

DEATH IN FIFTEENTH-CENTURY TOTTENHAM

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Douglas Moss is a pharmacist who, on taking relatively early retirement, devoted the following years to studying economic history. His attention was drawn to the copious medieval documents at Bruce Castle, Tottenham, and he has published four articles dealing with different aspects of life in the village in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Three have appeared in the **Transactions of the London and Middlesex Archaeological Society**, one in the **Agricultural History Review**. He is a member of the Institute of Historical Research and has attended seminars under Professor F. R. H. Du Boulay, J. Bolton and Dr C. Barron, to which he has contributed papers.

Editors' Note

It is unfortunate that the demographic as well as the social and economic history of the fifteenth century is so neglected a field of study. The period is too early for the parish registers and too late for the Poll Tax, so the size, distribution and trends in population remain shrouded in obscurity. The editors of **Local Population Studies** are pleased, therefore, to have found a historian, Douglas Moss, willing to estimate the level of adult mortality during the reigns of Henry IV, Henry V and Henry VI. The estimate is derived from entries in the Court Roll of one of the manors of Tottenham. However, the Manor Court Rolls are difficult sources from which to derive demographic information. The problems, and some suggestions as to how they might be circumvented are discussed in a second article contributed by another medieval historian Larry Poos.

This paper is a demographic study, an examination of the life expectancy of a group of peasants in the Middlesex village of Tottenham in the fifteenth century.¹ It is, therefore, a very small scale examination of a small sample of peasants in a small village over a short span of years. Hence it does not pretend that anything has been proved about the life expectancy of the medieval peasantry. No attempt will be made to generalise from this localised study. Nevertheless, it is suggested that it should have value because of the lack of information about the mortality of the 'lower orders' in this period.

There has, indeed, been one considerable enquiry, by Dr Zvi Razi of Tel Aviv University, into the demography of the peasants of Halesowen in Worcestershire. This is on a considerably larger scale than anything attempted here. It covers a much longer period, 1270-1400, and is therefore able to compare the situation before, during and after the black death. It discusses fluctuations in population, marriage and illegitimacy rates, size of families, much more than pure mortality as in this article. Further, the size of Razi's sample is larger than mine.² Yet if, as a result of the Tottenham enquiry, a comparison emerges, between Worcestershire in the West Midlands and Middlesex, in the vicinity of London, this should be of value to students of history and demography.

Tottenham is situated to the north of London, just outside the former London County Council boundary, astride the A10, the roman Ermine Street. In the middle ages it was bounded by Highgate and Muswell hills to the west and the River Lea, the Essex boundary, on the east. The medieval manor included what is now Wood Green, then still a wooded area. The manor had been, until 1254, an appanage of the King of Scots, an outlying part of the honour of Huntingdon. In 1254 direct succession failed and a tripartite division took place into the Balliol manor, mainly in the south, the Pembroke manor in the north and the Bruce manor lying in between. When, because of rebellion, the Bruce and Balliol manors escheated, new lords replaced the Scots; at the period discussed the Balliol had become the Daubeny manor and the Bruce manor was frequently referred to as Fawkoner's. During the 1420s the three manors were re-united by John Gedney, a prominent London citizen, at various times alderman, mayor and a city representative in parliament.

Many documents have survived from the medieval period. There is a more or less continuous series of court rolls from 1375,³ a very detailed Pembroke manor rental dated 1368, more an extent than a rental,⁴ lists of tenants of all three manors in the 1390s,⁵ a Daubeny rental of 1417, a terrier of 1459⁶ and a 1467 rental.⁷ There are also over sixty surviving accounts.⁸ So there is in existence a mass of material of value to the historian.

The incentive to make this study came from a discussion in Dr Caroline Barron's medieval London seminar at the Institute of Historical Research. In the course of this discussion the archaeologist John Schofield referred to the excavation of a late twelfth-century cemetery at the church of St Nicholas Shambles, near Newgate, probably at the time a district inhabited by the poor. Examination of the bones had shown that 75 per cent died before the age of thirty-five and only 5 per cent attained forty-five years. (A report of this excavation has since been published.⁹) I felt it would be interesting to try to discover the ages attained by medieval peasants, the class which formed the bulk of the population at that time, and to see how these compared with the findings of the London excavation.

For this study the basic requirement is a long series of court rolls and, as stated above, we have this in Tottenham. The series is more or less continuous, but there are gaps. There are no rolls for the Daubeny manor from the seventh to twelfth years of Richard II's reign, none exist for Pembroke between the eighth and fourteenth years. Besides this, a number of membranes of various dates are so damaged as to be indecipherable. But enough remains to make the enquiry possible.

The great difficulty is that, while one knows when the tenants died, there is no record of their date of birth. My first attempt to overcome this obstacle was based on the fact that, at the age of twelve, peasants had to enroll in a tithing, or frankpledge. This might have made the solution of the problem a very simple one. It is optimistic in the extreme to imagine that any investigation of medieval documents can be a simple matter. The total of recorded entries into tithings during the reign of Richard II, twenty-two years, was only nineteen; many of whom are never referred to later as tenants. It would appear that normally entry into a tithing was not the concern of the manorial courts; only if an individual was found not to be in one, when he should have been, did the court order him to be enrolled. Some other method had to be devised for estimating the age of the peasants.

In Halesowen, Dr Razi was assisted by a local custom which, alas, did not prevail in Tottenham. In the Worcestershire manor a peasant could not become a tenant until he was twenty. Basing his calculations on this circumstance Dr Razi assumed, somewhat surprisingly, that a man was twenty when first appearing in the rolls as a tenant.¹⁰ He admits that sometimes he could be older, which would seem something of an understatement. However that may be, this solution of my problem was not open to me.

At this point it becomes necessary to describe the sample used in this investigation. Between the years 11 Henry IV and 25 Henry VI, a thirty-seven year period, a total of ninety-one tenant deaths was recorded, sixty-eight male, twenty-three female. Six of these can be eliminated as being outsiders, five from London, Joan, widow of John Balshin, skinner, Thomas Bassett, 'girdeler', Thomas Baxter, 'bocher', Thomas Brydlington, draper and John Bunting. Another, Richard Sonoman, is described as 'of Enfeld' (Enfield, to the north). The problem was to arrive at the ages of the remaining eighty-five.

The method employed was to discover the first reference to them in the rolls and then attach an age to that reference. Obviously it could not be less than twelve. Prior to that age land could not be occupied, a person could not serve on juries or be a manor official, debts could not be contracted, offences would be answered for by the parents. None of the differing circumstances leading to appearance in the rolls would exist.

Dr Razi believes that over a five year period practically all the names of villeins would appear.¹¹ If this is so the age at first appearance would be not more than seventeen. It was decided to test this for Tottenham. Pembroke manor, which has the most

detailed records, lists the unfree tenants in the year 19 Richard II, thirty-seven in all, but four of the names are illegible.¹² Going through all names mentioned in the years 17-21 Richard II inclusive, the results proved to be unsatisfactory. The names of two tenants did not appear at all elsewhere during those years: on the other hand 260 names do appear, 220 men, 40 women. Women's names do not appear as frequently in manor court records, although there were probably as many present as men. So one would arrive at 440 inhabitants of Pembroke manor aged twelve or more, and at least a thousand for Tottenham as a whole, which is obviously incredible. Many a medieval town would have fewer inhabitants. Probably many of the 260 people recorded were not Tottenham residents.

Next, an attempt was made to come to a solution by seeing what were the intervals occurring between mention of individuals. This too, was not helpful. Most of the tenants appeared every year, generally several times. For example, nineteen of the twenty-two who lived in the reign of Richard II appeared year after year. Others appeared once or twice, perhaps several times over a short period because of special circumstances, and then disappeared again into obscurity.

The rather unsatisfactory solution at which I arrived was to attach two separate mean ages to the tenant's first appearance. Obviously this had to be more than twelve: the tables which follow are based on ascribing ages of both sixteen and twenty.

The ages at death calculated by this method would be minimal, there are no existing court rolls before 1375, and there are the gaps already referred to. Many of the individuals who first appear, say, in 1379, could very well have appeared in earlier rolls now lost. The fact that five Pembroke tenants are mentioned in the 1368 rental bears out this assumption. One must always have this consideration in mind.

Yet more problems remain to be solved. Those researching medieval court rolls encounter many pitfalls, as described by Dr Razi in his criticism of the Toronto school.¹³

But one pitfall very much in evidence in Halesowen did not affect the Tottenham enquiry, namely, the unsettled state of surnames, or even their complete absence. By the late fourteenth century surnames were generally permanent. Five Tottenham families did have alternative surnames, but identity was made clear by the use, sooner or later, of the term 'alias'. They were Sewall alias Cacher, Carpenter alias Fetteyman, Shepherd alias Hope, Hawte or Hawkt alias Hale, and Bunting alias Clodhame. Alternative spellings had to be carefully noted. Besides that just mentioned I came across, for example, Vynch and Fynch, Absolon and Upsolon, Attegore and Adgore, Brok and Brook, Hod and Hood, Yonge, Jonge and Young. Much care had to be taken to determine identities and avoid multiplying the tenants enumerated.

Perhaps yet more frustrating was the very common practice of giving sons the same first name as their fathers. Among others, a whole series of William Drakes, John Smiths, John Baldwyns and John Hoods appear. One would hope that these would

be distinguished by the use of the terms 'senior' and 'junior', and sometimes this was done. Frequently, though, it was not, and to me, it remains a mystery as to how the manor authorities knew which John Hood or John Absolon was being referred to. Only meticulous inspection of the rolls series could prevent a son's death being attributed to the father, thus raising the individual's age at decease. And the missing and damaged documents did not help. One hopes that all these problems have been dealt with satisfactorily. Every effort has been made to ensure this.

III

What were the results of the enquiry? Of the eighty-five tenants whose deaths were recorded an earlier mention in the rolls could not be traced in fourteen cases. The sample under examination numbers, therefore, seventy-one, forty-nine male, twenty-two female. The failure to trace these fourteen tenants must be ascribed to imperfections in the records, especially the hiatus in Richard II's reign already referred to. (The Bruce manor roll for the last year of the reign is also missing.) Then there are the damaged documents. Further, it will be recalled that some tenants, usually small ones, appear infrequently.

With the exception of Robert Bonyers and William Lovekin, who each held a quarter virgate, all those not traced held very small holdings at their death. So while all must have been entered when they bought their holdings, the gaps and damaged membranes would appear to explain this failure to trace every individual tenant.

Table 1 lists year by year the number of recorded deaths of tenants during the period discussed and, where known, the interval elapsing between the first mention found in the rolls and the individual's death. The mean expectation of life at the time of this first entry was calculated from the table as a little under twenty-nine years for all, and 30.1 for men only, 23.2 for women. The mean number of deaths per year was 2.5 but it will be seen that this figure was considerably exceeded in some years.

In the year 11 Henry IV there were five deaths, in the year 4 Henry V there were six deaths followed by five in the next year. There were four deaths in 8 Henry V, five in 5 Henry VI, the number rose to as high as seven in 12 Henry VI and there were four in 19 Henry VI. In all but two of these years of higher mortality the deaths coincided with national outbreaks of plague,¹⁴ the exceptions being the years 11 Henry IV and 4 Henry V.

Table 2 shows the age distribution at death decade by decade, and is based on the hypothetical age of sixteen on first entry in the rolls (panel 1) or on that age being twenty (panel 2). Of course it is realised that, whichever of these two ascribed ages is considered, in reality there would be deviations from the figure. One can only assume that, over the whole sample of seventy-one, the mean age is a reliable base for analysis.

Independent of the choice of sixteen or twenty as the mean age of first entry, it

Table 1. Deaths reported during a regnal year

Regnal year ¹	Number of deaths	Interval in years between first entry in rolls (where traced) and death
11 Henry IV	5	42, 8, 34, 30, 34
12 Henry IV	1	19
13 Henry IV	1	—
14 Henry IV	1	36
1 Henry V	1	37
2 Henry V	4	38, 7, 3, —
3 Henry V	1	17
4 Henry V	6	40, 24, 8, 36, —, —,
5 Henry V	5	34, 50, 26, 34, 50
6 Henry V	2	22, —
7 Henry V	1	43
8 Henry V	4	44, 40, —, —,
9 Henry V	3	54, 45, —,
10 Henry V	2	11, —
1 Henry VI	1	—
2 Henry VI	3	27, 47, 47
3 Henry VI	4	43, 32, 27, —
4 Henry VI	2	44, 27
5 Henry VI	5	31, 5, 5, 35, —
6 Henry VI	1	36
7 Henry VI	2	12, 49
8 Henry VI	3	13, —, 16
9 Henry VI	1	33
10 Henry VI	1	11
11 Henry VI	1	32
12 Henry VI	7	18, 37, 7, 39, 41, 17, 38
13 Henry VI	3	18, 27, 29
14 Henry VI	1	—
15 Henry VI	2	5, 20
17 Henry VI	4	24, 17, 44, 17
18 Henry VI	3	18, 36, 24
19 Henry VI	2	—, 15
20 Henry VI	3	50, —, —,
21 Henry VI	1	7
23 Henry VI	1	—
24 Henry VI	2	—, —
25 Henry VI	1	38

Number of tenants traced 71

Total sample 91, of whom 6 were outsiders

Mean deaths per year 2.4

Total number of year intervals 2024

Mean expectation of life at first mention in court rolls of 49 men traced 30.1 years

Mean expectation of life at first mention in court rolls of 22 women traced 23.2 years

Note

1. The reign of Henry IV commenced in September 1399, that of Henry V in March 1413, and that of Henry VI in September 1422. The regnal year 11 Henry IV, for example relates to the year September 1410 to September 1411. However, it should not be assumed that the deaths which were reported periodically to the Manor Court necessarily took place during this precise period.

would appear that the women had a much shorter life-expectancy than the men. This seems to me improbable. It can be ascribed to the infrequent appearance of women in the court rolls, rendering the date of the first appearance unreliable for my purpose. Therefore these figures will be ignored.

For the men alone an assumed age on first appearance of sixteen gives 59 per cent living beyond the age of fifty and 24 per cent beyond sixty years. Assuming that the average age on first mention occurred at the age of twenty produces even more astonishing results: 63 per cent exceeding fifty years and 37 per cent sixty years. (Comment as to which hypothetical age, at first appearance in the rolls, is more likely to be the correct one will be deferred.)

Table 2. Age distribution at death assuming mean age of 16 or 20 at first traced appearance in court rolls

Assumed mean age at first appearance = 16

Age	Men	%	Women	%
16-19	1	2.04	0	
20-29	6	12.25	6	27.27
30-39	6	12.25	6	27.27
40-49	7	14.28	6	27.27
50-59	17	34.69	4	18.19
60 +	12	24.49	0	
Total	49	100	22	100

Assumed mean age at first appearance = 20

Age	Men	%	Women	%
20-29	8	16.33	2	9.09
30-39	6	12.24	7	31.82
40-49	4	8.16	7	31.82
50-59	13	26.53	6	27.27
60 +	18	36.74	0	
Total	49	100	22	100

By comparison, Dr Razi's Halesowen results for the post black death period after 1348 produce a rather higher life expectation at age twenty, of 32.5 years.¹⁵ The age structure in 1393 shows 38 per cent were over fifty years of age with 16 per cent in their fifties and 22 per cent over sixty.

The Tottenham figures provide an interesting contrast to Razi's findings. In Halesowen 22 per cent were over sixty, in Tottenham 24 per cent of men, assuming a mean age on first appearance of sixteen or 37 per cent of men, assuming a mean age on first appearance of twenty. As the Halesowen figures assume an age of twenty on first appearance as tenants the latter comparison would seem the more

appropriate. Hence the Tottenham peasants appear to have had a distinct advantage at the later ages in comparison with 1393. But the expectation of life over the whole Halesowen post plague years was greater, and this is the more valid, more relevant comparison.

All in all, the Tottenham peasants would appear to come through very creditably. Of those who did attain adult age a high proportion lived on to be over fifty. It can emphatically be stated that we have come a long way from the position obtaining in the twelfth century London cemetery excavated by Schofield and Dyson.

It remains to consider whether it is more likely that a mean age of sixteen or of twenty at first mention in the rolls is acceptable. On both assumptions the Tottenham peasants enjoyed a greater expectation of life than Razi found in Halesowen in the late fourteenth century. However, the assumption of a mean age on entry of twenty does seem highly unlikely to be correct. First, that 37 per cent passed sixty years seems improbable. Secondly, a mean age of sixteen at first appearance seems more plausible given the presence in Tottenham of the custom of Borough English, that is, it was the younger son who inherited. Admittedly, if the peasants lived for many years, even a younger son could be advanced in years when he became the lord's tenant; but the assumption of a mean age on entry of sixteen does seem to produce the more plausible result. (Compare Table 2, panels 1 and 2.

More significantly, it does seem that, considering one is dealing with a sample of the poorer mass of the population, the expectancy of life revealed is remarkably high, both in Halesowen and Tottenham. How can one account for this? A number of considerations can be taken into account. Hatcher cites Wrigley in support of there being fewer deaths from plague in rural areas,¹⁶ though, as has been noted, plague does not seem to have passed Tottenham by. Then, after several generations of peasants had lived through years marked by pestilence, those surviving could have been particularly tough specimens, individuals with strong constitutions due to their inherited nature.

One must also remember that the fifteenth century was the period Thorold Rogers called the golden age of the English labourer. The reduced population gave distinct advantages to the working classes. Wages rose, cereal prices fell, the proportion of peasants holding larger tenements, even of more than a virgate, rose. Imposition of some previously general fines, such as merchet, seems to have ceased. These factors would combine to raise living standards and so tend to increase length of life. In Tottenham there may have been special circumstances working in this direction. In the fifteenth century, London butchers bought land there and moved in, it would seem, to intercept cattle coming to London from the north, to purchase the better specimens and fatten them on the meadows by the River Lea before putting them on the London market. Under Gedney's lordship, too, industrial employment became available at a brickworks and at fulling mills. There were numerous inns and common lodging houses for those passing along what was a main road into London or perhaps, dwelling in the village temporarily.¹⁷ All this would add to opportunities of employment: perhaps there were some supplies of

cheap meat to be had. Such factors would have tended to raise living standards and contribute to the somewhat surprising survival figures revealed in the medieval records.

V

An attempt has been made to trace the life expectation of a sample of the Middlesex peasants in the village of Tottenham in the first half of the fifteenth century. Some problems presenting themselves to those who investigate medieval records have been described. A formula has been devised to overcome the fact that there is no information on the date of birth of the peasants in the sample. Some reasons have been advanced to explain the length of life attained by these peasants.

In conclusion, it must be reiterated that no definite conclusions are suggested as to the life expectancy of the peasant population. A sample of seventy-one peasants in one small village over a period of thirty-five years could not be expected to provide a significant generalisation. More work of a similar nature will have to be done before one can say how typical these results are, or, indeed, how typical Dr Razi's are. However, the two enquiries produce facts in an under-investigated field. They imply that, as in Africa today, if a peasant could survive infancy and childhood, he would have, if conditions were at all reasonable, a chance of living to a considerable age.

NOTES

1. This paper was first read in Mr James Bolton's seminar at the Institute of Historical Research. I wish gratefully to acknowledge assistance from Mr Bolton and members of the seminar, from Dr Caroline Barron, Dr Andrew Prescott and also from Mr Ian Murray, Haringey Borough archivist, who placed the Bruce Castle documents at my disposal. I must also thank Mrs Lily McColgan for typing the manuscript. Finally, I must express my gratitude to Professor Joel Rosenthal, of New York State University, for providing the seminal idea which led to this article.
2. Z. Razi, **Life, marriage and death in a medieval parish**, 1980.
3. Bruce Castle (Tottenham) Archives [hereafter given as BC] M R 13, 14, 20, 26, 27, 30, 33, 34, 35, 37, 38, 39, 43, 47, 48, 67.
4. BC MR 9a.
5. Borough of Tottenham, Libraries and Museum, **Tottenham Manorial Rolls**, vol. II, 1961, pp. 88, 119, 284.
6. BC MR 75.
7. BC MR 89.
8. BC MR 10.
9. A. Dyson and J. Schofield, 'Excavations in the City of London, second interim report 1974-8', **Transactions of the London and Middlesex Archaeological Society**, vol. 32, 1981, pp. 77-8.
10. Razi, p. 43.
11. **ibid.**, pp. 24-5.
12. **Tottenham Manorial Rolls**, vol. II, p. 284.
13. Z. Razi, 'Reconsideration of medieval peasant society: a critical view', **Past and Present**, no. 85, 1979, pp. 141-59.
14. J. Hatcher, **Plague, population and the English economy, 1348-1530**, 1977, p. 57.
15. Razi, **Life, marriage and death**, pp. 150-1.
16. Hatcher, p. 25.
17. D. Moss, 'The economic development of a Middlesex village', **Agriculture History Review**, vol. 28, 1980, pp. 104-14.