

SOCIAL STATUS AND LITERACY IN NORTH EAST ENGLAND 1560 - 1630

David Cressy

David Cressy is a professor in the Department of History, Pitzer College, Claremont, California.

The most convincing evidence for the extent of illiteracy in Tudor and Stuart England comes from the deposition books of the ecclesiastical courts. The church courts had a wide jurisdiction, embracing moral and probate matters as well as affairs more directly connected with religion. One who defamed a neighbour or otherwise offended the community might answer before the bishop or his commissary, while contested wills, disputed tithes, arguments about churchyard maintenance or church attendance were commonly resolved in the episcopal or archidiaconal courts.¹

In addition to the principals in the case there came a steady stream of witnesses, drawn from all ranks in society, to testify what they saw, what they heard, or what they knew. It is the appearance of the witnesses which provides our greatest clue about pre-industrial literacy. The court usually recorded the name, occupation or status, place of residence and age of each witness or deponent, and required him to sign his testimony or make a mark if he could not sign his name. However unsatisfactory an indicator of literacy or illiteracy this may be the distinction between marking and signing does at least provide a measure which is, in Roger Schofield's words, 'universal, standard and direct.'²

Examination of the surviving depositions from four ecclesiastical jurisdictions reveal something of the pattern of illiteracy in England from the age of Elizabeth to the end of the Stuart era. Evidence from the Diocese of Norwich (Norfolk and Suffolk), Diocese of London (Essex), and Diocese of Exeter (Devon and Cornwall) presents a consistent picture of socially stratified illiteracy with irregular improvements across the period. In East Anglia, for example, illiteracy was rare among the gentry (2 per cent), moderately distributed among yeomen and tradespeople (35 and 85 per cent), and widespread among husbandmen and labourers (79 and 85 per cent). Yeomen and tradesmen tended to improve, while husbandmen and labourers stagnated. A similar pattern is found in south west England.³

Depositions from the Diocese of Durham (Durham and Northumberland), however, are more difficult to interpret. As might be expected, the north east was generally more illiterate than southern England, but it is the odd experience of the group described as yeomen which especially distinguishes the Durham region. Table 1 shows the illiteracy of the major social groups, derived from the Durham consistory court depositions of 1561 - 1626.¹

Table 1. Illiteracy in the Diocese of Durham.

	Gentlemen			Tradesmen			Yeomen		
	All	Mark	% Mark	All	Mark	% Mark	All	Mark	% Mark
1560s	22	9	41	92	77	84	35	22	63
1570s	44	12	30	153	117	76	83	45	54
1580s	12	5	42	53	42	79	33	17	52
1590s	28	10	36	79	45	57	164	116	71
1600s	63	11	17	132	73	55	394	304	77
1610s	40	6	15	116	65	56	389	287	74
1620s	47	0	0	102	51	50	228	180	79
Total	256	53	21	727	470	65	1326	971	73

	Husbandmen			Labourers			Women		
	All	Mark	% Mark	All	Mark	% Mark	All	Mark	% Mark
1560s	86	81	34	20	19	95	49	49	100
1570s	134	122	91	68	67	99	87	87	100
1580s	42	38	90	15	15	100	41	38	93
1590s	55	50	91	23	23	100	78	76	97
1600s	52	45	87	38	36	95	201	198	99
1610s	7	6		11	11	100	122	116	95
1620s	3	3		1	1		128	126	98
Total	379	345	91	176	172	98	706	690	98

Yeomen in southern England were those prosperous independent farmers, said by some to be pressing on the heels of the gentry. In East Anglia yeomen improved from 55 per cent illiterate in the 1580s to 32 per cent in the 1630s and 24 per cent in the 1660s. In the south west the much skimpier evidence suggests improvement from 47 per cent illiterate in the 1570s to just 20 per cent in the 1660s. But the evidence from the north east of England presents a contradictory picture. Durham yeomen at first appeared to improve, like their contemporaries in other parts of England, from 63 per cent unable to sign in the 1560s to 54 per cent in the 1570s and 52 per cent in the 1580s. Then the literacy of yeomen collapsed, to 71 per cent in the 1590s, deteriorating further to 79 per cent by the 1620s. Unfortunately the Durham depositions for the rest of the seventeenth century are missing and we are unable to trace the fortunes of the yeomen or any other class after 1630. It is extraordinary that a class so favoured in the south should appear so benighted in the north.

The switchback behaviour of the Durham yeomen is so unexpected and so ill-fitting with what we believe to be the characteristic yeoman experience that it is worth considering at length. Could the turbulence lie

more in the sources than in the society? Or was there something exceptional about the social structure and progress of literacy in north east England?

Perhaps the nature of the causes tried before the consistory court changed after the 1580s so as to attract a particularly illiterate type of yeoman deponent. Were there, perhaps, more tithe cases or disputes requiring venerable witnesses for the resolution? One can imagine a procession of ageing yeomen too old to have benefitted from the Elizabethan expansion of schooling or lapsing from literacy as senility overcame them. The evidence for this is doubtful. There seem to have been no changes in the business of the court which might account for the crash of yeoman illiteracy. It can be shown, however, that the late Elizabethan and Jacobean yeomen deponents were somewhat older than those of the early decades. Table 2 shows the age distribution of yeomen deponents for 1560-89 and 1590-1609. While 44 per cent of the yeomen in the earlier period were aged 50 or more, and 19 per cent aged over 60, the proportion that old in the later period had grown to 53 per cent and 30 per cent.⁵ While interesting in their own right these age statistics do not help to explain the sudden and sustained deterioration of yeoman literacy.

A more likely explanation may be found in the way the word yeoman was used in the Durham region. The figures in Table 1 may in fact point to a change in labels, a local shift in the terminology of status, rather than an alteration in literacy or social structure. It is striking that the numbers of yeomen increased as they became more illiterate. Table 3 shows the size and composition of the deponent population, omitting clergy and women. The proportion of depositions attributable to yeomen rose from 14 per cent in the 1560s to 47 per cent in the 1590s, climbing to 69 per cent in the 1610s. At the same time the husbandmen, who originally outnumbered yeomen, dwindled to become almost invisible while labourers and men described by a trade or craft also experienced shrinkage.

Table 2. Ages of Yeomen deponents.

Age	1560-1589		1580-1609	
	No.	%	No.	%
-20	1	1	1	0
20-29	17	11	67	12
30-39	28	19	95	17
40-49	38	26	93	17
50-59	36	24	123	23
60-69	24	16	106	19
70-79	3	2	41	8
80-	2	1	18	3
All	149		544	

One might argue from this data that there was an explosion of the yeoman population in the north east, or that the consistory court became unusually disposed to prefer yeomen as witnesses. Such arguments beg the evidence without helping to explain the slump in the literacy of yeomen. Rather, the evidence suggests that the term "yeoman" came to

Table 3. Composition of deponent population (clergy and women omitted)

	Total	Gentry %	Trades %	Yeomen %	Husbandmen %	Labourers %
1560s	255	9	36	14	34	8
1570s	478	8	32	17	28	14
1580s	155	8	34	21	27	10
1590s	349	8	23	47	16	7
1600s	679	9	19	58	8	6
1610s	563	7	21	69	2	2
1620s	381	12	27	60	1	0
Total	2860	9	25	46	13	6

be used more carelessly, or more generously, embracing men who would not be regarded as yeomen in other parts of England and who might not have stood the scrutiny of the Durham court earlier in Elizabeth's reign. It seems that a growing proportion of the rural population claimed to be yeomen and the court was content so to describe them. Husbandmen in great numbers, and some tradesmen and labourers too, were entered as yeomen, thereby boosting the illiteracy of the yeoman category.

It is possible that 'yeoman' came to mean something very different in the Durham region from its conventional southern usage. There is some evidence to suggest that it was used there, and perhaps elsewhere, as a vague term of respect and not as a strict label belonging to the independent agriculturalist. Among the deponents of the 1570s, for example, we find Miles Baith of Ebchester, 'yeoman alias blacksmith', William Stoyr of Newcastle, 'yeoman alias porter of the water,' and even Chris Lawson of Walsingham, 'yeoman, alias schoolmaster'. Altogether nineteen of the eighty-three yeomen appearing in the 1570s had additional occupational descriptions, ranging from fisherman to shipping clerk. Some have occupations which seem incompatible with yeoman status, conventionally considered. Thomas Wawton, 'yeoman alias husbandman' features a common confusion of agrarian status, but what is one to make of James Wally, 'yeoman alias labourer', or Mathew Skorfeld of Barmeston, 'yeoman alias servingman being hired to Mr. Robert Andsty'? Mathew was thirty years old and illiterate.⁶ Composite descriptions like this are rare after 1580 when the number referred to simply as yeomen starts to rise. Is it possible that the later clerks did not always bother to record the true occupations of working men, entering them indiscriminately as yeomen? Until more research is done into the social and occupational structure of north east England, with particular attention to the terminology of status, the pattern will remain mysterious.

The other social groups appearing in the Durham depositions present fewer problems. The husbandmen, before their virtual disappearance from the records, were as illiterate as husbandmen in East Anglia and the south west. Durham tradesmen were not much worse than their southern counterparts, and managed to improve their literacy levels over the period. Labourers and women were benighted everywhere with those of the north east no more illiterate than the rest.

The Durham gentry, however, stand apart. Amazingly illiterate by gentle standards when first encountered, they slowly shed their inability to write. In southern dioceses no more than 2 or 3 per cent of the gentle deponents were unable to sign their names but in the Diocese of Durham in the 1560s the illiterate proportion was as high as 41 per cent. The Elizabethan and Jacobean periods saw steady improvement but it was not before the accession of Charles I that the gentry of the north east matched the literate gentry of the south.

The remarkable illiteracy of the gentry supports the common view that the pre-industrial north was backward and culturally impoverished. Elizabethan northerners have been called 'mere ignorant of religion and altogether untaught', and the condition may have extended to the gentry.⁷ Although there is no doubt that the governing class, the magnates and great gentlemen were fully literate and in touch with England's cultural mainstream, the parochial gentry, including most of those who made depositions, were barely part of Laslett's 'one class', the political nation. Indeed, their high illiteracy must for a time, have excluded them. Mervyn James finds 'the smaller parish gentry' in Tudor Durham 'emerging from the ranks of the rich farmers, yeomen, and merchant shopkeepers. This small gentry had its importance as the most volatile and mobile element in the society, some of its members building up great fortunes, others soon lapsing from their gentry status'.⁸ Some of these people appearing as witnesses might not have been recorded as gentlemen at all if the strictest standards were applied. Unless, of course, the word gentlemen, like the word yeoman, was used more loosely in north east England.

NOTES

1. Depositions are discussed in David Cressy, "Occupations, immigration and literacy in east London, 1580-1640," *LPS* No. 5, 1970, pp. 53-60. A selection of depositions from the courts of Durham was published by the Surtees Society, 21, 1845.
2. R. S. Schofield, 'The measurement of literacy in pre-industrial England,' in Jack Goody (ed.), *Literacy in traditional societies*, 1968, p. 319.
3. David Cressy, 'Literacy in pre-industrial England,' *Societies*, 4, 1974 pp. 229-240. 'Levels of illiteracy in England, 1530-1730,' *Historical Journal*, 20, 1977 pp. 1-23. 'Literacy in seventeenth-century England: more evidence,' *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 8, 1977, pp. 141-150. The Exeter figures are calculated from the Chanter manuscripts in the Devon Record Office and will appear in a forthcoming publication.
4. Department of Palaeography and Diplomatic, University of Durham, Depositions D.R. V, 1-12. Mervyn James, *Family, lineage, and civil society. A study of society, politics and mentality in the Durham region, 1500-1640*, 1974, pp. 105-6, has some confusing notes on literacy. Some of his figures are wrong, although taking percentages to two places of decimals lends them a spurious precision.
5. The difference between 44% and 53% aged over 50 is not statistically significant; the difference between 19% and 30% is statistically significant. Contrast these figures with a finding from Sussex depositions: 'there are few persons under thirty years of age, and almost an undue proportion of the over sixties.' Julian Cornwall, "Evidence of population mobility in the seventeenth century,' *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, 40, 1967, p. 144.
6. Durham depositions, D.R. V, 2, f.247v;4,ff.18,95v;2,f.243;4,ff.55,62.
7. B. W. Beckingsale, 'The characteristics of the Tudor north,' *Northern History*, 4, 1969,p.74.
8. James, *op.cit.*, p.31.