

# DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE IN KIBWORTH HARCOURT, LEICESTERSHIRE, IN THE LATER MIDDLE AGES

David Postles

David Postles is Marc Fitch Research Fellow in the Department of English Local History, University of Leicester. His research is concerned with naming processes in the English past

## Introduction

Demographic trends in the later middle ages still defy confident explanation. Earlier analyses employed non-demographic indicators – such as the price of land – to reflect assumed trends. Those using directly demographic data have made estimates at two levels: the national and the local or regional. Estimates of the global population of England have been based precariously on reflatting figures in sources such as Domesday Book and the Poll Taxes of 1377-81, using a putative multiplier, since these sources comprehended only part of the population. Studies at the micro-level have considered data from manorial court rolls, mainly relating to adult males. The ‘Toronto School’ (the group of historians at the Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies who, over the past thirty years, have conducted detailed research into the estates of Ramsey Abbey), Razi and, more recently, Judith Bennett, have reconstituted the adult male population from appearances in and suit of court respectively from some manors of Ramsey Abbey, Halesowen and Brigstock. Possibly more accurate data and trends have been produced by Titow for Taunton and Poos for six manors in north Essex. Their data have been derived from tithing- or hundred-penny payments, where it was still levied flexibly at a rate per head, rather than becoming a fixed sum for the whole community. Data from this latter source are likely to be the most accurate.<sup>1</sup>

The problem with studies at the micro-level is that they may be subject to wide ‘stochastic variation’. The data for Taunton – currently being reworked by Harold Fox and Chris Thornton – relate to a particular type of federated manor with an urban centre. The data for north Essex, presented by Poos, are genuinely regional, covering six manors, but the quality of the data is variable by manor. On the other hand, the importance of localised studies is that, not only do they present relatively more accurate data, but demographic change may also have been variable regionally. Particularly is this so in the case of the demographic response to the ‘crisis’ of 1315-7 and the level of recovery after the plague of 1348-9. A truly accurate reflection of overall demographic change may, in the end, only be perceived through an accumulation of studies at the micro-level. Long-run demographic change in the later middle ages had important implications for agrarian change, the relationship between social groups, and the condition of the peasantry.

## Tithing-penny payments at Kibworth Harcourt

Demographic change at Kibworth Harcourt in the later middle ages exhibits important regional variation from other places studied to date. Kibworth Harcourt is located a short distance south of Leicester, in a *pays* (or region) of Leicestershire which is now predominantly grassland.<sup>2</sup> The largest manor in the community was held by Merton College, which also held the liberty or franchise of the view of frankpledge. Consequently, all males aged over twelve in the community – on all manors there, not just Merton’s – were required to be in one of the four tithing groups of Merton, each under a chief pledge. It seems quite clear that all these males over twelve paid tithing-penny flexibly at the rate of 1d. per head, and it is these data which are employed here to reconstruct the demographic trend at Kibworth between c.1280 and c.1450. Payment of the tithing-penny acts as an index of the adult male population over twelve and thus, by and large, of demographic trends.

The nature of the payment needs to be established. The designation of the payment changed over the later middle ages, and this can cause some confusion. Tithing-penny payments were often alluded to as the common fine. On some manors, this common fine became levied as a fixed sum for the whole community. The common fine was levied at Kibworth, but was only part of the exaction for tithing-penny. The common fine (*communis finis; de communi fine*) was levied at Kibworth at the equivalent of the Easter (Hockday) view, although this was often not held until early summer. The fine was fixed initially at 20s., but later at a reduced level of 9s.1d. Another payment, however, was also exacted in association with frankpledge and tithing, but this sum was known by various appellations during the later middle ages, although its nature was always the same. This payment was received at the equivalent of the Michaelmas view of frankpledge (although often not collected until winter). Tithing-penny payments thus consisted of two parts: a fixed levy at Easter and a flexible levy at Michaelmas. It is the latter which can be employed to reflect changes of population at Kibworth.

The different nature of these payments can be established from some sporadic, but specific, entries on the court rolls:

*‘quod dant de communi fine nichil ad presens Item quod dant de cap’ ad presens iijs viijd.’* (October 1352) (that they give at the moment nothing for the common fine Item that they give now for ‘head-money’ 3s.8d.);

*‘quod dant de capit’ iijs viijd Et nichil de communi fine ad presens quia ad visum post Pascha’.* (November 1363) (that they give 3s.8d. for ‘head-money’ And nothing for the common fine now because [it is taken] at the view after Easter).

These entries, amongst several others, illustrate that the two sums were collected at the two different views of frankpledge (the two views equivalent to the two dates of the sheriff’s tourn).

For much of the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the levy at Michaelmas was designated *capitales denarii*. During the later fourteenth century, however, terminology became confused. Whilst the term *capit' denar'* was still in use in the 1360s, and even as late as 1378, the more frequent term from the 1350s was *de capit'*. There seems little doubt that this later term was simply a confusion of the earlier *capitales denarii*, and that it had nothing to do with payments of chevage to leave the manor. More confusingly, from c.1379, the common fine (the fixed sum) became known as the *certum (de certo)* (reflecting its fixed nature), and from the 1390s the flexible levy at Michaelmas was also referred to as *certum*. It is evident, however, that the payment at Michaelmas was still received on the basis of 1d. per male over twelve in tithing, not least because the sum varied from year to year.<sup>3</sup> This use of the term *certum* for both levies, however, was transient. In the early fifteenth century, the court rolls again referred to the levies respectively as *communis finis* and *de capitalibus denar'*.

The real nature of the flexible levy, however, can be illumined by specific memoranda on the court rolls and the early designation of the levy. The earliest references in the court rolls allude to the payments as: *De hominibus qui sunt in franciplegagio* (from the men who are in frankpledge) (1286) and *De capitibus dicene* (1288 and 1289). The earliest account rolls provide the same insight: *Fines Curie Et de vjs de receptis de capitibus dicene* (Fines of court And 6s. of receipts from the heads in tithing) (1289); *de capitibus dicene* (1287 and 1292). These receipts are quite evidently the equivalent of what are subsequently known as *capitales denarii*. Taking designations in account rolls to c.1330, the payment was specified as *de capitalibus denar'* (eight years), *de capital' den'* (three years), *de capitalibus den'* (eight years). Thereafter, the variant forms comprised *de capit' denar'* and *de capital' denar'*. The same terminology existed in the court rolls.

Other memoranda reveal the flexible nature of the levy, based on payment of 1d. per head in tithing. In 1295, an inquisition was held whether Osbert *sutor* should contribute to the payment: '*Osbert' sutor dat pro inquisitione habenda utrum debet dare argentum franciplegagii uel non'* (Osbert *sutor* gives [a fine] to have an inquisition whether he should give frankpledge money or not). Another inquisition exonerated a tenant from all payments except tithing-penny at the rate of 1d. per head: '*Unde inquisicio dicit quod nichil dedit nec aliquid exigunt* (that is, the lords, Merton College) *nisi jd pro capite suo'* (Whereby the inquisition says that he gave nothing nor did they exact anything except 1d. for his head[-money]). In 1284, there was no receipt from the payment, since it was not certain how many men there were ('*De capitibus (sic) denariis [nichil] quia nescuntur quantum de hominibus'* (From head-money [nothing] because they do not know how many men). In 1298, the account roll reflected that the sum received should be based on the number in tithing ('*Preterea de capit' den' secundum numerum hominum in decena existencium'*) (Moreover from head-money according to the number of men being in tithing). In 1378, the payment was qualified in the court rolls as 1d. per head: '*de den' capit' prouenientibus de numero tot' capit' quilibet ad jd'* (From head-money coming from the total number of heads each at 1d.). From 1379 to 1417 (in thirteen years), the level of payment was explained in the court rolls because there were no more heads: '*et non plus quia non [sunt] pluria capita.'* These memoranda establish that the sum

received at the view at Michaelmas was based flexibly on 1d. from each male over twelve in tithing.

The receipts from this payment can be accumulated for 102 of the years between c.1280 and c.1450. After 1450, the court rolls no longer recorded the payment. Most of the data was initially collected from the court rolls. Before 1350, however, there is a large gap in the series of extant court rolls between c.1290 and the early 1340s. Not much of these data have been restored from the account rolls, which record the payment separately through to c.1350 (thereafter it is subsumed in the *perquisita* – or fines and proceeds – of the courts). From these two sources, it has thus been possible to amalgamate data for a significant proportion of the years.

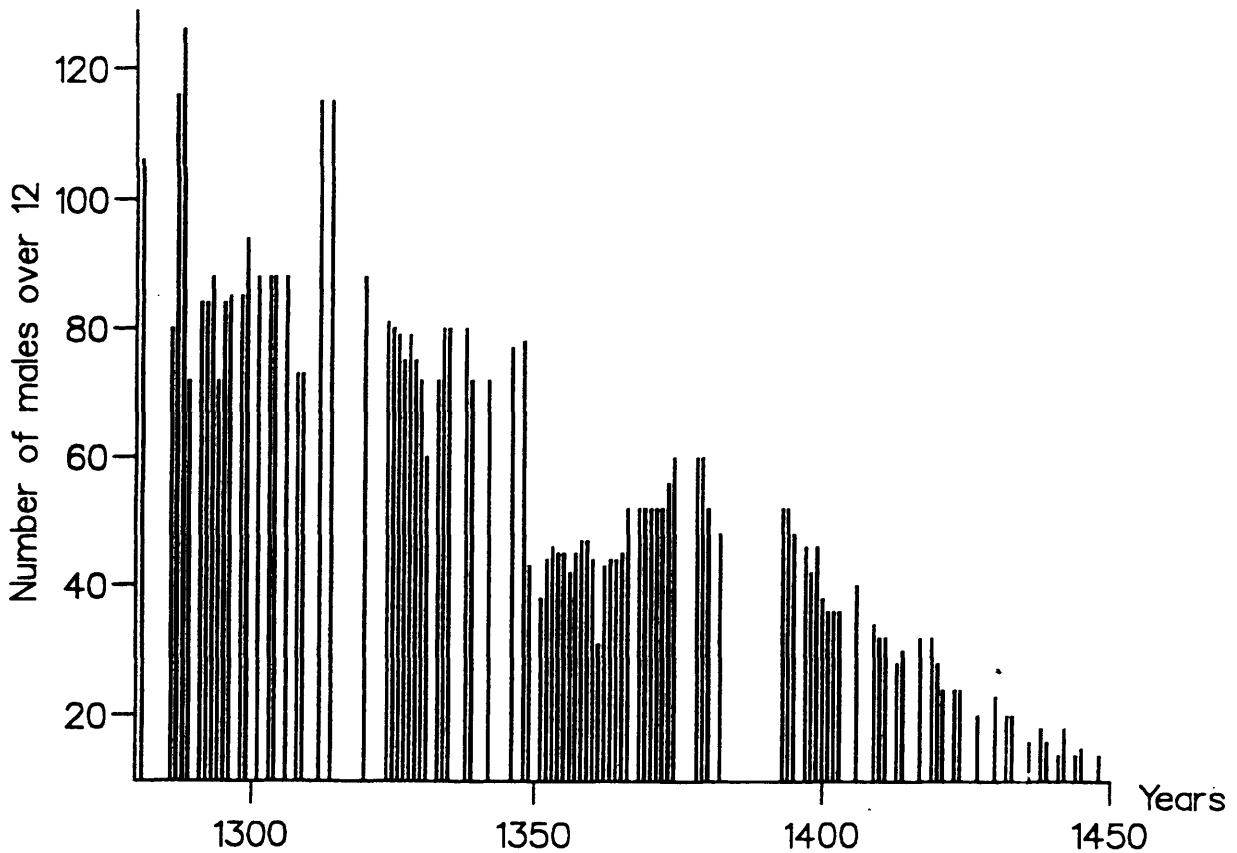
### **Administration and collection**

There remain, however, some questions which must be addressed about the data. First, there is the problem of how comprehensive are the data; second, and relatedly, is that of the efficiency of the administration and collection of the money, with possible changes over time. It is known that some males would be exempt from being in tithing – especially those not resident for at least a year (possibly including some servants). There is also the question of those newly admitted into tithing and those presented for not being in tithing. Poos compensated by adding these to the figure for tithing-penny.<sup>4</sup> At Kibworth, however, it is not clear that these males had not paid tithing-penny; the sum may have been exacted at the end of the proceedings. Moreover, it is very probable that these males would have been included in the following year, so that the trend is still reasonably accurate.

Until the fifteenth century, the administration seems to have been fairly effective. This efficiency may be implicit paradoxically in the presentment of males for not being in tithing and the level of new admissions. In 1278, eleven males were presented for not being in tithing – all sons (*fili*); in 1280, another seven; in 1292 five. In 1276, two men were excused being in tithing because of their age, one professedly 100 years old (*fuit de Etate V<sup>xx</sup>*).

Towards the middle of the fifteenth century, the efficiency suffered perceptibly. The failure can be illumined by comparing the level of receipt of the sum with the number of males who appeared in court. Data for two sample courts are sufficiently illustrative. In October 1436, the receipt comprised only 16d., but twenty-eight males appeared in court; in November 1441, only 18d. accrued, but thirty males appeared in court. It is obvious that the sums could not represent all the males on the manor. With these figures, there would have been insufficient males to fill the multiple manorial offices: reeve; two affeerors; four chief pledges; two ale-tasters; six *superuiores terrarum et tenementorum* (overseers of the lands and tenements); and, when in use, the jury of presentment (known here simply as the *Inquisicio*), which comprised twelve men. There would have needed to be a great concentration of office-holding, but this did not occur. In 1436, twelve offices were held by ten different men; in 1441, twelve offices were distributed amongst eleven men. The collection of

Figure 1 Population of males over 12: Kibworth Harcourt, 1280-1450



the money had obviously become inefficient. Data after c.1430, although represented on the histogram (Figure 1), have therefore been discounted as inaccurate.

The reliability of the payments before this date can also be established by two independent controls. A tithing list and a count of those in the four tithings were both made in c.1280-90. The listing suggests about 120 males in tithing, taking due account of cancellations of names.<sup>5</sup> The count provides 112 or 115 in tithing (there was some confusion as to whether there were thirty-one or twenty-eight in one tithing). The *capitales denarii* suggest a figure of 106 males in 1281, 116 in 1287, and 126 in 1288. The Poll Taxes of 1377-9 enumerated sixty-four males liable to tax (over the age of fourteen).<sup>6</sup> There were also ten male servants, but some of these may not have been required to be in tithing. The contemporary receipts *de capit'* suggest an adult male population of about sixty. There is therefore a degree of correlation between these independent controls and the receipts of money.

### The demographic profile of Kibworth Harcourt

The demographic trend at Kibworth can thus be described. From c.1280 to c.1320, despite some sharp fluctuations, there was an underlying stable trend. The vicissitudes may owe more to the problems of collection than demographic changes. The fluctuations have been eliminated in Table 1. The check on the validity of Table 1 is that in the 1340s, the payments represented about eighty males.

**Table 1 Mean levels of population of males over twelve c.1280-c.1320**

number of years with data	mean	median	males over twelve		Q1	Q3	sd
			min	max			
39	84.56	80	60	126	75	88	14.62

**Notes:** min = minimum number in any one year; max = maximum number in any one year; Q1 = first (lower quartile) in the range of numbers over all years; Q3 = third (upper) quartile in the same range; sd = standard deviation. These statistics have been produced using Minitab.

This stable trend was only briefly interrupted by the agrarian 'crisis' of 1315-7.<sup>7</sup> That dislocation had no enduring effect at Kibworth. The level of population remained fairly stable through to 1348. The pestilence of 1349, however, produced the first secular downturn; mortality reduced the population of males over twelve by about 40 per cent (and possibly by a higher rate than other susceptible cohorts). The population then remained at this new low, but stable, level through the 1350s. Recovery occurred during the 1360s and 1370s. By 1377, the population stood about 25 per cent above the level in 1349-50. This recovery, however, was only relative, since the level in 1377 was still 25 per cent below that of the late 1340s, before the plague. Towards the end of the fourteenth century, another decline set in, although it may have been compounded by the declining efficiency of collection of the pennies.

The data do not explain the causes of demographic change – whether exogamous or endogamous. The unknown variable is the relative level of in-migration and out-migration. Some information could be extracted from the court rolls, but it would tend to be anecdotal, with fears about its comprehensiveness. For example, the court rolls before c.1350 tended to acknowledge immigration to the manor, but after that date the emphasis is on recording villein *fugitivi* (who left the manor without the lord's permission).<sup>8</sup> It is known, however, from the changes of surnames in the vill, that there was also much immigration during the later fourteenth century. The rolls simply reflect administrative concerns, rather than real processes. The data presented here therefore stand only if there is assumed to be an equilibrium between immigration and emigration.

With these allowances, the data present some local variation of demographic change. The impact of 1315-7 seems to have been short-lived. The population in the early fourteenth century exhibited some stability rather than decline. The first secular downturn was in 1349. Thereafter there was some stability at this new, low level. The recovery of the 1360s and 1370s was substantial by comparison with the level immediately after the plague, but still remained at a level significantly below the late 1340s before the plague. It was only a relative recovery. The trend at Kibworth cannot be used even as a regional model, however, since more evidence is needed of trends in other similar vills.

## APPENDIX

### SOME DATA FROM KIBWORTH BEAUCHAMP

Some similar data can be abstracted from the views of frankpledge of the adjacent manor of Kibworth Beauchamp. It seems that here only one view was held, equivalent to the Michaelmas sheriff's tourn. Here the fine levied was called the common fine (*communis finis*), but it seems to have continued to be flexible. [However, a separate figure given for the appurtenant manor of Mowsley in 1348 was called *capitales denarii*. They seem nonetheless to have been equivalent terms]. Data are available for 1346-51 inclusive and 1354, tabulated below.<sup>9</sup>

**Table 2** Inferred male population over twelve years at Kibworth Beauchamp 1346-54

Year	inferred males (aged 12+ years)	population (mean)	change (per cent)
1346	96		
1347	108	1346-8=109	
1348	122		mean of 1346/8 to 1349
1349	40		= - 63%
1350	72		
1351	84	1350-4= 84	1349 to mean of 1350-4
1354	96		= +110 %

The extent of the recovery immediately after the plague, according to these figures, casts a shadow of doubt over their reliability after 1349. Before 1349, the payments do seem to reflect actual numbers of males. Although the payment was in rounded shillings in 1346-7, in 1348 it was 10s.2d. In 1347, the payment was qualified as *hac vice* (on this occasion). In 1349, the drastic decline in the amount paid was explained: *Et non plus propter pestilenciam* (and no more because of the plague). After 1349, however, the sums are all rounded shillings – indeed, seemingly at increments of 1s. over the initial years. Moreover, in 1350-1, the payments were made *de gracia* (by favour), which suggests some sort of negotiation between lord and community. One explanation might be that the lord, in response to the decline in the proceeds of the flexible common fine, negotiated a fine which, although lower than the level before the plague, yet was higher than would have accrued if levied per head. In these years 1350-4, the fine was defined as so much *ad presens* (at this time), but that phrase may merely indicate annual reviews of the level by discussion between lord and tenant, rather than any persistent real flexibility. The figures for Kibworth Beauchamp may therefore only be totally accurate demographically for the decline up to 1350. The figures after 1350 must still represent the ability of the community to pay, so assume some demographic recovery, but are only indicators of that change.

## NOTES

1. The most recent considerations of previous research are by R.M. Smith, 'Demographic developments in rural England, 1300-48: a survey', in B.M.S. Campbell, (ed.), **Before the Black Death: studies in the 'Crisis' of the early fourteenth century**, Manchester, 1991, pp.25-77; 'Human resources', in G. Astill and A. Grant, (eds), **The countryside of medieval England**, Oxford, 1988, pp.188-212. For the use of tithing-penny data, L.R. Poos, 'The rural population of Essex in the later middle ages', **Economic History Review**, 2nd ser, XXXVIII, 1985, pp.515-31. For the most recent use of counts of appearances by males in court, J.M. Bennett, **Women in the medieval English countryside: gender and household in Brigstock before the plague**, Oxford, 1987, p.13 (Table 1.1).
2. See generally, C. Howell, **Land, family and inheritance in transition: Kibworth Harcourt 1280-1700**, Cambridge, 1983. Also, R.H. Hilton, 'Kibworth Harcourt – a Merton College manor in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries', in Hilton, **Class conflict and crisis of feudalism. Essays in medieval social history**, London, 1985, pp.1-17. I have consulted all the court rolls (Merton College Muniments MM 6351-6447) and all the account rolls between 1287 and 1350 (MM 6196-6244), in the course of my research into naming patterns in medieval Leicestershire. The court rolls are gathered in such a way that the references are confusing. I therefore give dates of rolls rather than references. I am grateful to John Burgass of Merton College for his help and patience. Cicely Howell did not discuss the interpretation of the demography presented here. My interpretation and manipulation of the data are new for Kibworth, but I have relied heavily on her work for the general developments at Kibworth. Her discussion of the demography depended largely on the mortality of tenants – only a small cohort of the total population, and possibly thus not a reliable indicator of wider demographic change. The tithing-penny data also allow a longer-term and more continuous view of the changes and recoveries.
3. I thus differ from Howell, **Land, family and inheritance**, pp.31-2, who missed the point suggested here.
4. Poos, 'The rural population of Essex', p.521.
5. I differ slightly from Howell, **Land, family and inheritance**, p.29.
6. The data in the Poll Taxes are presented by Howell, **Land, family and inheritance**, pp.217-20 (Table 22).
7. Compare Poos, 'The rural population of Essex', p.521, and I. Kershaw, 'The great famine and agrarian crisis in England 1315-1322', reprinted in R.H. Hilton, (ed.), **Peasants knights and heretics. Studies in medieval English social history**, Cambridge, 1976, pp.85-132.
8. Villein *fugitivi* are discussed by Howell, **Land, family and inheritance**, pp.44-7.
9. Public Record Office SC2/183/76-77.