

of one-fifteenth of movable wealth; and that everyone should be ready to revolt when called upon.

On 14 June the rebels met Richard II at Mile End just outside the city of London. There they presented demands which included the handing over of 'traitors'; the end of serfdom; the right to hire themselves out at fair wages; and the right to rent land at a cheap rate. Peasant issues had become part of the matter, but they were not there to begin with.

By the third day the agenda had developed further, and was now revolutionary. To the end of serfdom their leader, Wat Tyler, now added the abolition of outlawry; the repeal of all laws except the 'law of Winchester' (traditional common law); the complete abolition of nobility in Church and state but for one king and one archbishop; and the confiscation and division of Church land.

The targets of the rebels' destruction were places where records were stored: abbeys, priories, lawyers' houses and the like. Thomas Walsingham, whose chronicle contains much malice and invention, describes what happened in a way that brings to mind the 'Year Zero' of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, and which must have contained at least a kernel of truth:

They strove to bury all old records; and they butchered anyone who might know or be able to commit to memory the contents of old or new documents. It was dangerous enough to be known as a clerk, but especially dangerous if an ink-pot should be found at one's elbow: such men scarcely ever escaped from the hands of the rebels.

Historia Anglica

But this was not a general attack on literacy. It was specifically legal records that were destroyed and others, in many places, were left intact. Some, at least, of the rebels could read.

So if peasants were not illiterate members of a dirty, uncouth, barbarous, rural 'lumpen proletariat', who were they?

AT HOME WITH THE PEASANT

The word 'peasant' was not used in English in medieval times. It comes from the French *peysan*, which simply means a country man or woman. At the time, men who worked on the land were either free or were in some degree of serfdom as cottagers, smallholders or villeins. It was the last group, villeins, that Froissart was describing – men who were not free to leave their land and who owed labour duties to their lords. Probably 30 per cent of men in England were villeins in 1381.

It is often said that peasants lived in primitive one-room 'hovels', but in all the excavations of medieval villages there seems to be little sign of these horrible dwellings. According to the historian Christopher Dyer, 'Most villages that have been excavated seem to consist mainly of substantial houses'. In fact, according to Dyer, 'We should not be looking for tiny buildings, but for structures of standard size, but distinguished from the houses of the better-off by the quality and quantity of the materials used, or the standard of carpentry.'

But even if the lowest semi-slave lived in a substantial house, presumably he and his miserable extended family were crammed in there in a half-starved, overcrowded huddle – grandparents, uncles, aunts, nieces and nephews jumbled promiscuously together?

Well, maybe not.

Where we do have evidence, it tends to show that peasants lived in nuclear families like our own, and that they liked their privacy. From as early as the twelfth century there were upper rooms in quite small rural buildings, and certainly this is how many people were living by the early fourteenth century. This suggests that some houses, at any rate, had private rooms and their occupants did not have to live their lives under the whole family's gaze. The same inference – that peasants liked their privacy – can be drawn from archaeological evidence that, in the thirteenth century at least, houses were surrounded by ditches (and presumably also hedges and

fences) and had locked doors, and that goods were kept in locked chests.

What kind of peasants were these? What did they have that was worth protecting? Excavations show pewter tableware, glazed pots, dice, cards, chessmen, footballs, musical instruments and 'ninemens' morris' boards in these hovels. And people seem to have eaten rather better than one might suppose. The evidence is that they didn't simply live on bread and cheese, but ate pork, lamb and beef, fruit and vegetables, and that even in inland villages they ate fish (archaeologists have found fish bones at the deserted village of Wharham Percy in Yorkshire).

Something seems to be not quite right about the traditional picture of peasant life.

The excavations at Wharham Percy are full of surprises. It looks like a neat, planned village, and archaeologists expected to find traces of earlier villages going back to early Anglo-Saxon times. Those traces are missing. Even though Wharham Percy is listed in *Domesday Book*, the village itself seems to have come into being around the end of the twelfth century. The farmers in the area had previously lived in scattered farms and hamlets.

It now seems as though there were very few, if any, villages in that area of England before the eleventh century. While it is impossible to show a connection between this curious fact and the Norman Conquest, it does look as though the creation of villages was linked to the manorial system. In other words — villages may have been built for the local lord's villeins.

THE PEASANT'S STATUS

At the time of the Norman Conquest many in the rural population were slaves in the full meaning of the word (and the *Domesday Book* shows that this still applied to about 10 per cent of people in 1086). This was not a satisfactory economic arrangement for the Norman overlords whom the king had installed as landholders. These lords of the manor were military men, expected to provide military service to the king as the price for their landholdings. They wanted the English to work

their land, but did not want the responsibility of feeding and caring for them — which is, of course, one of the drawbacks of having slaves. So it seems they preferred to group working families in 'vills' (villages) and treat them as tenants, who had to support themselves from small parcels of land worked when they were not doing labour service for their lord. This labour service was their rent.

These people were villeins. Villeinage had begun to develop before 1066, but the Normans promoted it mightily and slavery disappeared in a couple of generations. Froissart was probably right in saying that the system was more widespread in England than in the rest of western Europe.

Many manorial lords held several manors and spent much of their time away fighting. They needed the manor to look after itself — or rather, they needed their villeins to organize its care for them. This was done through the manor court, which determined how fields were to be farmed and (since villeins held strips of land in large open fields) the days for planting and harvesting, the boundaries of each person's land and the dates on which animals were allowed to graze in different fields. Although the court was presided over by the lord's steward, its officials were villeins elected by the village, and its decisions were made by a jury of villagers. There was the reeve, who acted as a general overseer, the hayward, who watched over the crops and brought offenders to court, and so on. The steward's job was to look after his lord's interests (payments and work that was due to him) not to tell the court how to manage its business.

In fact, the manor court had the power to fine the lord, and would do so. The records of one in Laxton in Nottinghamshire show it fined the lord for leaving soil on the common land. The peasants of Albury in Hertfordshire went so far as to petition parliament in 1321 over oppression by their lord, Sir John Patmore, who had imprisoned them and seized their cattle.

Some villages came close to being totally self-governing political entities run by the peasants for the peasants. Villeins

resisted authority by quietly ignoring regulations, and manipulated the system by exploiting their influence as officials and bending laws in their own favour. Take the village of Gotham in Nottinghamshire, afforded legendary status by the exploits of its inhabitants.

In about 1200 King John proposed building a hunting lodge near the city of Nottingham. The residents of Gotham realized the implications of this — he would pass through the village on the way to his lodge, making it a king's highway and thus making them liable to new taxes.

So what did they do? The entire village pretended to be mad. It is said that the villagers built a fence around a cuckoo bush to prevent the cuckoo escaping, tried to drown an eel, set about pulling the moon out of a pond with a rake and rolled cheeses down a hill to make them round. Since madness was considered contagious the idea of a whole village of lunatics was perfectly feasible, and apparently the ploy worked.

Villeins were not mindless and helpless, but actually ran the country. The barons who were their masters had to respect their traditions and ways of doing things, and it was normal for the lord of the manor to demonstrate this respect by laying on feasts for them twice a year — wet and dry boon. Does anyone's landlord now treat them to a slap-up dinner twice a year?

At Wharham Percy the lord accommodated the peasants in neat rows of houses beside the church, and the land was recast into regularly planned fields. A manor house belonging to either the Percy or the Chamberlain family (both had some power over the village) was built in splendid style in the twelfth century, but this was soon abandoned and demolished, and its site turned over to peasant houses.

At Cosmeston in Wales there is further evidence of peasants enjoying a reasonable standard of living. Most families lived in two-room houses surrounded by a fence or ditch for privacy. Excavation of the home of the reeve — the villein who acted as general overseer for the manor court — revealed oil lamps and glazed French pottery, and the discovery of a particular kind of

jug shows that, far from living in dirt and squalor, he washed his hands between courses when eating. His house had a wardrobe, at least one chair and a timber floor. There was a tablecloth and candle-holders.

The reeve slept on a raised bed with a surprisingly comfortable wooden pillow, and the discovery of a casket key indicates he had possessions that were worth locking up. A herb — fleabane — kept his bed free of insects and a bowl of honey was used as an insect trap. There was an outdoor privy and excrement was collected regularly to be used, with animal manure, as fertilizer.

Coins found on the site are evidence that money was circulating, and so this was not entirely a subsistence economy. In fact, from the thirteenth century labour service began to be replaced by cash rents, indicating that villeins had surplus crops for sale. And when they had paid their rents they had money left over to spend at stalls in the village run by merchants.

They also had money to spend at the tavern, which was in an ordinary house. Ale was essential to life as many villages lacked clean water and it was drunk from leather mugs lined with pitch. Brewing was often viewed as an appropriate activity for widows, who found it hard to farm land. But some villeins had more high-faluting tastes. The excavations at Cosmeston have revealed the remains of wine jugs from France — peasants were drinking imported French wine.

This all seems so fundamentally at odds with our picture of the life of a medieval peasant that some explanation is needed — which involves recognizing that the Middle Ages was not a static and unchanging period, but a time of change and development.

DAYS OF SURVIVAL

In the eleventh century peasant farmers lived pretty close to subsistence level. The year's work began in October, ploughing and harrowing what had been the fallow field with wheat and rye. The aim was to have done this by All Saints' Day,

1 November. A reasonably substantial peasant farmer with 30 acres scattered over three village fields would have ten acres in his fallow field. An acre was in theory the amount of land that could be ploughed in a day – typically, four lands (strips), each of which was covered with five long furrowlengths (furrows), turning the plough at the end of each furrow. A strip was therefore a quarter-acre.

The farmer would need to prepare these in five weeks, covering 84 miles with the plough and the same again with the harrow. And with one day a week given over to God, and up to three days to the lord of the manor, he had 15 days to do it in. This sounds fine, except that in practice it was not uncommon to cover only half an acre in a day (problems with the plough, problems with the animals drawing it, soil that was sodden with rain or ground that was frozen too hard to be worked).

At Candlemas, 2 February, ploughing would resume. This time, last year's rye-and-wheat field would be ploughed for oats, barley, peas and beans, and the third field ploughed for fallow. The work was supposed to be finished by Easter – ideally by 25 March, but it could go on until the end of April. A long, hard frost could be a serious problem.

In the eleventh century it is likely that the best yield to be hoped for, on good land, was eight bushels of corn per acre. The net harvest, after losses during harvesting and to animals, and after the farmer had handed over his tithes to the Church and produce to his lord, was half that or less – and two bushels would have to be kept back as seed corn. Overall, the farmer would have enough to feed a family of five and there would be a small surplus, but only so long as nothing went wrong with the ploughing, ripening and harvesting of the crops. And so long as no marauding armies came along.

But things did go horribly wrong at times, and there were marauding armies. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle for the end of the eleventh century is a list of things going awry:

AD 1077

This year was the dry summer; and wild fire came upon many shires, and burned many towns; and also many cities were ruined thereby.

AD 1082

... and this year also was a great famine.

AD 1086

And the same year there was a very heavy season, and a swinishful and sorrowful year in England, in murrain of cattle, and corn and fruits were at a stand, and so much untowardness in the weather, as a man may not easily think; so tremendous was the thunder and lightning, that it killed many men; and it continually grew worse and worse with men.

AD 1087

In the one and twentieth year after William began to govern and direct England, as God granted him, was a very heavy and pestilent season in this land. Such a sickness came on men, that full nigh every other man was in the worst disorder, that is, in the diarrhoea; and that so dreadfully, that many men died in the disorder. Afterwards came, through the badness of the weather as before mentioned, so great a famine over all England, that many hundreds of men died a miserable death through hunger. Alas! how wretched and how rueful a time was there! When the poor wretches lay full nigh driven to death prematurely, and afterwards came sharp hunger, and dispatched them without! Who will not be penetrated with grief at such a season? or who is so hardhearted as not to weep at such misfortune? Yet such things happen for folk's sins, that they will not love God and righteousness.

AD 1098

Before Michaelmas the heaven was of such an hue, as if it were burning, nearly all the night. This was a very troublesome year through manifold impositions; and from the abundant rains, that ceased not all the year, nearly all the tilth in the marshlands perished.

Things would have been even worse without the strip system, which at least meant that a peasant's lands were scattered and he did not have to put all his eggs in one basket. There was also a system of food-sharing in bad times. This was one beneficial