NORMANS, SAINTS, AND POLITICS: FORENAME-CHOICE AMONG FOURTEENTH-CENTURY GLOUCESTERSHIRE PEASANTS

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The later Middle Ages are of great interest as the time when surnames were becoming fixed and hereditary in England and when the local records through which their evolution and behaviour can be traced become abundant. The **forenames** of this period have attracted much less attention, perhaps because many of those in use are familiar. The forenames used and the popularity of particular names and kinds of names can, however, constitute a subject of considerable interest; a local study of the present kind shows the effects of the wider trends in nomenclature recorded in works such as E.G. Withycombe's dictionary,[1] to which repeated references will be made, and raises questions about the religious and political attitudes of the name-givers.

This article examines the forenames used in a small and well-documented part of Gloucestershire (the large lay estate of Thornbury[2]) by peasants active in and around the second quarter of the fourteenth century.

It makes use of three separate sources — a manorial extent, a tax assessment, and a series of manorial court rolls — and compares their scope and comprehensiveness for this work. Ideally I would have used records of the same years, but such were not available: the three sources were, however, close together in time and there was probably little change in the use of names in the intervening periods, save perhaps in a few special cases discussed below.

I will begin by describing the three sources and the kinds of people who appear in them. The 1322 extent of Thornbury Manor forms part of the unprinted document known as the 'Contrariants' Survey, which gives detailed accounts of the confiscated estates of those who took part in Thomas of Lancaster's rebellion.[3] The extent divides Thornbury tenants into freemen, villeins and cottars, and lists separately the lords and tenants of two little sub-manors at Cowhill and Thieves' Hope: altogether there are 121 names of rich, middling and poor tenants,[4] but as it is a tenant-list few women appear and no one who did not hold directly of the lord of the manor or the lords of the sub-manors. Unfortunately it covers only part of the estate because Thornbury was considered to be held jointly by the lord and his wife, and her half was not confiscated. (This legal nicety did not affect its ordinary day-to-

day working.) A few non-residents are included, but do not significantly affect the study.

The Gloucestershire Subsidy Roll of 1327 records the individuals assessed to pay that year's subsidy of one-twentieth from both towns and country. I used the printed edition of the document.[5] People assessed are listed in short sections, each covering one or two settlements and arranged by hundreds. Thornbury Hundred is covered in sixteen sections of which the first deals with Thornbury Borough, the second to ninth inclusive Thornbury Manor, and the remaining seven other estates within the hundred. The eight manorial sections yield 122 names, again including a few non-residents; the whole estate is covered, but as it is a tax document many people too poor to be assessed are omitted. (A few rich peasants also seem to have escaped the taxman's net.) Again it is an incomplete tenant-list with few women appearing, but nevertheless a useful source.

The best evidence comes from the third source, the series of unprinted Thornbury manorial court rolls. This article draws upon the earliest surviving rolls, from October 1328 to June 1352.[6] We cannot simply go through these collecting names as they appear because some peasants used a number of distinct surnames, and because many names of outsiders who had business with the court were recorded.[7] This brings us up against the problem of 'individual identification', and to produce lists of **individual** peasants I collected references to events which could only happen once to each person.[8] There could be only one record of death for each man and woman, and only one record of paying **merchet** — the fine for permission to contract a first marriage — for each villein woman, so records of deaths and merchets produced lists of individually identified local peasants. I omitted freemen who formed a small part of the population, did not pay merchet, and whose deaths often went unrecorded,[9] and was left with 352 villeins who died[10] and 154 women who paid merchet. Both samples cover the whole manor. The dead include tenants of all sizes and many peasants who held no land directly of the lord (103 of 265 men, 49 of 87 women) — subtenants and landless people who owed heriot on their deaths by local custom.

The bias to men is still present, but the record of merchets does much to redress it. The latter undoubtedly includes most local villein women and may be almost comprehensive if, as has been suggested,[11] women in English peasant society nearly always married.

The sources give forenames in latin, for example **Robertus** for **Robert** and **Johanna** for **Joan**, and they are often abbreviated, but translation was usually simple and debatable names were referred to C. T. Martin's list.[12] Unusual names not found there were generally left as they appeared in the sources. The use of some names by both sexes posed no serious problems: all Thomases appear to have been men, and Nicholas was used by only one woman (latinized as **Nichola**).[13] Problems arose only in cases of Margaret (**Margareta**) and Margery (**Margeria**), both of which were commonly abbreviated to 'Marg.' by Thornbury scribes, but it is clear from the subsidy roll that Margery was the more common in this part of the county, and there appear to have been only two Margarets in the combined sources.

Table 1. Thornbury men's forenames

	1322 Extent	1327 Subsidy Roll	1328-52 Court Rolls (Deaths)
Adam	2	5	5
Aubrey	0	1	0
Bartholemew	2	2	3
Bernard	1	0	0
David	1	1	1
Denis	0	0	1
Edward	4	4	7
Ellis	1	1	0
Geoffrey	1	0	1
Gilbert	2	3	3
Henry	2	2	2
Hugh	1	0	3
Isaac	1	0	0
John	17	19	62
Nicholas	5	2	5
Note	1	1	0
Philip	0	0	2
Rhys	0	1	0
Richard	12	10	24
Robert	6	11	40
Roger	2	1	3
Sebert	2	1	1
Simon	2	1	3
Stephen	0	1	0
Thomas	9	10	21
Walter	9	11	32
William	19	12	46
Total	102	100	265

Table 2. Thornbury women's forenames

	1322 Extent	1327 Subsidy Roll	1328-52 Court Rolls	
			Deaths	Merchets
Agnes	4	3	13	30
Alice	3	2	6	24
Amice	0	0	1	0
Aubrida	0	0	0	1
Beatrice	0	0	1	0
Christine	0	0	0	3
Clarice	1	0	0	0
Edith	2	5	15	27
Ella	0	0	0	2
Ellen	0	1	4	6
Emma	0	0	1	1
Felise	1	1	0	0
Gunnell	0	1	1	0
Isabel	1	2	8	6
Joan	0	0	5	17
Julian	0	2	4	6
Lettice	0	0	2	1
Margaret	1	0	0	1
Margery	0	1	2	1
Matilda	5	4	24	25
Nicholas	0	0	0	1
Sarah	0	0	0	1
Symonda	1	0	0	1
Total	19	22	87	154

The total 749 names from the three sources are set out in Tables 1 and 2. Most will be familiar, but their use was by no means devoid of interesting features and two are quite striking — the limited range of names in use for each sex and the great popularity of small groups of names. The court rolls give twenty men's names, and although their samples are much smaller the subsidy roll gives twenty-one and the extent twenty-two. There were twenty-seven distinct male forenames in the three sources, so each omits some rare ones.

The court rolls reveal a distinct group of six very common men's names — John, William, Robert, Walter, Richard, and Thomas in order of descending popularity. Each accounted for at least 8.0 per cent of men's names, and John for 23.5 per cent. Together they covered 84.9 per cent of male villein deaths, and the least popular of them appeared **three times as often** as the name (Edward) which headed the less popular group. I have called the six very popular names 'Group A' and the others 'Group B'. The subsidy roll reveals the same pattern and similar detailed results: Group A names emerged clearly and each accounted for at least 10 per cent of men's names. They covered 73 per cent of the male population , and the least common of them appeared twice as often as the leading Group B name (now Adam).

The extent's partial coverage of the manor now becomes apparent. Although its sample is slightly larger than the subsidy roll's, the clear division between Groups A and B has disappeared. The six most popular names are the same, but William is now the greatest favourite. Each accounts only for at least 5.9 per cent of men, but the proportion of the male population they cover has only fallen to 70.6 per cent.

Court rolls' merchets reveal a very similar pattern for women's names. A distinct Group A of **five** names emerges — Agnes, Edith, Matilda, Alice and Joan, in order of descending popularity. Each accounted for at least 11.0 per cent of women, and Agnes for 19.5 per cent. Group A names covered 79.9 per cent of women, and the least popular of them appeared **nearly three times as often** as the names — Ellen, Isabel, and Julian — which jointly headed Group B. The small sample sizes in the extent, subsidy roll and court rolls' record of deaths considerably restrict their usefulness as sources for women's names. Although they formed a significant proportion of Thornbury tenants — at least one in seven[14] — only a tiny proportion of the female population were tenants. Some deaths were recorded of villein women who held no land of the lord, apparently a mixèd group of unmarried girls and subtenants, but it is unlikely that more than one-third of actual women's deaths were recorded. Court rolls' merchets give eighteen women's names, deaths recorded there fourteen, the subsidy roll ten, and the extent only nine. The sources give a total twenty-three distinct names, of which sizeable proportions are missing from each. This usually affects rare names, but leading merchets Group B names like Ellen and Julian were rare in the subsidy roll and absent from the extent, and the Group A name Joan does not appear in either of the earlier sources. The clear division between Groups A and B does not appear in the smaller samples, and even in the recorded deaths it has become blurred.

This general pattern of forename use is well known and marks the end of a period of development which concentrated forename-choice. Many names were in use in late

twelfth- and early thirteenth-century England but numbers decreased rapidly in later years. Even at the end of the twelfth century there were small groups of extremely popular names and these increased in importance as the range in use narrowed. Henry, John, Richard, Robert and William together accounted for 38 per cent of recorded men's names in the twelfth century, 57 per cent in the thirteenth, and 64 per cent in the fourteenth.[15] They accounted for 65.7 per cent of recorded male deaths in Thornbury, although Henry was rare. I compared Thornbury names with those published for Holywell-cum-Needingworth and Warboys, Huntingdonshire, and with national figures for men's names.[16] Distinct Group A emerged for Holywell men and women (six names each, covering 75.9 per cent and 64.0 per cent of the population) and for Warboys women (eight names covering 78.3 per cent of the population), but not for Warboys men. Thornbury men's Group A names were the six most popular at Holywell and Warboys (though the order differed) except that Walter was replaced by Nicholas. Most Thornbury women's Group A names were popular in Huntingdonshire, but Joan was rare at Warboys and Edith not used on either manor. Thornbury men's names were closer to national trends than those of the other manors, but the popularity of Robert was an interesting local feature (see below).

Table 3. Popular men's names

| | England end C12 | England end C13 | Thornbury 1328-1352 (deaths) | Holywell C13-C15 | Warboys 1290-1347 |
	%	%	%	%	%
John	2	25	23.4[a]	20.9[a]	19.9
Nicholas	—[b]	—	1.9	6.2[a]	4.7
Richard	8	10	9.1[a]	8.0[a]	11.7
Robert	11	11	15.1[a]	8.9[a]	9.4
Thomas	—	—	7.9[a]	6.2[a]	5.9
Walter	—	—	12.1[a]	1.2	0.6
William	15	14	17.4[a]	25.8[a]	17.2
Sample	—	—	265	664	865

[a] Group A
[b] Figure not known

The names in Table 1 reflect the enormous influence of the Conquest on nomenclature. Nearly all those used in Thornbury were Norman introductions or had in earlier times been restricted to occasional monks or priests, such as John, Nicholas and Thomas.[17] A few, for example Denis, were brought in late in the twelfth century.[18] Anglo-Saxon forenames had almost been eclipsed, and only Edward had survived and retained a little popularity without being bolstered by a Norman form. The only Welsh name used was Rhys ('Rees') and it was rare, reflecting the limited Welsh influence on the estate. Note is of interest as a form of Cnut which

Table 4. Popular women's names

	Thornbury 1328-1352 (merchets) %	Holywell C13-C15 %	Warboys 1290-1347 %
Agnes	19.5[a]	10.0[a]	14.6[a]
Alice	15.6[a]	13.3[a]	18.7[a]
Beatrice	0.0	2.4	6.4[a]
Christine	1.9	3.8	7.1[a]
Edith	17.5[a]	0.0	0.0
Ellen	3.9	9.5[a]	1.5
Emma	0.6	3.8	9.7[a]
Joan	11.0[a]	12.8[a]	1.9
Julian	3.9	2.4	6.4[a]
Margaret	0.6	10.0[a]	7.1[a]
Matilda	16.2[a]	8.5[a]	8.2[a]
Sample	154	211	267

[a] Group A

Withycombe records was in use until the **thirteenth** century.[19] Isaac was rare before the Reformation except amongst Jews; it was also a local surname.

The women's names in Table 2 show a similar pattern, most having been introduced after the Conquest or — like Agnes and Joan — during the twelfth century.[20] Again, only one Anglo-Saxon forename (Edith) had remained popular. One local woman bore the Old Norse name Gunnell ('Gonilda').

The post-Conquest revolution in names was to a great extent a change to church names, but examination of particular names suggests a restricted picture of local peasant piety. The parish church was dedicated to the Virgin Mary, and there were separate chapels to Sts Arild and Mildburh. Churches in parishes bordering Thornbury were dedicated to the Virgin and to Sts Andrew, Helen, James, John the Evangelist, Leonard, Mary of Malmesbury, Michael and Oswald. By custom the Virgin's name was not used,[21] but of the nine available only John and Helen (= Ellen) were used by local people. The name of St Arild, traditionally martyred in Thornbury parish,[22] was not used. Five Apostles' names were used, but only John and Thomas were common and these probably owed their national popularity to the Baptist and to Becket.[23] St Thomas was quite a rare dedication in this county.[24] The popularity of church names followed national trends: attitudes to the local church were probably ambivalent, and are reflected in peasants' failure to pay one chaplain's wages and call for the dismissal of another.[25]

Royal names and those of lords and ladies of the manor show similar trends. Of names borne by post-Conquest kings, William, Richard and John were Group A names, but Henry was rare and Stephen almost unknown. The last may reflect the county's memories of Stephen's war with the Empress, and the popularity of Robert might reflect support for Robert of Gloucester. Edward's limited popularity at this time reflects the alienation of the peasantry in the reign of Edward II rather than the popularity of his shrine in St Peter's Abbey, Gloucester.[26] Many years of rule by Gilbert Clares (Earls of Gloucester and Hertford) produced few local ones and Hugh Audley (lord from 1317 to 1347) is known to have been unpopular from evidence of a peasant movement.[27] Some queens' and ladies' names were popular — Edith and Matilda, Alice and Joan — but these were common in England as a whole. The fact that Joan does not occur in the earliest documents may suggest, though the samples are small, that it was unpopular while Joan of Acre's time as lady of the manor (from 1290 to 1307) was remembered and later recovered. Opposition to Edward II might have meant support for Queen Isabel — Withycombe suggests the name's spread may have been partly due to her —[28] but her name was little more popular than her husband's.

This survey of peasant nomenclature has shown that manorial extents, subsidy rolls, and manorial court rolls are valuable sources for men's names. Extents and subsidy rolls are poor sources for women's names because of their restricted coverage, though the latter **may** accurately reflect nomenclature over wider areas, such as whole counties. Thornbury forenames provide excellent illustrations of the chief features of forename-choice in the period when the most fundamental change in the history of English forenames had been accomplished. Names introduced or popularised by the Normans had, with some more recent importations, swept nearly all before them; few Anglo-Saxon names were still used and few derived from Old Norse. Ranges of names in use had narrowed over the previous century and small groups had become extremely common. At least 98 per cent of these men and 90 per cent of women in a medieval rural parish had names familiar to us, and most of the common names Englishmen and women would bear for the next 650 years were already established among them.

This study has raised questions about how forename-choice may reflect peasants' religious and political views, but the lack of hard evidence for these makes proof difficult. They commonly gave their children saintly and royal names, but those of local saints, lords and ladies, and recent monarchs enjoyed little popularity. Withycombe's view that royal use made names popular or kept them in use must be questioned. The study has also drawn attention to regional variations in the use of names which seem to have affected women's names more than men's. These call for examination and explanation: sources are not lacking.

NOTES

1. E. G. Withycombe, **The Oxford Dictionary of English Christian Names,** 3rd edn, 1977.
2. P. A. Franklyn, Thornbury Manor in the Age of the Black Death, unpublished PhD thesis, Univ. of Birmingham, 1982 [hereafter given as Thesis].
3. PRO Ancient Extents E142/24.
4. Three names were not given or have been lost through damage to the manuscript.
5. Sir T. Phillipps, **Gloucestershire Subsidy Roll, 1 Edward III, Ad 1327.**
6. Stafford Record Office [hereafter given as SRO] D641/1/4C/1(i)-(iii),/2.
7. Thesis, pp.53-6.
8. **Ibid,** pp.67-77; Z. Razi, 'The Toronto School's Reconstitution of Medieval Peasant Society: A Critical View', **Past and Present** no.85, 1979, pp.141-57.
9. Thesis, pp.72-4.
10. Excluding three who had lived outside Thornbury.
11. J. Hajnal, 'European Marriage Patterns in Perspective', in D. V. Glass and D. E. C. Eversley (eds), **Population in History,** 1965, pp.101-43.
12. C. T. Martin, **The Record Interpreter,** 2nd edn, 1910, pp.451-64.
13. Withycombe, p.228.
14. Thesis, p.127.
15. Withycombe, pp.xxvii-xxviii.
16. E. B. Dewindt, **Land and People in Holywell-cum-Needingworth,** 1972, pp.184-5 fn.63; J. A. Raftis, **Warboys,** 1974, pp.64-5. (Peasants were not identified in either work, so results can only be approximate.) Withycombe, p.xxvi.
17. **Ibid,** pp.178, 227, 279.
18. **Ibid,** p.81.
19. **Ibid,** p.189.
20. **Ibid,** p.xxvii.
21. **Ibid,** p.211.
22. S. Rudder, **A New History of Gloucestershire,** 1779 reprinted 1977, p.756.
23. Withycombe, pp.178-9, 279-80.
24. I. Gray and E. Ralph (eds), **Guide to the Parish Records of the City of Bristol and the County of Gloucester,** 1963.
25. SRO D641/1/4C/1(iii) court sessions 22 October 1338, 2 January 1339, 25 February 1339, 22 March 1339; SRO D641/1/4C/2 court session 5 February 1347.
26. J. R. Maddicott, **Thomas of Lancaster, 1307-22,** 1970, p.107. W. H. Hart (ed), **Historia et Cartularium Monasterii Sancti Petri Gloucestriae,** i, 1863, p.46.
27. Thesis, pp.191-226.
28. Withycombe, p.164.