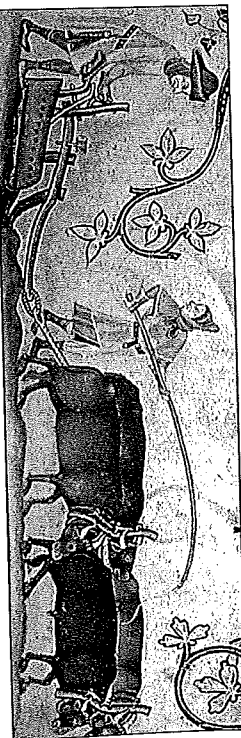


Men using flails to separate the wheat from the chaff. The freely swinging ear at the end of the flail allowed for more powerful and efficient work. Threshing was usually done during the winter, when the fields and flocks demanded less attention.

So far as Cecilia had the time and inclination, she could have done these and other "male" tasks herself. In part, she might have coped by calling on the help of her brothers—first William when he lived next door, and later Robert with whom she shared a household. Her brothers, of course, faced a problem that complemented Cecilia's dilemma. They had "female" tasks that needed doing such as gardening, darning, or herb-gathering. So Cecilia might have helped them just as they helped her. Finally, she also coped, in part, by employing men to do the work for her.

Cecilia probably employed not only local men but also men who passed through Brigstock looking for work. In the early spring, she might have hired a neighbor to plow her few bits of arable land. In the summer, she might have hired some boys to help with haymaking. In the autumn, she might have hired a few days' work to some of the men (and women) who followed the rye and grain northward in search of harvest work. Whenever a plowshare broke or her house needed repairs, she turned to a nearby smith or carpenter. More than likely, Cecilia preferred to employ men as laborers, not as live-in servants. Few widows and singlewomen kept male servants in their households, perhaps because neighbors gossiped about imagined (or real) sexual indiscretions, or perhaps because women found it difficult to control male servants. Instead of coping with such problems, most female householders found it easier to hire men by the day or task.

Cecilia found these male workers in many ways—by using a smith or carpenter whose skills were well known; by asking neighbors whom she knew needed work; by hiring strangers who stopped at her gate; by looking for street laborers when she went to market days at Kettering, Geddington, or elsewhere. If she was lucky, she was sometimes able to turn repeatedly to the



Men plowing. The man on the left maneuvers the heavy plow, and the man on the right uses a goad to urge the oxen forward.

same workers, using the same plowman for several seasons, or employing the same harvest workers year after year. If not, she did not need to worry. With about 6 million people in England and not enough land to go around, Cecilia could always find someone willing to work. In the first half of the fourteenth century, laborers, skilled as well as unskilled, were plentiful and cheap.

Cecilia probably made good use of this cheap labor, especially during labor-intensive times of the agricultural year and especially for tasks that were traditionally done by men. But she probably also needed servants to provide steadier and more flexible help. Contracting to live and work with one employer for a year, servants were usually young people who hoped to learn skills and save money. Among young adults, those from poor families were especially likely to seek out such work. Most servants worked for their employers as they had worked for their parents, doing whatever general work needed doing. Although adolescents of both genders worked as servants, Cecilia, as a singlewoman, probably employed female servants only. Perhaps she kept just one servant, but she might also have employed two or more at any time. For the duration of their employment, servants shared with Cecilia the daily life and work of the household. They also lived under her authority. One medieval song tells the fate of a servant who dared to stay out all night. On her way home in the morning, she encountered her angry mistress who shouted at her, "Say, you strong strumpet, where have you been? Your tripping and darning will come to a bad end!" The mistress then beat the young servant, "over and over again." Good servants could hope for kind treatment, but bad servants could expect harsh punishment: all servants knew they had to work hard. Almost every day, Cecilia awoke to more tasks than she could manage. "I have more to do than I may do," was how one woman put it in another medieval song. Servants made it possible for the work to get done. When sheep had to be moved to a new pasture, and fields weeded, and butter churned, and fish caught for dinner, and pigs brought in from the woods, Cecilia did some tasks and left others to her servants.

The day laborers and servants whom Cecilia employed were distinguished from each other by the terms of their work. Laborers, whether skilled or unskilled, most often came from the poorer households in