LIFE EXPECTANCY AND 'AGE OF FIRST APPEARANCE' IN MEDIEVAL MANORIAL COURT ROLLS[1]

L. R. Poos

L. R. Poos is an Assistant Professor of History at The Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C. He completed his PhD dissertation at Cambridge University, under the supervision of Dr R. M. Smith of the ESRC Cambridge Group for the History of Population and Social Structure. He has published several papers on the historical demography of England before 1500, and is currently completing a book about rural social structure in central Essex in the late middle ages.

Any local historian who has spent much time among the records of medieval or early-modern English manorial courts will have been struck by the intriguing, even seductive appeal of these sources. Yielding information bearing upon a broad range of issues in local communities' experiences, medieval court rolls have of course long proved an invaluable source for social and economic history.[2] More recently, historians such as Z. Razi and H. E. Hallam have made bold attempts to utilise these records for elucidating local demographic patterns also, and in the process have raised methodological issues as yet unresolved.[3]

Manorial court records are, above all, products of legal and administrative processes. Demographic events were therefore recorded in them only as incidental adjuncts to these processes: for example, courts recorded the deaths of individuals who died holding land of the manor in order to mark the transfer of property rights to the deceased's heir, or the fines paid during the middle ages by or on behalf of women of unfree legal status who thereby secured the manorial lord's permission to marry. Recent local-history studies from these records have therefore proceeded by 'reconstituting' the careers of individuals as evidenced by their appearances in these and a host of other contexts — such as land transfers, litigation, or violations of manorial custom or curial process — among enrolled court transactions.[4] Such a procedure, which may entail one hundred or more curial appearances in a single individual's lifetime and a thousand or more individuals in a single manor's records over just a few decades, requires enormously painstaking and time-consuming work (quite apart from the palaeographical and linguistic demands made by these sources). Obviously there are analogies between this procedure and parish-register reconstitution. But in contrast to the current state of research concerning parish registers, unfortunately there do not yet exist well-established guidelines for this

procedure which can aid local historians embarking upon new projects and which might eventually yield results susceptible of comparison among different local studies.

Douglas Moss's article, 'Death in fifteenth-century Tottenham',[5] is a welcome sign that more local historians are accepting the challenges posed by these documents. Nonetheless, in view of the current embryonic state of methodology concerning manor court rolls, any attempt at demographic inference from them demands close scrutiny. These present remarks are, therefore, not so much aimed specifically at Moss's data but more generally as reflections which may assist future work along the lines of his Tottenham study.

Moss's point of departure in his article is his questioning the widespread assumption that middle-aged or elderly persons were rare among the lower orders of medieval society. This assumption may stem from such evidence as that, cited by Moss, of excavations in the twelfth-century graveyard of St Nicholas Shambles within the City of London. Examination of remains unearthed in this excavation indicated that as many as 75 per cent of persons interred there had died by the age of thirty-five.[6] Since urban environmental circumstances (even from such an early period as this) would doubtless have contributed towards especially high levels of mortality, particularly among infants and children, this indication of age-specific mortality must not be taken as paradigmatic of all of England's population at that time. But even if this be disregarded for the moment, and if, quite unrealistically, the population contributing to this graveyard were assumed to have been closed (i.e. without any distortion of the age distribution of deaths, resulting from the movement in or out of particular age groups), an age-specific mortality pattern as severe as this would not necessarily imply that middle-aged and elderly persons were rare in medieval London.

A simple exercise involving Princeton Model West life tables and stable populations will illustrate this point.[7] Table 1 (below) displays life expectancies, proportions of

Table 1. Life expectancies, proportions of deaths, and proportions alive at various ages, Model West stable populations

		Mortality Level 1		Mortality Level 4		Mortality Level 7	
		Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
	e_0	18.0	20.0	25.3	27.5	32.5	35.0
	e_{20}	26.7	28.5	30.6	32.7	34.4	36.6
	e_{25}	24.2	26.1	27.8	29.9	31.2	33.5
Percentage of birth cohort dying by age 35		74.5	72.7	63.3	61.4	52.5	50.5
Percentage of current population aged 35 and older		27.3	29.5	32.3	34.6	36.6	38.9
Percentage of current population aged 50 and older		10.5	12.7	14.1	16.5	17.5	20.0

Note: e_0, e_{20}, e_{25} = Expectation of life at age of 0, 20, 25.

deaths by age thirty- five, and proportions of current population aged thirty-five and older and fifty and older, in stationary populations under a variety of mortality conditions ranging from extremely severe to approximately identical to early-modern England.

Under Mortality Level 1 (according to female life expectancy at birth of 20.0 years, or in other words a mortality schedule of a severity almost unheard-of in recorded Western experience), approximately three-quarters of each birth cohort would have died by age thirty-five. But even so, when one had reached age twenty-five one could reasonably have expected to live on to around age fifty. Moreover, one must be careful to distinguish between proportions of a given birth cohort who have died by a given age, and the proportions of the resultant current population who fell within different age-groups. Even under such severe mortality, more than one-quarter of the current population would be aged over thirty-five (and more than one-tenth over fifty). As expectation of life at birth (e_0) increases, of course, expectation of life at age twenty-five (e_{25}) increases also, while proportions dying at relatively young ages drop somewhat.

All this is not to imply that the population of twelfth-century London was similar, let alone identical, to any of the scenarios tabulated above. Indeed it is highly likely that factors specific to the medieval urban environment (specifically, rural/urban migration contributing to age and sex distributions and associated nuptiality and fertility patterns) conspired to produce a quite different demographic regime from this notional closed population. In particular, a considerable influx into towns by young persons, especially females, in their mid- to late teens and twenties was characteristic of pre-industrial European urban communities, and has been documented for several English towns during the later middle ages.[8] Under these circumstances the deaths of young persons would have been especially prominent among all deaths, and infant burials may perhaps have been fewer, in proportion to this model population. But Moss is undoubtedly correct to point out that in medieval society generally, even an extremely severe mortality schedule would not necessarily have rendered persons aged fifty years and older into rare oddities among their contemporaries.

It may be added here that several other medieval graveyards, both urban and rural, have been excavated in England recently. Intensive analysis of human remains from these cemeteries, and inferences about ages at death and causes of death, are however still underway in many cases. Precise 'life-table'-like calculations based upon this evidence can only be tentative, due to the inevitably only approximate assignment of ages to remains and to uncertainties surrounding possible factors of selectiveness in the composition of populations interred in a given graveyard. Nevertheless, tentative age-distribution data from several of these excavations provide valuable corroboration of the remarks already addressed towards the St Nicholas Shambles evidence. In the medieval urban cemetery of St Helen on the Walls, York, seemingly incredible underrepresentation of infants' and young children's graves has been noted; but the range of plausible estimates for correcting this factor indicate a distribution of ages at death broadly similar to the London data.[9] Preliminary analysis of the extensive rural graveyard of Wharram Percy

(Yorkshire, East Riding), whose final analysis is still pending, and a smaller set of remains from rural Clopton, Cambridgeshire, taken together, would appear to imply a slightly less severe mortality regime than the urban samples, perhaps closer to, Model West Mortality Level 3 or 4.[10]

The difficulties involved in deriving life expectancies from medieval manorial court rolls can be summarised quite simply. From notices of the deaths of persons holding land in the manor at the time of their demises contained in records of heirs' admissions to tenure, the deaths of certain manorial tenants can be dated quite closely. But attaching an explicit age to such individuals is impossible, because births or baptisms were not recorded in these documents. One can, of course, painstakingly reconstruct all recorded court appearances of each individual up to his or her enrolled death notice, and thereby calculate a mean timespan between 'first appearance' in the record and eventual death. In his article Moss has closely followed Razi, who in his study of medieval Halesowen, Worcestershire, arbitrarily presumed that an individual would on average have been aged twenty years at 'first appearance', thus transforming this mean timespan into a surrogate life expectancy at age twenty (e_{20}).[11] Moss does, however, present data based upon alternative presumptions of sixteen and twenty years as 'mean age of first appearance'.[12]

There are at least two major difficulties with this procedure. Firstly, Razi's presumption of a fixed 'mean age of first appearance' is based upon his notions that local males (data relating to females are rather problematic) nearly always entered into landholding and thus into recorded court transactions at the minimum legal age of customary land tenure (twenty years at Halesowen), and that medieval manorial-court jurisdiction was so all-embracing of the community's life that nearly all adult males appeared in the records regularly enough for court-appearance patterns to be tantamount to a dispassionate 'census-like' profile of resident population.[13] The first assumption is highly improbable, and moreover is impossible to prove or disprove. The second assumption has been shown to be untrue for several contemporary manors in eastern England, whatever its applicability to medieval Halesowen.[14] Tottenham, incidentally, would also appear to substantiate this reservation, in view of Moss's comments upon the large numbers of people who passed through the records of this community at the fringe of the medieval metropolis.[15]

Secondly, the residents of a medieval manor hardly constituted a stable or closed population (again, Moss's Tottenham data confirm this). Only those tenants who held land at death actually died 'in the record'. Some proportion of tenants doubtless inherited or otherwise acquired land early in life and disposed of it before they died; conversely, others may have immigrated from elsewhere (and this is by no means always possible to detect in the court records), settled or acquired property locally, and thus 'entered the record' relatively late in life. Furthermore, others who appeared in the records early in life would have died before or without acquiring property and thus, again, be 'outside the record.' Therefore it is virtually impossible to relate the 'universe' of persons' careers, from 'first appearance' to recorded death, to a definable base population of known size and age characteristics (such as is done under the rules of parish-register reconstitutions).

These two difficulties are interrelated in quite complex ways. When a person makes his or her 'first appearance' in the court records, he/she may be the offspring of a local resident, acquiring property or otherwise commencing activities within the court's purview, and may conceivably be in his/her late teens or twenties. Or the person may be of low economic or social status within the community and possibly, therefore, may be making a 'first appearance' in curial transactions at a somewhat later age. Such is indicated by Ratzi's data, which consistently show 'poorer' peasants displaying a shorter interval between 'first appearance' and death.[16] Again, the individual's sex undoubtedly influenced 'age of first appearance': it is a commonplace among students of medieval manorial courts that females are underrepresented among recorded court transactions, and Moss's data show a shorter mean interval between 'first appearance' and death for women.[17] Conversely, persons settling within the manor from elsewhere might have been substantially older on average at 'first appearance' than the sons and daughters of local residents; again, a person's status as 'newcomer' is by no means always made explicit in manorial records, and at the very least anyone attempting to calculate these surrogate 'life expectancies' would need to distinguish between persons with explicit genealogical links to previous residents and others. This factor is a potentially quite serious difficulty for present purposes. Preliminary work on migration and settlement patterns from fifteenth-century London diocese church-court depositions implies that a majority of adults in rural Essex had settled in their current parish of residence in the late twenties, and only about one-quarter were still resident in their mid-adult years in their parish of birth.[18]

The one context in which some (albeit oblique) indication of age is provided at all regularly by manorial-court records relates to frankpledge, the system of local peace-keeping and legal responsibility which required that males aged twelve and older and resident within the local jurisdiction for at least a year be enrolled in small groups called tithings.[19] Many court-roll series record large numbers of males named as being subject to compulsory tithing membership and ordered to be enrolled. Tottenham, Moss notes, was no exception to this. The difficulty here is that males ordered into tithing comprised both local residents' sons who had reached the age of twelve, and newcomers to the community who could have been any age from twelve up (but, obviously, many were likely to have been considerably older). In order to be reasonably certain that a credible age may be ascribed to such individuals, then, it would be necessary to take only those males recorded with explicit genealogical links to persons previously resident in the community in question, and to omit all others. Even then, twelve years can be taken only as a rough minimal estimated age, as it might have been the case that a year or more could ensue between the attainment of age twelve and actual enrolment in tithing. It is moreover unlikely that more than a fraction of local males reaching age twelve in the community in question appeared in these records of tithing enrolment (because in many places such persons were named in court only if they had escaped prompt enrolment and the court was ordering an official to locate and enrol them), so this evidence does not constitute a complete register of all local youngsters entering adolescence.

At the contiguous manors of Great Waltham and High Easter (Essex), 430 males

were named in orders into tithing in surviving court records between 1327 and 1389.[20] Under the strict criterion that only those males who were explicitly named as sons of individuals resident in these communities for at least three years prior to the order into tithing can be assumed reasonably certainly to have been twelve years old at the time of their enrolment, only sixty-four males can be placed into this category. (This is undoubtedly quite restrictive, since others among the 430 males were probably also twelve-year-old sons of local residents, but this strict criterion is intended to eliminate as much ambiguity as possible.) When only those males thus explicitly linked genealogically who were enrolled into tithing after 1355 are taken (in order to avoid distortions introduced by the disrupted heirship patterns immediately following the Black Death), forty-six males remain for analysis.[21] Among these, the mean interval between entry into tithing and first subsequent recorded court appearance was 9.1 years; that is, even for local residents' sons surviving to the relevant ages, the earliest 'mean age of first appearance' apart from tithing enrolment was roughly twenty-one to twenty-two at a minimum. But the wide **variability** of this measure underscores how perilous it is to ascribe in a wholesale manner a predetermined age of this sort to all 'first appearers' even in this limited group, whereas settlement evidence derived from other sources (mentioned above) implies that a rather higher mean age might apply to the larger number of 'immigrants'.[22] The exact context in which 'first appearance' took place would also bear upon age at that point, and should be specified in research of this kind.[23]

The Waltham and Easter data indicate, then, that an arbitrarily-presumed 'mean age of first appearance' in manorial-court transactions, even for local residents' sons, as low as Moss's sixteen years is quite untenable. But the fact remains that the difficulties already discussed surrounding the relationship between 'first appearance' and actual local base populations are unlikely to be resolved. The only way around these difficulties, it would appear, is to take a strictly-defined group of tithing entrants (as outlined above) and trace them through to their subsequent deaths, in order to derive a partially-based e_{12}. As already implied both at Waltham and Easter and at Tottenham, only a small minority of tithing entrants will be susceptible to this analysis, and it would probably be necessary to aggregate such data from a number of manors within a fairly circumscribed region, in order to obtain a large enough sample to yield meaningful results.

Moss's primary reason for preferring sixteen years as a presumed 'mean age of first appearance' is, apparently, his reluctance to believe that life expectancy at age twenty could have been as high as thirty years in the middle ages.[24] But reference to Table 1 (above) implies that even under Mortality Level 1, a mortality schedule incomparably more severe than England's experience after the mid-sixteenth century, an e_{20} approaching thirty years is hardly implausible. Indeed, there is nothing inherently unlikely in demographic terms about the life-expectancy measures Moss has proposed. But in view of the arguments made here, one might equally plausibly presume a 'mean age of first appearance' of twenty-five years, and an underlying Mortality Level between 4 and 7 (female e_o = 27.5 and 35.0 years), and still obtain a credible e_{25} roughly equivalent to the empirical data Moss has derived from the Tottenham material.

In neither case, of course, would such a scenario necessarily bear close scrutiny

methodologically. In sum, medieval manorial-court evidence, though sparse and in most respects only tangentially related to strictly demographic matters, does afford tantalising prospects of contributing to broad knowledge of demographic patterns among common people during the middle ages. And, when proper consideration is given to the circumstances in which this evidence was generated, results can be obtained which are credible within broad limits in comparative demographic terms. These remarks have been intended merely as suggestions towards a better understanding of those circumstances, and towards establishing a common format in which future investigations might take place. Only by amassing data from many local investigations will this broader knowledge be attained. It is encouraging that local studies of this kind are proceeding.

NOTES

1. The author is grateful to Richard Wall and R. S. Schofield for comments upon an earlier draft of this article, to D. R. Brothwell and R. E. Glasscock for advice concerning the current state of knowledge about archaeological evidence for medieval life expectancy, and to Andrea Duncan for bibliographical assistance.
2. E.g., G. C. Homans, **English villagers of the thirteenth century,** 1960; R. H. Hilton, **The English peasantry in the later middle ages,** 1975; J. M. Bennett, 'Spouses, siblings and surnames: Reconstructing families from medieval village court rolls', **Journal of British Studies,** xxiii, 1983, pp. 26-46.
3. Z. Razi, **Life, marriage and death in a medieval parish: Economy, society and demography in Halesowen 1270-1400,** 1980; H. E. Hallam, 'Age at first marriage and age at death in the Lincolnshire Fenland 1252-1478', **Population Studies,** 39, 1985, pp. 55-69. A critical survey of research in this area is presented in L. R. Poos and R. M. Smith, '"Legal windows onto historical populations?" Recent research on demography and the manor court in medieval England', **Law and History Review,** 2, 1984, 128-52.
4. E.g., E. Britton, **The community of the vill: A study in the history of the family and village life in fourteenth-century England,** 1977; J. A. Raftis, **Warboys: Two hundred years in the life of an English medieval village,** 1974.
5. D. Moss, 'Death in fifteenth-century Tottenham', above, p.p.36-44.
6. **Ibid.** p.37.
7. A. J. Coale and P. Demeny, **Regional model life tables and stable populations,** second edition, 1983. Model West has been used here because it appears to conform best among the Princeton models to English mortality schedules at young age-ranges in the earliest period of English parochial registration: R. S. Schofield and E. A. Wrigley, 'Infant and child mortality in the late Tudor and early Stuart period', in C. Webster (ed.), **Health, medicine and mortality in the sixteenth century,** 1979, pp. 61-95. This is, of course, not intended to imply that medieval London necessarily conformed to any great extent to Model West; this model is taken here merely in order to demonstrate that the tabulated life expectancies and proportions can coexist within a single, demographically plausible stable population.
8. C. Phythian-Adams, **Desolation of a city: Coventry and the urban crisis of the late middle ages,** 1979, pp. 199-220; R. H. Hilton, 'Small town society in England before the Black Death', **Past and Present,** 105, 1984, pp. 65-7; J. P. J. Goldberg, 'Female labour, service, and marriage in the late medieval urban North', **Northern History** (forthcoming); for early-modern Europe in general, this topic is surveyed in J. de Vries, **European urbanization 1500-1800,** 1984, pp. 175-249.

9. J. D. Dawes and J. R. Magilton, **The cemetery of St Helen of the Walls, Aldwark,** 1980, pp. 23-4, 63-6. The authors note that 27.0 per cent of interments among excavated remains were children (i.e. estimated ages 0-16), but argue that a 'more likely' estimate of deaths in this age-range might approach 50 per cent. Of the remaining interments, 35.8 per cent represented deaths between estimated ages 17-35 years (for both sexes taken together). Thus, proportions of deaths by age 35 lay somewhere in the range between 61.2 per cent (assuming under-17s were 27 per cent of interred population) and 73.3 per cent (assuming under-17s were 50 per cent of interred population). From the remarks offered above concerning urban age and sex structures, of course, archaeologists' expectation that urban interments would necessarily resemble a 'normal' model population may be misplaced.

10. J. G. Hurst, 'The Wharram research project: Results to 1983', **Medieval Archaeology,** 28, 1984, pp. 92-3; D. R. Brothwell, 'Palaeodemography and earlier British populations', **World Archaeology,** ix, 1972, pp. 75-87; Clopton and preliminary Wharram data taken from the latter, p. 82. At Clopton, 49.0 per cent of interments represented deaths at estimated ages 0-19 years; at Wharram (where the data cited represent a provisional sample of the entire graveyard eventually excavated), the corresponding figure is 56.3 per cent (in both cases, these figures represent both sexes taken together). In Princeton Model West stable populations, deaths by age twenty would represent 64.4 per cent (males) and 62.1 per cent (females) of a birth cohort at Mortality Level 1, and 52.7 per cent (male) and 50.6 per cent (female) at Mortality Level 4. The Wharram cemetery contained remains spanning a number of centuries, and so tying these mortality data firmly to any particular epoch may be unwise before analysis of the entire set of remains is complete.

11. Razi, pp. 43-5.

12. Moss, p.42.

13. Razi, pp. 2-3, 43.

14. Poos and Smith, pp. 134-7.

15. Moss, p.39.

16. Razi, p. 43-4.

17. Moss, p.40.

18. This evidence is discussed in L. R. Poos, 'Reconstructing a demographic region in medieval England: The case of Essex after the Black Death', in R. M. Smith (ed.), **Regional demographic patterns in the past** (forthcoming).

19. L. R. Poos, 'The rural population of Essex in the later middle ages', **Economic History Review,** xxviii, 1985, pp. 515-30.

20. PRO DL30.63.790 — DL30.67.841; Essex Record Office D/DTu M239.

21. Discussion of these heirship patterns, which would have affected the age at which heirs would have tended on average to enter their inheritances, as a direct result of the epidemic is given in L. R. Poos, 'Population and resources in two fourteenth-century Essex communities: Great Waltham and High Easter 1327-1389' (unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Cambridge, 1984), pp. 100-2.

22. $N = 46$, $\bar{x} = 9.1$ years, standard deviation $= 5.3$ years.

23. For example, among these forty-six tithing entrants, seven made their first subsequent recorded court appearance when they inherited property at the death of a parent, and the mean interval between their tithing enrolment and inheritance was slightly longer than for the forty-six as a group ($N = 7$, $\bar{x} = 9.7$ years, standard deviation $= 5.2$ years). This is obviously too small a sample upon which to judge the issue conclusively, and more work would be needed to delineate this pattern. But it would appear quite likely that the context in which 'first appearance' was made had some influence upon how early in life a person was liable to be drawn into recorded court transactions.

24. Moss, p.43.