 were about two thousand bushels of barley, half as much wheat, and lesser proportions of oats, drage (mixed grain), and peas and beans.⁵⁷ Yields were four to one for barley, four to one for wheat, a bit over two to one for oats, and four to one for beans and peas. The overall yield was about three and two-thirds to one, better than the three and one-third stipulated in the



Harrowing. Man following the harrow is planting peas or beans, using a stick as a seed drill. British Library, Luttrell Psalter, Ms. Add. 42130, f. 171.

*Rules of St. Robert.*⁵⁸ In 1297 the Elton wheat yield reached fivefold, but overall the ratio remained about the same, a third to half modern figures.⁵⁹ Prices fluctuated considerably over the half-century from 1270 to 1320, varying from five to eight shillings a quarter (eight bushels) for wheat.⁶⁰ Half a ring (two bushels) planted an acre. Even without drought or flood, labor costs and price uncertainty could make a lord's profit on crops precarious.

The treatises offered extensive advice on animal husbandry—standards for butter and cheese production, advice on milk versus cheese, on suspension of the milking of cows and ewes to encourage early breeding, on feeding work animals (best for the reeve or hayward to look to, since the oxherd might steal the provender), and on branding the lord's sheep so that they could be distinguished from those of the tenants. The cowherd should sleep with his animals in the barn, and the shepherd should do the same, with his dog next to him.⁶¹

In the realm of veterinary medicine, the best that can be said is that it was no worse than medieval human medicine. Without giving specific instructions, Walter of Henley advocated making an effort to save animals: "If there be any beast which begins to fall ill, lay out money to better it, for it is said in the proverb, 'Blessed is the penny that saves two.'"⁶² Probably more practical was Walter's advice to sell off animals quickly when disease threatened the herd. Verdigris (copper sulfate), mercury, and

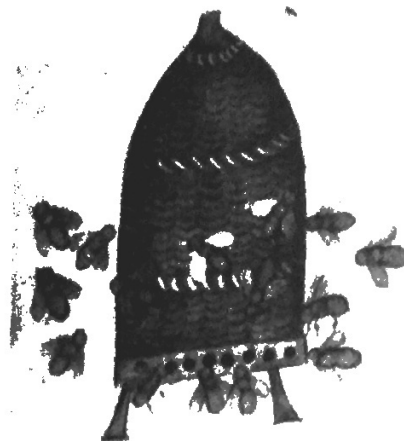
tar, all items that appear frequently in the Elton manorial accounts, were applied for a variety of animal afflictions, with little effect on the prevailing rate of mortality, averaging 18 percent among sheep.⁶³ Sheep pox, "Red Death," and murrain were usually blamed, the word "murrain" covering so many diseases that it occurs more often in medieval stock accounts than any other.⁶⁴

The Elton dairy produced some two hundred cheeses a year, most if not all from ewes' milk, with the bulk of the product going to the cellarer of the abbey, some to the *famuli* and boonworkers.⁶⁵ Most of the butter was sold, some of the milk used to nurse lambs. The medieval practice of treating ewes as dairy animals may have hindered development of size and stamina. But though notoriously susceptible to disease, sheep were never a total loss since their woolly skins (fells) brought a good price. The relative importance of their fleece caused medieval flocks to have a composition which would seem odd to modern sheep farmers. Where modern sheep are raised mainly for meat and the wethers (males) are slaughtered early, in the Middle Ages the wethers' superior fleece kept them alive for four to five years.⁶⁶

Poultry at Elton, as on most manors, was the province of a dairymaid, who, according to *Seneschaucie*, ought to be "faithful and of good repute, and keep herself clean, and . . . know her business." She should be adept at making and salting cheese, should help with the winnowing, take good care of the geese and hens, and keep and cover the fire in the manor house.⁶⁷

The only other agricultural products at Elton were flax, apples, and wax, all cultivated on a modest or insignificant scale.⁶⁸ The wax was a scanty return on a beekeeping enterprise that failed through a bee disease. On other English manors a variety of garden vegetables, cider, timber, and brushwood were market products. Wine, a major product on the Continent, was a minor one in England.

In the old days of subsistence agriculture, when the manor's produce went to feed the manor and the clink of a coin was



Beehive. British Library,
Luttrell Psalter, Ms. Add.
42130, f. 204.

seldom heard in the countryside, the surplus of an exceptional season, beyond what everyone could eat, went to waste. But for some time now a momentous change had been under way. The growth of town markets "put most men within the reach of opportunities of buying and selling."⁶⁹ The man most affected was the lord, if he awoke to his opportunity. Robert Grosseteste, the practical-minded bishop of Lincoln, urged his readers to ask "how profitable your plow and stock are."⁷⁰ Generally the answer was satisfactory. Not only that, but revenue from cash rents was increasing rapidly as the tenants took advantage of the market. One study of central England in 1279 indicates that even the villeins were now paying more than half their dues in money.⁷¹ Besides rents, these included a long list of servile fees and the fines of the manorial court. The very number and variety of the lord's revenues probably helped blind everyone to the inefficiency of the system that supplied them. Like slavery, serfdom required continuous year-round maintenance of a labor force whose labor was needed only in varying degrees in different seasons.

Hired labor and cash rents were the wave of the future. So was the application of technical improvements. Some lords made an effort. Henry de Bray's account book records a number of improvements added to his single manor, including building

cottages for tenants, widening a stream to provide fish ponds, and constructing a mill and a bridge.⁷² At Wharram Percy a wholesale reconstruction of the village was executed, evidently a rare seizure of the opportunity afforded a lord by his legal ownership of the village houses and land.⁷³ In the towns such a large-scale project was impossible; over centuries changes were restricted to individual building sites.

Naive but intelligent Walter of Henley has been credited with pioneering scientific agriculture for his recommendations, admittedly general, for improving seed ("Seed grown on other ground will bring more profit than that which is grown on your own")⁷⁴ and breed ("Do not have boars and sows unless of a good breed").⁷⁵ The Elton records show evidence of attempts to improve the demesne seed by trading among manors. In 1286–1287, thirty rings of wheat were sent to the reeve of Abbot's Ripton and twenty received from the reeve of Weston.⁷⁶ *Seneschaucie* was more specific than Walter in respect to improving breeds, assigning the cowherd responsibility for choosing large bulls of good pedigree to pasture and mate with the cows.⁷⁷ Robert Trow-Smith believes the experts were heeded to some extent. Progressive lords such as the Hungerfords of Wiltshire imported rams from Lincolnshire and other regions of England, and Trow-Smith ventures a surmise that "the owners of the great ecclesiastical estates in particular" imported breeding stock from the Continent.⁷⁸

Yet the only really widely used device for increasing agricultural production remained the old one of assarting, of enlarging the area of land by cutting down forest or draining marsh. In earlier centuries, when forest and marsh covered the countryside of northwest Europe, a pioneering effort with axe and spade was natural and obvious. Now, in the late thirteenth century, as villages filled the landscape, scope for assarting was disappearing.

At the same time an opportunity was opening in the booming wool market. Exceeding in volume the demand for grain, meat, leather, and everything else were the purchases by the great merchant-manufacturers of the cloth cities of Flanders, France,

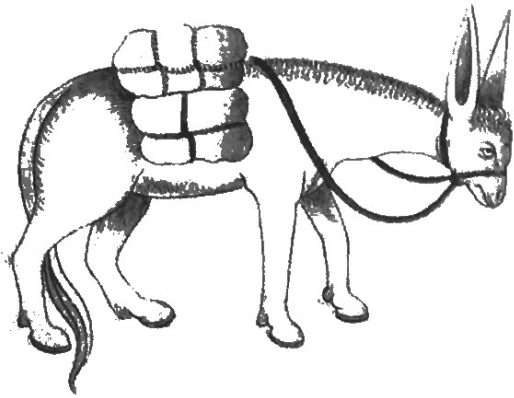
and Italy. English wool was especially prized for its fineness, the most sought-after single characteristic of a fiber. Agents of the great wool firms often contracted with a monastic house like Ramsey Abbey for an entire year's clip, or even several years' clip, in advance. Prices remained very steady at four to five shillings a stone (1270–1320). The Elton demesne, which delivered 118 fleeces to Ramsey in 1287, in 1314 carted 521 to the abbey.⁷⁹ Clumsy, fragile, and vulnerable, but easy to feed, easy to handle, and producing its fleece reliably every year, the sheep was on its way to becoming England's national treasure.

Appreciative though they were of the wonderful wool market, most lords remained conservative in respect to change, "reluctant to spend heavily from current revenue upon improvements."⁸⁰ The most profitable part of the lord's land was meadow, and the most valuable crop he could raise was hay for winter feed, but on most manors grain remained the top priority. Cereal agriculture retained a mystic prestige among the landholding class as it did, for sounder material reasons, among the peasants.⁸¹

When foreign wool buyers, their eye on long-term investments, insisted that the sheds where fleeces were shorn and stored be given boarded floors, as did a consortium of merchants



Shepherds watching sheep. British Library, Queen Mary's Psalter, Ms. Royal 2B VII, f. 74.



Donkey carrying wool-sacks to market. Bodleian Library, Ms. Ashmole 1504, f. 30.

from Cahors in dealing with the Cistercian abbey of Pipewell, the abbey gave in and boarded the floors, but that was as far as the lord cared to go in welcoming improvement.⁸² The historic shift in British agriculture marked by the enclosure movement got under way, very slowly, only in the fifteenth century.

Content to see their revenues rise and their luxuries multiply, most lords preferred to assure themselves of all that was coming to them under the system rather than striving to improve the system. Manorial custom still ruled the countryside, its authority fortified by the new commitment to the written record, and neither lord nor peasant was sufficiently dissatisfied to press for change. The lord counted on custom to bring laborers to his fields, coins to his coffers, and poultry, cheese, meat, and ale to his table. The villager relied on custom to limit his services and payments, and to guarantee him his house, his croft, his strips of arable, and his grazing rights.



4

THE VILLAGERS: WHO THEY WERE

THREE CONSIDERATIONS GOVERNED THE CONDITION of the Elton villager: his legal status (free versus unfree), his wealth in land and animals, and (related to the first two criteria but independent of them) his social standing. How the villagers interacted has only recently drawn attention from historians. Earlier, the peasant's relationship with his lord dominated scholarly investigation. This "manorial aspect" of the peasant's life overshadowed the "village aspect," which, however, is older and more fundamental, the village being older than the manor. The fact that information about the village is harder to come by than information about the manor in no way alters this conclusion. The manor has been described historically as "a landowning and land management grid superimposed on the settlement patterns of villages and hamlets."¹

Both village and manor played their part in the peasant's life. The importance of the manor's role depended on the peasant's status as a free man or villein, a distinction for which the lawyers strove to find a clear-cut criterion. Henry de Bracton, leading

Also by Frances Gies:
The Knight in History (1984)
Joan of Arc (1981)

By Frances and Joseph Gies:
Marriage and the Family in the Middle Ages (1987)
Women in the Middle Ages (1978)
The Ingenious Yankees (1976)
Life in a Medieval Castle (1974)
Merchants and Money men (1972)
Leonard of Pisa (juvenile) (1969)
Life in a Medieval City (1969)



LIFE IN A MEDIEVAL VILLAGE



Frances and Joseph Gies



Harper Perennial
A Division of HarperCollins Publishers

To Dorothy, Nathan, and Rosie

A hardcover edition of this book was published in 1990 by Harper & Row, Publishers.

Copyright acknowledgments follow the index.

LIFE IN A MEDIEVAL VILLAGE. Copyright © 1990 by Frances and Joseph Gies. All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information address HarperCollins Publishers, 10 East 53rd Street, New York, NY 10022.

First HarperPerennial edition published 1991.

The Library of Congress has catalogued the hardcover edition as follows:

Gies, Frances.

Life in a medieval village/Frances and Joseph Gies. — 1st ed.

p. cm.

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

ISBN 0-06-016215-5

1. Elton (Cambridgeshire, England)—Social conditions. 2. Elton (Cambridgeshire, England)—Rural conditions. 3. Peasantry—England—Elton (Cambridgeshire)—History. 4. England—Social life and customs—Medieval period, 1066–1485. I. Gies, Joseph. II. Title.

HN398.E45G54 1989

306'.09426'5—dc20

89-33759

ISBN 0-06-092046-7 (pbk.)

10 11 12 RRD H 40 39 38 37 36 35