

Chapter Ten

The Pre-1348 Demographic Regime

The Postan thesis assumes that changes in death rates had a greater impact than fluctuations in the incidence of births and marriages on the direction of demographic changes in England before the Black Death.¹ Postan was aware of the theoretical possibility that over-population could “have brought the birth-rates down, by reducing the ability of the young men to set up households and marry”.² However, he placed little weight on this factor, arguing that the limitations of our sources mean that “this theoretical possibility cannot be convincingly demonstrated”.³ Moreover, Postan was convinced that “even if, for lack of evidence, the changes in marriage-rates and age of marriage were disregarded, the behaviour of the death rates would by itself have been sufficient sooner or later to prevent the population from continuing its growth”.⁴ The purpose of this chapter is to re-examine this assumption, which still commands widespread acceptance among historical demographers.

As has been pointed out, Postan’s case for a fall in population before 1348 was weaker than is often assumed. The contention that fluctuations in mortality were the main determinants of population trends before the Black Death therefore rests on the results of more recent studies, such as work by Canadian and British scholars in the field of court roll analysis. It will be argued here that the majority of attempts to demonstrate that demographic contraction preceded the Black Death suffer from serious methodological flaws. This chapter argues that marriage was welfare-dependent in rural England before the Black Death and that this practice may have ensured a long-term equilibrium between population and resources.

Despite the weakness of the case made by Postan for a fall in population before 1348, a number of researchers have attempted to provide evidence of this trend on the basis of local sources. Among these are the members of the so-called Toronto School of historians, the group of Canadian

¹ This assumption is consistent with the hypothesis that the Postan thesis rests, at least in part, on a Russian model. Before 1900 Russia had what historical demographers term a “high-pressure” population regime. Peasant custom dictated that most peasants married early in life and few were required to forego marriage. Russian peasant mores placed enormous importance on an early marriage during this period. Women who remained single in their twenties were often regarded as a source of shame for their parents. Moreover, patterns of land tenure in many parts of the country gave peasants good reasons to marry early. Each new couple was entitled to a share in the allotment lands of the village and was likely to benefit from any periodic redistribution. In addition, the practice of partible inheritance made it easier for sons to marry and establish their own families. Both birth rates and death rates in the countryside were therefore high and the balance between population and resources was maintained through periodic mortality crises, such as the famine of 1891–2. Gatrell, *The Tsarist Economy*, pp. 52-53. T. Shanin, *The Awkward Class*, Oxford, 1972, pp. 36-7, 220-4.

² Postan, *The Medieval Economy and Society*, p. 38.

³ *loc. cit.*

⁴ *loc. cit.*

medievalists working at the Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies. Toronto-based scholars such as J. A. Raftis, E. B. DeWindt, A. R. DeWindt, E. Britton and Judith M. Bennett have argued for more than two decades that court roll evidence indicates a fall in the size of the tenant population on the Ramsey Abbey estates after c.1300.⁵ The conclusions reached by the Toronto School, however, rest on the assumption that each name recorded in the court rolls represents a different person and that all individuals with the same surname belonged to a single family. In light of the fluid nature of medieval surnames, critics have argued that demographic observations have been made on names, rather than individuals, and on surnames, rather than on families.⁶

In addition, little effort has been made by some members of the Toronto School to compensate for possible fluctuations in the level of court business, changes in court procedure, or for the differences in the number of surviving court rolls for specific periods. It is therefore difficult to give much credence to their evidence for demographic contraction before the Black Death.⁷ Moreover, not all the members of the Toronto School regard this downward trend on the Ramsey estates as confirmation of the Postan thesis. E. Britton, for example, has argued that out-migration of peasant families from the Ramsey Abbey estates would be sufficient to account for the apparent decline in population.⁸

More recently, L. Poos has made a case for demographic decline in parts of Essex before the Black Death. Poos has claimed that observed successions to land on the Essex manors of Great Waltham and High Easter indicate that, no more than 46.7 per cent of all male tenants in these villages had a son living at the time of their death. On the assumption that that at least sixty per cent of all males should be survived by at least one son if the population of these villages was to reproduce itself, Poos has concluded that the population of these two manors underwent a significant decline between 1320–48.⁹

⁵ J. A. Raftis, *Warboys: Two Hundred Years in the Life of an English Medieval Village*, Toronto, 1974, pp. 68, 214. E. B. DeWindt, *Land and People in Holywell-cum-Needingworth*, Toronto, 1972, p. 64. A. R. DeWindt, "Society and Change in a Fourteenth Century English Village: King's Ripton", Ph.D. thesis, University of Toronto, 1972, pp. 157-8. E. Britton, *The Community of the Vill*, p. 141. Bennett, *Women in the Medieval English Countryside*, pp. 206-7.

⁶ Raftis, *Warboys*, pp. 63-4. DeWindt, *Land and People*, p. 166. DeWindt, "Society and Change", pp. 157-8. Britton, *The Community of the Vill*, p. 11. Bennett, *Women in the Medieval Countryside*, pp. 12-3. Z. Razi, "The Toronto School's Reconstitution of Medieval Peasant Society: A Critical View", *Past and Present*, 85 (1980), pp. 142-6. K. Wrightson, "Medieval Villagers in Perspective", *Peasant Studies*, 7 (1978), pp. 211-2.

⁷ L. R. Poos and R. M. Smith, "Legal Windows Onto Historical Populations? Recent Research on Demography and the Manor Court in Medieval England", *Law and History Review*, 2 (1984), pp. 131-4.

⁸ Britton, *The Community of the Vill*, pp. 132-163.

⁹ Poos, "The Population of Essex in the Later Middle Ages", pp. 48-51.

R. M. Smith had made a similar case for demographic decline on the Suffolk manors of Redgrave and Rickingham before the Black Death. The court rolls for these manors indicate that between 1260-1320 about thirty per cent of the male tenants at Redgrave and Rickingham died leaving no recorded heirs. Smith has therefore concluded that the populations of both Rickingham and Redgrave were falling during the first half of the fourteenth century, as he believes that no more than a fifth of the male population could die leaving no heirs if the population was to continue to reproduce itself.¹⁰

Although the product of careful research, the results presented by Poos and Smith must be treated with caution. Poos believed that his figures were corroborated by the decline in annual tithingpenny payments on the two Essex manors. However, there are strong indications in the court rolls that the drop in the amount paid in tithingpenny during the early fourteenth century may have been due to no more than a growing reluctance on the part of tenants to pay. Moreover, Poos' figures for male replacement rates at Great Waltham and High Easter are almost certainly too low. Inclusion of mother-son transfers in order to take account of local inheritance customs results in a maximum figure of 60.2 per cent for the proportion of fathers with sons living at the time of their death.¹¹

In addition, the application of the Cambridge Group model populations used by Poos and Smith to medieval village population raises a number of unanswered questions. The Cambridge Group models assume that all adult males married and that the populations in questions were closed.

¹⁰ Poos and Smith, "Legal Windows Onto Historical Populations?", p. 133. Smith, "Some Issues Concerning Families and Their Properties in Rural England 1250-1800", in Smith, *Land, Kinship and Life-Cycle*, p. 50.

¹¹ The reliability of the tithingpenny payments as a guide to demographic trends on the two manors depends on the assumption that all males over the age of 12 at High Easter and Great Waltham paid tithingpenny whether or not they were actually present at the court leet. If those not present were able to avoid payment, then the drop in tithingpenny payments from c.1320 onwards may have been due to no more than declining court attendance, hardly an unusual phenomenon during a period when the frankpledge system on many manors was in decay. In 1336, a year when the number of tithingpenny payments came to 440, a total of 249 tithingmen at High Easter and Great Waltham were amerced for their absence from the leet. Thus, either (i) 249 out of 440 tithingmen were absent in this year, but still discharged their financial obligations in full or (ii) the total number of tithingmen was 689 — less than two-thirds of whom actually attended and paid up. Although Poos favours the first interpretation, it is hard to see how the manorial officials were able to secure payment if they were unable or unwilling to secure something so simple as actual appearance at the court leet. The tithingpenny figures may not, therefore, provide a census-like enumeration. Moreover, Poos' assumption that no more than 46.7 per cent of all males had a son living at the time of their death is based on the total number of father-son (26.6 per cent) and husband-widow (20.3 per cent) successions. However, mother-son successions make up over 13.3 per cent of his total sample of 128 successions. Custom at Waltham and Easter dictated that a widow retained her dead husband's land for the rest of her life, with the result that any son surviving at his father's death would have to wait until the death or retirement of his mother before he entered his patrimony. Thus, when a mother holding land (almost certainly a widow) died or retired to pass on her holding to her son, it may be assumed the son in question had outlived his father. L. R. Poos, "Population and Resources in Two Fourteenth Century Essex Communities: Great Waltham and High Easter 1327-1389", Ph.D. thesis, Cambridge University, 1984, pp. 50, 66-82.

These assumptions are unlikely to have been fulfilled in practice. As Poos and Smith admit, not all male heirs took up their share of the family holding and others remained unmarried, while the populations the Essex and Suffolk manors in their samples were open to both immigration and emigration. Although suggestive, a low recorded male replacement rate need not be regarded as a conclusive sign of demographic decline.¹²

If the evidence from local court rolls studies is, at best, inconclusive, then attention should perhaps be paid to broader indicators. The agrarian crisis of 1315–21 may not have, after all, marked a turning point in demographic history.¹³ It has already been pointed out that trends in rents, wages, and prices between c.1325 and the Black Death are inconsistent with any significant fall in population. During this period prices fell, rents maintained their value in real terms and wages rates remained more or less stable in nominal terms. In contrast, demographic contraction between 1348–70 led to rapid inflation, rising real wages, and a sharp fall in the real value of rents.

Moreover, against the results of the work of Poos and Smith should be set the evidence in court rolls and manorial surveys from different parts of the country for a continued fall in the average size of peasant holdings during the early fourteenth century. On numerous manors there are signs that the break down of standard virgate holdings into half-virgates and quarter-virgate holdings continued right up until the Black Death. There is little indication of a reversal of the trend towards the proliferation of smallholdings such as occurred after 1348.¹⁴

¹² *ibid.*, p. 102.

¹³ Estimates of mortality rates due to the Great Famine of 1315–1317 tend to be high. It is often stated that this period saw a decline in the level of population of around ten to fifteen per cent, although direct evidence is lacking. Even if such a figure was correct, there is no reason to assume that a drop of such a magnitude was sufficient to reduce the chances of a successful demographic recovery during the second quarter of the fourteenth century. Poos, "The Rural Population of Essex in the Later Middle Ages", p. 521. J. Z. Titow, "Some Evidence of the Thirteenth-Century Population Increase", *Economic History Review*, 2nd series, 13 (1961), p. 223. Razi, *Life, Marriage and Death in a Medieval Parish*, pp. 25, 39–40. Kershaw, "The Great Famine and Agrarian Crisis in England 1315–1322", p. 131.

¹⁴ Donkin, "Changes in the Early Middle Ages", pp. 86–7. Miller and Hatcher, *Medieval England*, p. 145. King, *Peterborough Abbey*, p. 119. Miller, *Abbey and Bishopric of Ely*, pp.144–5. H. E. Hallam, "Some Thirteenth Century Censuses", *Economic History Review*, 10 (1958), p. 342. Clarke, "Peasant Society and Land Transactions in Chesterton, Cambridgeshire", p.119. Watts, "A Model for the Early Fourteenth Century", p. 544. Campbell, "Population Pressure, Inheritance and the Land Market in a Fourteenth Century Peasant Community", pp. 114–6. R. M. Smith, "Families and their Land in Redgrave, Suffolk 1260–1320", in Smith, *Land, Kinship and Life-Cycle*, p. 193. J. Williamson, "Norfolk: Thirteenth Century", in P. D. A. Harvey (ed.), *The Peasant Land Market in Medieval England*, pp. 39–60, 63–84, 100–5. Such indirect evidence should be preferred to the simple counting of the number of tenancies on a particular manor mentioned in a series of dated extents or surveys, a procedure which is sometimes used as an indication of the direction and magnitude of local demographic trends. Few historians would now place much weight on such a procedure. Not all extents were carried out with the same degree of concern for the number of actual, as opposed to legal, tenancies. In a number of cases it can be shown that an apparent drop in population is in fact the result of the omission of sub-tenancies and a return by the compilers to a notional framework of bovates or virgates. In no case can we be certain that a manorial survey or extent records all the

The evidence for a continued increase in the English population in the decades before the Black Death is consistent with the assumption that England had a “low-pressure” demographic regime during this period. Moreover, such an assumption accords with what is known of the demography of other societies in North-West Europe in more modern times. Throughout most of North-West Europe between 1600 and 1800, the restriction of marriage to those with an independent livelihood meant that changes in births and marriages ensured the maintenance of a balance between population and resources. During periods of declining real incomes, marriage rates among peasant families fell, there were fewer births and the rate of demographic increase slowed. The result was that the presence of this mechanism ensured a high degree of long-term demographic stability.¹⁵

If a similar regime existed in pre-1348 England, it is reasonable to assume that the balance between population and resources was maintained primarily through changes in marriage rates. For this reason, it is necessary to examine patterns of family formation in late thirteenth and early fourteenth century to determine if these reflect the presence of a North-West European regime. Welfare-dependent marriage assumes that every marriage leads to the formation of an independent household. The result is a situation where simple or nuclear families predominate, and stem or extended families are uncommon. The case for a “low-pressure” regime before 1348 would therefore be strengthened if firm evidence could be provided to indicate that the composition of peasant families conformed to this pattern.

It is therefore significant that there is general agreement among historians that the nuclear or simple family was the norm in England before the Black Death. Manor court rolls and other legal

households resident in a particular manor. Moreover, the number of tenants mentioned in such a document need not bear any direct relation to the number of actual residents, as individuals could hold land in more than one manor. This last problem is of particular concern where a single settlement formed part of two or more manors. For this reason, it is difficult to place much weight on the estimates of demographic trends during the first half of the fourteenth century made by H. E. Hallam in his “Postscript (1983)” to *The Agrarian History of England and Wales. Vol. 2: 1042-1350* (pp. 536-93). In a recent review P. D. A. Harvey has pointed out the problems inherent in over-reliance on such evidence of rentals and surveys. Harvey observed that:

In the course of its first 28 pages he [Hallam] explains how he cannot accept the suggested general decline in population in the fourteenth century before 1348; then, in a ‘Postscript (1983)’ of fifty-six pages of tables and two of text, he brings his views up to date by arguing the opposite. (Economic History Review, 43 (1990), pp. 739-40)

¹⁵ S. C. Watkins and E. van der Walls, “Nutrition, Mortality and Population Size: Malthus’ Court of Last Resort”, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 14 (1983), pp. 205-26. D. R. Weir “Life under Pressure: France and England 1670–1870”, *Journal of Economic History*, 44 (1984), pp. 27-43. M. Drake, *Population and Society in Norway 1735–1865*, Cambridge, 1969, pp. 158-9. E. A. Wrigley and R. S. Schofield, “English Population History from Family Reconstruction: Summary Results 1600–1799”, *Population Studies*, 37 (1983), p. 161.

sources indicate that extended families were uncommon among English villagers during this period. This was the case both where partible inheritance was the rule and where primogeniture was customary. Even stem family households were rarer than was once supposed. When such arrangements existed, the available evidence indicates that most stem families tended to be of short duration.¹⁶

The assumption that only those with an independent livelihood should marry was so fundamental as to have left its mark on the language. The original meaning of the Middle English *husbonde* was not married man, but householder. The term was used both for a wedded man and for the holder of a substantial tenement.¹⁷ In contrast, landless labourers in parts of eastern England were sometimes referred to as *anlepimen* and *anlepiwomen*, literally “single man” and “single woman”.¹⁸

Literary evidence also makes it clear that marriage was regarded as contingent upon an independent livelihood. In his *Summa Praedicatorum* (1348), the Dominican John Bromyard complained that fornicators rebuked for not marrying often replied that they are poor and therefore could not marry. According to Bromyard, others pleaded that they would marry if they had a house to which they could take their wife. Still others, Bromyard remarked, argued that if they married they would not have enough to live on with offspring.¹⁹ The early fourteenth century Carmelite John Baconthorpe observed in his *Quaestiones in Quator Sententiarum* that Man, unlike the beasts who intend only the multiplication of their kind, aimed “at living a good and peaceful life with his wife”.²⁰

Legal sources confirm the impression gained from literary evidence. While an independent livelihood was not dependent on the holding of land, as is sometimes assumed, it is significant that most peasant couples seem to have waited until acquiring land before marrying. Court rolls from manors where male tenants paid marriage fines indicate that marriage was often dependent on, and sometimes coincident with, the acquisition of land. It is common in such rolls to find reference to the payment of heriot or an entry fine and licence to marry in the same court roll entry. The presumption

¹⁶ B. Hanawalt, *The Ties that Bound*, p. 92. A. Macfarlane, *Origins of English Individualism*, Oxford, 1978, p. 138. E. Britton, “The Peasant Family in Fourteenth-Century England”, *Peasant Studies*, 5 (1976), pp. 2-3. Hallam, “Some Thirteenth-Century Censuses”, pp. 340-61. R. M. Smith, “Some Reflections on the Evidence for the Origins of the European Marriage Pattern in England”, in C. Harris (ed.), *The Sociology of the Family, Sociological Review Monograph*, 28 (1979), p. 99. DeWindt, “Redefining the Peasant Community in Medieval England: The Regional Perspective”, p. 193. C. Dyer, “English Peasant Buildings in the Later Middle Ages”, p. 25.

¹⁷ Homans, *English Villagers of the Thirteenth Century*, p. 137.

¹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 136.

¹⁹ J. T. Noonan, *Contraception. A History of its Treatment by the Catholic Theologians and Canonists*, Cambridge, Mass., 1965, p. 229.

²⁰ P. P. A. Biller, “Birth Control in the West in the Thirteenth and Early Fourteenth Centuries”, *Past and Present*, 94 (1982), p. 10.

is that the male tenant did not feel at liberty to marry before he had acquired land.²¹ This conclusion is confirmed by court rolls from other manors and royal plea rolls recording village lawsuits. These frequently imply that the acquisition of land was regarded as a prerequisite for marriage.²²

Despite the evidence for the existence of the nuclear family and welfare-dependent marriage in England before the Black Death, the assumption is often made by historians that marriage was early and near-universal in England during this period. Many still believe that the pre-1348 demographic regime was a “high-pressure” one. It is argued that early and near-universal marriage meant a high birth rate and that, with births so common, the equilibrium between population and resources was maintainable only through changes in mortality rates.²³

Recent acceptance of this interpretation of the demographic regime before the Black Death rests on the work of J. Hajnal and Z. Razi.²⁴ In 1965 J. Hajnal argued against the existence of the North-West European regime in England during the fourteenth century on the basis of the observed proportions of unmarried women among the tax-payers recorded in the 1377 Poll Tax rolls.²⁵ He claimed that this source indicates that the “percentage of married among women over 14 ... could not have been under 67 per cent and was probably somewhere near 70 per cent”.²⁶ Since the percentage of women who married over the age of fifteen under the North-West European regime was below fifty to fifty-five per cent, Hajnal concluded that the proportion of married women recorded in the 1377 Poll Tax was of “quite the wrong order of magnitude”.²⁷

More than a decade later, Z. Razi argued that the Halesowen court rolls indicate the absence of a North-West European marriage regime in England before 1348. Court roll evidence led Razi to the conclusion that the age at first marriage for men and women at Halesowen before the Black Death was between eighteen and twenty years, a figure well below that which might be expected if a North-West European demographic regime had existed. In addition, Razi believed that the ratio between *merchet* and *leyrwite* fines in the Halesowen court rolls indicated a high illegitimacy rate inconsistent with a low-pressure fertility regime. Razi also claimed that, as some villagers evidently married

²¹ Homans, *English Villagers in the Thirteenth Century*, pp. 149-52. R. Faith, “Debate: Seigneurial Control of Women's Marriage”, *Past and Present*, 99 (1983), pp. 135-6.

²² R. C. Palmer, “Contexts of Marriage in Medieval England: Evidence from the King's Court circa 1300”, *Speculum*, 59 (1984), pp. 43-54. Faith, “Debate: Seigneurial Control of Women's Marriage”, p. 144.

²³ For recent restatements of this view, see E. Moodie, “The Population History of England 1541-1871: A Review Symposium”, *Social History*, 8 (1983), pp. 166-7. Hanawalt, *The Ties that Bound*, pp. 99-101.

²⁴ J. Hajnal, “European Marriage Patterns in Perspective”, in D. V. Glass and D. E. C. Eversley (eds.), *Population in History: Essays in Historical Demography*, London, 1965, pp. 116-20. Razi, *Life, Marriage and Death in a Medieval Parish*, pp. 50-71.

²⁵ Hajnal, *ibid.*, p. 119.

²⁶ *loc. cit.*

²⁷ *loc. cit.*

holding no more than a cottage or a smallholding of five acres, “it seems that Halesowen villagers were prepared to face economic hardship and destitution rather than remain bachelors and spinsters”.²⁸

Recent work has cast doubt on Hajnal’s assumption that the 1377 Poll Tax rolls provide accurate figures for the mean female marriage proportion. Many wage earners were not recorded in the returns.²⁹ Because labourers and servants formed a significant proportion of the unmarried population over fifteen years of age in pre-industrial North-West Europe, the under-enumeration of these groups is likely to have distorted the mean female married proportion. Moreover there are strong indications in the Poll Tax rolls of female under-registration. Lone female servants appear less likely to have been recorded than solitary male servants, while an only daughter had a smaller chance of being recorded than an only son.³⁰

In fact, Smith has argued that the 1377 Poll Tax evidence implies the existence of a North-West European regime during the fourteenth century. Bearing in mind the evidence for female under-registration, Smith has concentrated on estimating the mean adult male marriage proportion. He has shown that, if due allowance is made for the under-enumeration of servants, then the adult male marriage proportions for his sample taken from the 1377 Poll Tax is within the North-West European range.³¹ This conclusion is supported by the 1380–81 Poll Tax returns for parts of Gloucestershire. The taxers in this county made a second assessment designed to repair the deficiencies of the first. The returns of the second count consist primarily of unmarried *laborii et servientes*. Smith observes that:

*The physical condition of these documents is very poor, and it is unfortunate that it is only possible to match up the supplementary lists with 10 villages in the original returns ... In the ten villages in the first listing the male proportions married equalled 62.7 per cent but when the unmarried servants and labouring males who had not been included in the original count were added, the male proportion married fell to only 53.8 per cent. It should be added that some villages were listed as having no addition to the first list of tax payers “quod ad primum sessionem plene presentaverunt”. These villages usually had male marriage proportions below 60 per cent.*³²

The fact that the Poll Tax evidence implies that the mean marriage proportions for adult males fell within the North-West European range at the end of the fourteenth century has important implications for the pre-1348 period. Late fourteenth century conditions were far more favourable to

²⁸ *ibid.*, p. 57.

²⁹ Smith, “Some Reflections on the Evidence for the Origins of the European Marriage Pattern in England”, pp. 83-4.

³⁰ R. M. Smith, “Hypothèses sur la Nuptialité en Angleterre aux XIII^e–XIV^e siècles”, *Annales ESC*, 38 (1983), pp. 117-9.

³¹ *ibid.*, pp. 112-3.

³² *ibid.*, pp. 113-5.

early marriage than those in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. With land abundant and real wages high, peasant couples were likely to have married much earlier on the average than their parents and grandparents before the Black Death. If the North-West European regime existed after 1348, it was almost certainly present in the pre-Plague period.

There is some statistical evidence to confirm this hypothesis. Smith has shown that the mean married proportion for both men and women according to the surviving listings of *nativi* for the Spalding Priory manors of Weston and Moulton in 1268–9 appear to fall well within the North-West European range.³³ This conclusion accords with H. E. Hallam's estimate of the mean age at first marriage for the customary population of the Spalding manors of Pinchbeck, Spalding, Weston, Moulton and Sutton before 1348. Hallam has suggested that the mean age at first marriage for both men and women on these five manors was within the North-West European range. Hence, there is some reason to believe that the North-West European regime was already established in parts of the Lincolnshire Fenland at least as early as the late thirteenth century.³⁴

In light of the evidence for the presence of a North-West European regime in England before 1348, it is necessary to treat with care the evidence advanced by Razi in support of the opposite conclusion. Razi's contention that the inhabitants of Halesowen married between the ages of eighteen to twenty-two years rests on the assumptions that land-holding tenants appeared in the court rolls on the average at least once every three years and that male tenants who acquired land married almost immediately. Razi therefore concluded that if a son appears in the court rolls as a landholder between seventeen and twenty-three years after the first appearance of his father as a tenant, the son was married at about age twenty. If a daughter is recorded as paying *merchet* sixteen years after the initial appearance of her father as a landholder, he assumes that she was married between the ages of sixteen and nineteen. This method led Razi to conclude that out of his sample of 285 three-generation families:

*at least 139 (49 per cent) had a son or daughter (80 a son and 59 a daughter) who probably married between the ages of 18 and 22.*³⁵

He therefore believes that it is "plausible to assume that males and females at Halesowen married at an early, rather than at a late age".³⁶

This conclusion is difficult to accept. Razi does not substantiate his assumption that each land holder was recorded in the court rolls at least once every three years. This is merely an

³³ *ibid.*, pp. 120-4.

³⁴ H. E. Hallam, "Age at First Marriage and Age at Death in the Lincolnshire Fenlands", *Population Studies*, 39 (1985), pp. 57-60.

³⁵ Razi, *Life, Marriage and Death*, p. 63.

³⁶ *loc. cit.*

assumption which he finds reasonable to make. However, there is good evidence to suggest that court rolls do not provide a “census-like enumeration” of the manorial population. In fact, it is clear that substantial number of landholders were never recorded in the court rolls. Many others were recorded but once or twice over the entire period of their land holding career.³⁷

Hence, it is questionable whether the first appearance of a land holder in the court rolls can be pushed too far as evidence for the date of his initial acquisition of land. Moreover, while many villagers probably married soon after acquiring land, there is no evidence that those who held land were necessarily married.³⁸ Thus, it is far from certain that Razi’s method of determining age at first marriage is a reliable one.³⁹ Moreover, even if it is conceded that Razi was correct in identifying 139 individuals married at age twenty, it is far from clear if his eighty sons and fifty-nine daughters constitute a representative sample of the population as a whole. Razi wrote that:

*Rich families are much better documented than less-well-off families, because on average their members attended the manorial courts more times — more frequently and over a longer period — than the members of poorer families. Consequently, the familial links between villagers who had the same surnames are almost always found in the court rolls if they were rich but are often missing if they were poor.*⁴⁰

Thus, it seems probable that a disproportionate number of Razi’s original sample of 285 three-generation families came from the ranks of the village rich. If this was the case, then it is doubtful if his figures can be regarded as evidence for the existence of a non-North-West European regime. As Razi concedes, the sons and daughters of wealthier members of village society had a better chance of earlier marriage than those of less well-off families.⁴¹ Thus, the experience of the 139 men and women at Halesowen who may have been married before the age of twenty-two may be atypical of the population as a whole. In addition, Razi neither states the total number of recorded offspring in his 285 three-generation families, nor provides an estimate of the mean age at marriage for the whole

³⁷ R. M. Smith, “[Review of] Z. Razi, *Life, Marriage and Death in a Medieval Parish*”, *Journal of Historical Geography*, 8 (1982), pp. 305-6. Poos and Smith, “Legal Windows Onto Historical Populations?” pp. 131-7. J. M. Bennett, “Spouses, Siblings and Surnames: Reconstructing Families From Medieval Village Court Rolls”, *Journal of British Studies*, 23 (1983), p. 44.

³⁸ There is evidence from other parts of the country that younger sons were sometimes given land in order to provide them with a measure of economic independence although it was expected that they would remain unmarried as their holdings were insufficient to support a family. Williamson, “Norfolk: Thirteenth Century”, p. 93. W. G. Hoskins, *The Midland Peasant: The Economic and Social History of a Leicestershire Village*, London, 1957, p. 76. Page, “The Customary Poor-Law of Three Cambridgeshire Manors”, p. 129.

³⁹ Razi, *Life, Marriage and Death*, pp. 61-3.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, p. 74.

⁴¹ *ibid.*, p. 64.

of his sample. Thus, the extent to which these eighty sons and thirty-nine daughters were typical even of their own siblings remains unknown.⁴²

The existence of the North-West European regime in England in the period after 1541 was associated with a high degree of sexual conformism. Razi has therefore argued against the existence of this regime at Halesowen before 1348 on the grounds the ratio of *merchet* to *leyrwite* fines in the court rolls indicate that, for each 1.9 women who married, one gave birth out of wedlock. However, Razi assumes that each *leyrwite* fine represents a bastard birth although *leyrwite* fines were imposed for a range of sexual offences and need not indicate that the women concerned gave birth outside of marriage.⁴³ Moreover, *leyrwites* cannot be related as a simple ratio to *merchets* as if these two measures were comparable to an index of marriages and bastard births derived from a parish register. *Merchets* were not levied on all servile marriages and were often waived in the case of poorer tenants. By comparing *leyrwites* with *merchets*, Razi may have not only over-estimated the actual number of bastard births, but also under-estimated the total number of marriages.⁴⁴

Equally doubtful is Razi's argument that the existence of a high-pressure demographic regime at Halesowen before 1348 is indicated by the marriage of individuals holding no more than a few acres or a cottage.⁴⁵ Such marriages are consistent with the presence of a North-West European regime. Couples beginning a family with a few acres or a cottage were not necessarily destitute. Those who were craftsmen, petty traders or skilled workers might enjoy a modest degree of economic security, especially in a parish such as Halesowen, which included a prosperous and expanding borough.⁴⁶

The hypothesis that the North-West European pattern of late, prudential marriage and nuclear family households was established in England before the Black Death is therefore a plausible one. None of the arguments against the existence of a North-West European demographic regime at Halesowen before 1348 can be substantiated. In contrast, historians now agree that the nuclear family prevailed before the Black Death, while statistical evidence from the Lincolnshire Fens indicates that mean marriage proportions and the mean age at first marriage may have fallen within the North-West European range during the early fourteenth century. Further, the presence of a North-West

⁴² Razi himself admits that his finding that 139 families out of his sample of 285 three-generation families had a son or a daughter married between the ages of eighteen and twenty-two "obviously does not constitute an adequate calculation of the mean age at first marriage". *Ibid.*, p. 63.

⁴³ *ibid.*, p. 64. T. North, "Legerwite in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries", *Past and Present*, 111 (1986), pp. 4, 7-15.

⁴⁴ E. Searle, "Seigneurial Control of Women's Marriage: The Antecedents and Function of Merchet in England", *Past and Present*, 82 (1979), p. 24. Faith, "Debate: Seigneurial Control of Women's Marriage", p. 143. Poos and Smith, "Legal Windows Onto Historical Populations?", pp. 145-8.

⁴⁵ Razi, *Life, Marriage and Death*, pp. 51-2.

⁴⁶ R. H. Hilton, "Lords, Burgesses and Hucksters", *Past and Present*, 97 (1982), pp. 3-15.

European regime in the pre-Plague period is implied by the Poll Tax evidence for such a regime by the late fourteenth century.

Thus, it is reasonable to assume that the increase in the number of small holdings before 1348 resulted in a rise in the mean age at marriage and the mean marriage proportion for both sexes. There is good reason to assume also that the decline in mean holding size and falling real incomes among wage earners towards the end of the thirteenth century meant a corresponding fall in the mean level of disposable income.⁴⁷ This trend alone would have tended to lengthen the period of pre-marital accumulation for most couples, as both marriage partners were expected to contribute to the common stock of income generating resources.⁴⁸

For those whose parents were unable to provide surplus capital or land, marriage would be almost certainly delayed until *post mortem* succession to land, or (in the case of non-inheriting sons and daughters) until some years had been spent in employment outside the family household.⁴⁹ Because of the limitations of the court roll evidence it is impossible to provide direct evidence that marriage rates fell as a result of the decline in mean holding size between c.1265–1348. However, this hypothesis is consistent with the results of comparisons between different groups in village society. There is every indication that heads of household in regions of impartible inheritance frequently found it difficult to provide land for non-inheriting sons. Apart from the village rich, few households seem to have been able to settle more than one son with land in the same community.⁵⁰

In addition, there are strong indications that even rich villagers found it difficult to provide land for sons during their own lifetimes, while it appears that only a small number of middling and poorer villagers were able to do so.⁵¹ Another significant factor is the apparently growing importance of widows in the local land market. It is evident that on many manors before the Black Death marriage with a land holding widow was a common means by which males acquired land and that the eagerness of men to make such matches is indicative of the difficulties which they faced in acquiring land in any other manner.⁵² The available evidence therefore suggests that the worsening land

⁴⁷ A. N. May, "An Index of Thirteenth-Century Peasant Impoverishment? Manor Court Fines", *Economic History Review*, 2nd series, 26 (1973), pp. 389-402. Post, "Manorial Amercements and Peasant Poverty", pp. 304-11.

⁴⁸ Homans, *English Villagers of the Thirteenth Century*, pp. 140-2, 150-4.

⁴⁹ See n. 58 this chapter.

⁵⁰ Razi, *Life, Marriage and Death*, p. 55. Britten, *The Community of the Vill*, pp. 60-64.

⁵¹ Smith, "Families and Their Land in Redgrave, Suffolk 1260-1320.", p. 174. Clarke, "Peasant Society and Land Transactions in Chesterton, Cambridgeshire", pp. 179-80, 239. C. Howell, *Land, Family and Inheritance in Transition: Kibworth Harcourt*, Cambridge, 1983, p. 260. Razi, *Life, Marriage and Death*, p. 58-60.

⁵² P. Franklin, "Peasant Widows' 'Liberation' and Remarriage before the Black Death", *Economic History Review*, 2nd series, 39 (1986), pp. 186-204. J. Z. Titow, "Some Differences Between Manors and their Effects on the Condition of the Peasant in the Thirteenth Century", *Agricultural History Review*, 10 (1962), pp. 1-13.

shortages before the Black Death made it harder for many families to provide non-inheriting sons with the opportunity to marry early or to allow male heirs to marry before the death or retirement of their fathers.

Such a rise in the mean age at marriage due to increasing land hunger was probably not confined to those areas of impartible inheritance. Partible inheritance could continue indefinitely only as long as there was enough land for all sons. When land began to run short, co-heirs might often find that their shares were insufficient to support a family. For some, marriage was delayed only until they enlarged their holding through land purchases. Others apparently had little choice but to sell their shares and join the ranks of the landless.

Demographic pressure appears to have forced many families to circumvent partible inheritance customs entirely. Many co-heirs either never pressed their claims to part of the patrimony, or having taken up their share of the family holding eventually transferred the land to one or more of their brothers. In other cases, a co-heir seems to have deliberately remained unmarried so that the land would pass to his brother on his death.⁵³

The declining availability of land in the pre-1348 period would also delay the marriage of women as well as men. It might be expected that women who had already made their choice of a marriage partner would have waited until their prospective husband accumulated land or capital. Delays experienced by men in acquiring the economic qualification for marriage would also tend to reduce the pool of potential husbands. Hence, any increase in the mean age at first marriage for men would have also tended to raise the mean marriage age for women, with a consequent decrease in the birth rate.⁵⁴

Moreover, any drop in family incomes due to economic stagnation during the decades before the Black Death would have had a direct effect in the mean age of marriage for women. Most families probably found it increasingly difficult to provide daughters with land as a marriage portion. It is also likely that the surplus capital available to provide dowries in money, livestock, or household goods, would decline as holdings contracted. Hence, it is reasonable to assume that an increasing percentage of the female population was forced to delay marriage, either waiting for their parents to

⁵³ B. Dodwell, "Holdings and Inheritance in Medieval East Anglia", *Economic History Review*, 10 (1967), p. 61. Williamson, "Norfolk: Thirteenth Century", pp. 43-4. A. R. H. Baker, "Some Fields and Farms in Medieval Kent", in M. Roake and J. Whyman (eds.), *Essays in Kentish History*, London, 1973, p. 27. Smith, "Families and their Land in Redgrave, Suffolk, 1260-1320", p. 181.

⁵⁴ Hallam has strongly argued that peasant marriage was companionate during the pre-Black Death period, which implies that at least some women would have put off their marriage until their preferred husband was in a position to contribute to the common pool of income-generating resources. Hallam, *Rural England, 1066-1348*, pp. 1-9.

accumulate a significant dower, or until they had acquired the necessary stock of capital themselves through domestic work, service in husbandry or home industry.⁵⁵

Indirect evidence in support of this hypothesis is available. A disproportionate number of *leyrwite* and *childwite* fines paid in village courts during the pre-1348 period were levied on the daughters of the village poor.⁵⁶ It has been argued that these women formed a “bastardy-prone” group in village society, one whose members were forced to delay marriage. If this was the case, then the existence of such a group may be related to the greater delays experienced by the daughters of poorer families in reaching the economic threshold for marriage.⁵⁷ Evidence from before and after the Black Death implies that it was common for adolescents to leave the home economy in order to work elsewhere as domestic servants, craft-workers or agricultural labourers.⁵⁸ Many of these young men and women may have returned to the family unit to obtain land at the death or retirement of their parents. As discussed earlier, others were probably forced to acquire the means for an independent livelihood through their own efforts.⁵⁹ If a period of service was a distinct stage in the life-cycle of many peasant men and women, it is likely that the worsening surplus of labour in the rural market before 1348 would have had a direct effect on nuptiality rates. Although rural wages probably rose in real terms after c.1325, (as will be argued in the next chapter) this trend almost certainly disguises a decline in the real incomes of rural wage earners.⁶⁰ It is probable therefore that employment opportunities for many casual labourers actually fell in the 1330s and 1340s, despite the rise in wages. The result would have been to further lengthen the period of pre-marital accumulation and to push an increasing number of wage earners below the economic threshold for marriage.

⁵⁵ Searle, “Seigneurial Control of Women's Marriage”, pp. 19-20.

⁵⁶ Poos and Smith, “Legal Windows Onto Historical Populations?”, p. 150.

⁵⁷ R. M. Smith, “Appendix”, in P. Laslett, K. Oosterveen and R. M. Smith (eds.), *Bastardy and its Comparative History*, London, 1980, p. 245.

⁵⁸ Although the issue is controversial, it seems that many young men and women spent their early adulthood in service accumulating the capital required for marriage. Smith, “Some reflections on the Evidence for the Origins of the European Marriage Pattern in England”, p. 97. Smith, “Hypothèses sur la Nuptialité en Angleterre aux XIII^e–XIV^e siècles”, pp. 127-130. J. M. Bennett, “Medieval Peasant Marriage: An Examination of Marriage Licences in the *Liber Gersumarum*”, in J. A. Raftis (ed.), *Pathways to Medieval Peasants*, Toronto, 1981, pp. 193-246. S. A. C. Penn, “Female Wage Earners in Late Fourteenth Century England”, *Agricultural History Review*, 35 (1987), p. 14. Bennett, *Women in the Medieval English Countryside*, pp. 82-3.

⁵⁹ This assumption is consistent with the evidence for high levels of female out-migration in parts of the country before the Black Death. Many young women appear to have left home to seek employment and subsequently married outside of their home village. Smith, “Hypothèses sur la Nuptialité en Angleterre aux XIII^e–XIV^e siècles”, pp. 127-30.

⁶⁰ It is important to maintain the distinction between income and wages. If the employment available per worker fell faster than real wages rose after 1325, then the income of the average worker would have been lower in the 1330s and 1340s than in the early 1320s, despite the upwards trends in wages per day.

Such a decline in nuptiality rates in the pre-Black Death period might also have been accentuated by the lingering effects of the acute agrarian crisis of 1315–22.⁶¹ During the subsistence crises of these years many of the poorer members of the village community were forced to alienate parts of their holdings due to economic distress. It would have taken many poorer families years to recover from such set-backs, and some may have never been able to make up for the loss of part of their holdings, imposing an additional break on the rate of household formation.

The evidence presented in this chapter is consistent with the hypothesis that the period before the Black Death saw a fall in nuptiality and birth rates. There are good reasons to assume the existence of a North-West European demographic regime in the pre-1348 period. Court roll studies and other research indicates leave little doubt of the increasing pressure of population on land during the early fourteenth century. There are indirect indications that, as a result of rising population pressure, young men and women in peasant society found it increasingly difficult to marry. In these terms, it is reasonable to assume that preventative checks operated to retard the further growth of population during these decades. Therefore, if the experience of societies in North-Western Europe during the early modern period is any guide, it is possible that the existence of such a mechanism was sufficient to ensure a long-term equilibrium between population and resources before 1348, when this balance collapsed under the impact of the Black Death.

⁶¹ Kershaw, “The Great Famine and Agrarian Crisis in England 1315–1322”, pp. 85-132.

Chapter Eleven

English Economic Growth

c.1200–1348

The purpose of this chapter is to present evidence in support of the hypothesis that wool export trends influenced the rate of economic growth in pre-Black Death England. In Chapter Seven it was suggested that the rising overseas demand for wool provided a powerful stimulus to the economic development in the English countryside after c.1200 and that the result was the creation of new opportunities for employment and economic specialisation in rural villages and towns. The hypothesis was advanced that, for most of the thirteenth century, this factor helped to offset the adverse consequences of the progressive sub-division of holdings under demographic pressure. It was also predicted, however, that periods which saw a prolonged slump in wool exports were marked by a fall in the rate of economic growth. Accordingly, the suggestion was made that the surplus of labour in the rural market rose sharply during these years, as a steady rate of economic growth was required to absorb the increase in the rural labour force due to demographic growth.

There is little doubt of the rise in wool exports during the first half of the thirteenth century. Most historians would now agree with T.H. Lloyd's observation that:

From some time in the late eleventh or early twelfth century to the early fourteenth century Flemish clothiers had an apparently insatiable demand for wool and it is likely that throughout the greater part of this period exports from the British Isles were growing continuously.¹

As discussed in Chapter Five, this steady increase in the overseas demand for English wool meant a significant rise in net silver inflows over the thirteenth century as a whole. The result was that the size of the English coinage grew from less than £100,000 c.1180 to as much as £1,100,000 c.1310.

During the pre-1348 period the English balance of payments was largely determined by the market for English wool. This was clearly the case in the late thirteenth century and almost certainly so a century or so earlier. Comparison between mint output figures and trends in wool exports has indicated that any sustained fall in wool export earnings was likely to have resulted to substantial net silver outflows. As discussed earlier, prolonged crises of this nature occurred between c.1265–1281 and from c.1325–c.1343. Account must also be taken of heavy net silver outflows between 1294–8, when a lower level of wool exports coincided with extremely heavy military and diplomatic expenditures overseas.²

¹ Lloyd, *The English Wool Trade*, p. 5.

² Between 1294–98 Edward I spent approximately £350,000 on military expeditions and alliances on the Continent. Prestwich, "Edward I's Monetary Policies and their Consequences", p. 411. Mayhew, "Money and Prices in England from Henry II to Edward III", p. 125.

The importance of wool for the English balance of trade meant that fluctuations in wool exports had a direct influence on the rate of economic growth. Net silver inflows generated by a surplus of exports over imports represented a rise in the national income. The immediate recipients of this rise were wool merchants and wool producers. When these groups made use of the additional income earned by the sale of wool to foreign buyers, the level of aggregate demand rose. This in turn meant an increase in prices. Higher prices, *ceteris paribus*, stimulated production and encouraged a higher rate of economic growth. In contrast, an adverse balance of payments due to a sustained drop in wool exports would have resulted in a drop in the level of aggregate demand and a lower or negative rate of economic growth. If the drop in wool exports was sufficient to lead to an adverse balance of payments (and hence a net outflow of silver), both the amount of coin in circulation and prices would fall, adding to the risks of economic regression.

The degree to which economic growth rates depended on trends in wool export earnings would be difficult to over-estimate. If historians such as P. D. A. Harvey are correct, the rapid expansion of the English economy at the turn of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries was largely due to the boom in wool exports at this time.³ By 1297 the English barons were claiming in Parliament that wool was half the country's wealth. Although this was clearly an exaggeration, there is little doubt that most contemporaries felt that it was a pardonable one.⁴

The total value of the wool exported each year gives some idea of the importance of the trade to the English economy. Between 1279–90 wool exports averaged about 26,750 sacks per annum, with the totals for individual years fluctuating between 24,000 and 31,000 sacks. At the prices then prevailing, the annual value of wool exports to English producers during these years was in excess of £150,000.⁵ Total export earnings were, of course, higher because of the difference in the purchase price of wool in England and its sale price overseas. As there was no more than £700,000 in circulation in c.1278, the annual value of wool exports in the 1280s was probably equivalent to between a fifth and a quarter of the total coinage. Even these impressive figures pale into insignificance in comparison to the wool export boom of the first decade of the fourteenth century. Between 1304–11 the total value of English wool exports rose to an unprecedented high, averaging around 39,500 sacks per annum. In 1304–5 exports totalled 46,382 sacks and earned English farmers more than £280,000 from wool sales.⁶

³ Harvey, "The English Inflation of 1180–1220", p. 81.

⁴ Lloyd, *The English Wool Trade*, p. 1.

⁵ E. Carus-Wilson and O. Coleman place the value to producers of annual wool exports during this period at £150,000–£180,000, a figure consistent with estimates of the profits of a levy of 8,000 sacks made by Edward I's official in 1297. E. Miller, "War, Taxation and the English Economy", pp. 13, 27.

⁶ Lloyd, *The English Wool Trade in the Middle Ages*, p. 125. Lloyd, *The Movement of Wool Prices in Medieval England*, Table I.

The contribution made by wool export earnings to the rate of economic growth in England naturally depended on the manner in which this income was spent. If squandered on foreign imports, wool export earnings would have had less effect on the rate of national economic growth than if spent at home. It is clear, however, that much of the profits of the wool export trade were spent in England. The country enjoyed a large and growing trade surplus during most of the period c.1200 to c.1325, something which would be inexplicable if the profits of wool exports were overshadowed by a growing appetite for imports. Moreover, what little is known about the consumption patterns of the peasants and smaller landowners, who probably provided the bulk of the English wool clip implies that their tastes and budgets ran largely to native products.⁷

The assumption that the expansion of wool exports from c.1200 onwards was one reason for the development of the English economy during the thirteenth century accords with the timing of broader economic trends. There are clear signs of the urban growth, both in terms of the number of cities and towns and their size, from the late twelfth century onwards. Between 1190 and 1230 the number of new towns and boroughs founded in England was probably greater than at any time since the Norman Conquest. In the larger cities there is evidence of the rapid expansion of the suburbs and increasing prosperity, for example, in the form of the slow replacement of wood buildings with stone. In addition, the same period witnessed the emergence of the great English trade fairs such as St Ives, Boston, St Giles and Winchester.⁸

It is clear also that the growth of towns, cities and fairs c. 1200 was contemporaneous with the rapid expansion of local trade networks. R. H. Britnell has drawn attention to the increasing number of charters granted for periodic local markets in the first decades of the thirteenth century. He has shown that there are good grounds for believing that this trend reflected a real expansion of rural marketing links As Britnell observed:

*lords of established but unlicensed markets needed to acquire a charter only in special cases, since the status of markets held by prescription was a recognised one. Many of the country's most important markets were of this character. On these grounds alone it is arguable that royal charters attest a real increase in market founding. This conclusion is supported by the frequent association of newly licensed markets with new towns. Some charters provoked complaints by neighbouring lords, and some others were followed by a second charter to alter the market day, implying that the licensee found difficulty in establishing his right: both circumstances suggest that the markets concerned were new.*⁹

⁷ Dyer, *Standards of Living*, pp. 151-187.

⁸ E. W. Moore, *The Fairs of Medieval England*, Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, Toronto, 1985, pp. 22-3. M. W. Beresford, *New Towns of the Middle Ages*, London, 1967, p. 331.

⁹ R.A. Britnell, "The Proliferation of Markets in England 1200-1349", *Economic History Review*, 2nd series, 34 (1981), p. 211.

In addition, no significant correlation is evident between the chronology of market formation and fluctuations in financial pressures on the Crown.¹⁰

In addition to the growth of rural marketing networks, the thirteenth century also saw the expansion of rural industries serving purely local markets. The production of coarse low quality pottery in rural areas greatly expanded after c.1200.¹¹ The increasing number of fulling mills in country areas may indicate an increasing demand for cheaper cloths purchased by peasant households.¹² Another indirect indication of the expansion of the rural economy is the rapid proliferation of windmills in the countryside. The first post mills appear in the documentary evidence in the late twelfth century. A century later such mills were reasonably common even in small villages.¹³

Moreover, archaeological evidence provides further indications of economic growth on the local level. Coin finds at deserted village sites indicate a substantial increase in the money in use in the peasant economy from the 1190s onwards.¹⁴ Excavations at a number of sites indicate a dramatic improvement in quality of peasant housing at this time, suggesting that the living standards of many villages improved significantly during the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. In addition, there are signs of increasing expenditure by at least a significant minority of peasants on higher quality goods.¹⁵

By the end of the thirteenth century, the opportunities open to peasant smallholders to supplement their incomes from agriculture through commercial or industrial employment were far

¹⁰ The number of charters granted for local markets fell after 1275, despite the *Quo Warranto* proceedings which began in 1274 and continued into the next reign. Although the military ambitions of Edward I and his grandson meant that the financial pressures on the royal governments were heaviest towards the end of the thirteenth century and in the second quarter of the fourteenth, the number of new market charters granted slumped during both periods. In contrast, the number of charters purchased in the first quarter of the fourteenth century were much higher than in the periods 1275–1299 or 1325–49, although this period was one in which the Crown's requirement for finance was less acute.

¹¹ H. E. Jean Le Patourel, "Documentary Evidence and the Medieval Pottery Industry", *Medieval Archaeology*, 12 (1968), pp. 107-8, 119-20.

¹² Miller, "The Fortunes of the English Textile Industry in the Thirteenth Century", pp. 71-7. R. Holt, *The Mills of Medieval England*, Oxford, 1988, pp. 143-8.

¹³ Holt, *ibid.*, pp. 20-35.

¹⁴ S. E. Rigold, "Small Change in the Light of Medieval Site-Finds", in Mayhew, *Edwardian Monetary Affairs*, pp. 59-80.

¹⁵ G. Beresford, *The Medieval Clay-Land Village: Excavations at Goltho and Barton Blout*, London, 1975, pp. 20-23-4, 51-2. M. Beresford and J. G. Hurst, *Deserted Medieval Village Studies*, Guildford, 1971, pp. 176-7. G. Beresford, "Goltho: A Deserted Medieval Village and its Manor House", *Current Archaeology*, 56 (1977), p. 264. D. G. and J. G. Hurst, "Excavations at the Medieval Village of Wythemail, Northamptonshire", *Medieval Archaeology*, 13 (1969), pp. 354-70. J. Steane, *The Archaeology of Medieval England and Wales*, London, 1985, p. 190. C. Dyer, "English Peasant Building in the Later Middle Ages", *Medieval Archaeology*, 30 (1986), pp. 354-70.

greater than they had been c.1200. Incidental references in court rolls and local taxation returns leave no doubt of the existence of a wider range of professions and trades at the local level. In particular, the victualling trades seem to have increased in importance, in part because of the growth in the number of local markets meant an increase in demand, but also because it was ultimately more efficient for peasants to purchase their foodstuffs from retailers. As a result, by 1300 a significant proportion of the local population in many villages appears to have been engaged in by-industries such as brewing, butchery or baking. Apart from victualling, the expansion of local marketing networks almost certainly involved a substantial increase in employment in other trades, such as carting, leather-making or cloth-making.¹⁶

Wool export earnings were not, of course, the sole reason for the rapid expansion of the English economy over the thirteenth century. Factors such as demographic increase, the existence of a long period of relative peace and political stability, the expansion of arable production and technological progress all made their contribution to long-term economic growth. However, there are good reasons to see wool exports as the main engine of economic progress during the thirteenth century. The link between wool export trends and economic growth rates is supported not only by contemporary opinion and the size of the silver inflows generated by wool exports, but also by the apparent correlation between slumps in wool export earnings and recessionary periods.

In Chapter Seven it was suggested that periods of net silver outflow in c.1265–80, 1294–8 and 1325–47 meant periods of economic recession, just as the silver inflows between c.1300–25 due to the recovery in wool exports encouraged an expansionary trend. Statistics for the foundation of local markets from royal and local records bear out this analysis. Enrollment of new market licences fell off during the last quarter of the thirteenth century, recovered in the first quarter of the next and ceased almost entirely in the decades before the Black Death.¹⁷ This is precisely the pattern that might be expected if the pace of economic development in the countryside was tied to the state of the wool export trade.

¹⁶ Moreover, the increase in the number of petty-traders and craftsmen in the English countryside over the thirteenth century implies that those peasants who had grain to spare would find a ready market for their surplus, a point consistent with the involvement of families with substantial land-holdings in brewing activities. Dyer, *Standards of Living*, pp. 156-7. Bennett, *Women in the Medieval Countryside*, pp. 57, 126-7. Raftis, *Warboys*, pp. 193. DeWindt, *Land and People*, pp. 235-40. Britton, *Community of the Vill*, pp. 87-93. Britnell, "The Proliferation of Markets", pp. 213, 217-21. Langdon, "Horse Hauling, A Revolution in Vehicle Transport in Twelfth- and Thirteenth-Century England?", pp. 65-6.

¹⁷ Although signs of economic recession or stagnation are increasingly apparent in the late 1330s and early 1340s as a result of the stress of war and heavy taxation, the slow-down in the rate of town-foundation and the growth in the number of local markets is first apparent a decade earlier. Britnell, "The Proliferation of Markets in England", p. 210.

If wool export slumps were sufficient to slow the formation of new markets and towns across England, then it is likely that these had a marked impact on employment on the local level. During any period of economic recession, it is probable that the increase in the size of the rural population outran the creation of new employment opportunities. If this was the case, then it only to be expected that an adverse balance of payments in the 1270s, 1290s, 1330s and 1340s would have resulted in an increase in the surplus of labour in the countryside. As has been observed earlier, such a trend would account for the contraction of the demesne sector in the last quarter of the thirteenth century and the second quarter of the fourteenth, as conditions in these periods would have favoured management strategies which allowed landlords to take advantage of the reduction in the opportunity cost of labour in the peasant sector relative to the market wage.¹⁸

¹⁸ Some allowance should also be made for the indirect effects on employment of economic disruption resulting from armed conflict between 1294-98 and after 1336. The extent of the impact of war on the English economy in this period remains, however, a matter of dispute.

Chapter Twelve Conclusion

This dissertation has re-examined Postan's interpretation of English agriculture in the period before the Black Death. The Postan thesis assumes that worsening over-population meant falling real wages and rising prices over the thirteenth century. According to Postan, rural mortality rates rose and the level of population contracted c.1300, with the result that much of the marginal land taken under cultivation during the thirteenth century was abandoned. These trends, Postan argued, explain the accelerated drift away from direct management on many estates, falling prices and the apparent rise in real wages before the Plague.

Some modifications of this view have been suggested in this thesis. It has been argued that the rate of demographic growth in the thirteenth century may not have been as high as Postan believed. Evidence has also been presented in support of the hypothesis that demographic increase need not have been accompanied by an inevitable decline in peasant livestock numbers and soil exhaustion. In addition, it has been argued that Postan may have under-estimated the opportunities available for peasants to improve the fertility of their holdings by adopting more labour intensive forms of husbandry. The assumption that there was a sharp increase in rural death rates at the turn of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries has also been called into question. Moreover, evidence has been presented in support of the claim that monetarist theory better explains the movement of wages, prices and rents between 1200–1348 than Postan's demographic hypothesis.

An alternative to the Postan thesis has been advanced. According to this alternative thesis, land was still comparatively abundant at the turn of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, while labour was relatively scarce. Hence, the factor cost of hired labour was high in comparison to that of agricultural land. Estate owners therefore found it more economical to increase production by expanding the area under the plough, than through the adoption of more labour intensive methods. Excess demand for labour and high wages in the demesne sector were also an incentive for peasant families to lease out their surplus labour rather than use it to increase outputs per acre on their own farms. The result was that agriculture in both the demesne and peasant sectors was land extensive, rather than labour intensive.

Like the Postan thesis, this alternative thesis assumes that demographic growth outstripped the expansion of the arable as the thirteenth century progressed and that this trend meant a gradual fall in average holding size in the peasant sector. It is hypothesised, however, that the adverse effects of this trend may have been to some degree offset by the direct and indirect consequences of the rise in wool exports between 1200–65. This increase in English wool exports meant that England

experienced a favourable balance of payments for most of this period. Net silver inflows led to an increase in the size of the English money supply and rising prices.

The increase in prices was only one of the visible signs of the increase in effective demand. Profits earned from the sale of wool resulted in an rise in spending power at the village level, which helped to stimulate the expansion of local marketing networks and small-scale rural industries. Industrial expansion and the growing sophistication of the rural economy in turn provided opportunities for both household specialisation and the employment of landless and semi-landless labourers. The emergence of a substantial class of petty traders and wage earners in the countryside meant a rise in the demand for foodstuffs, which provided a further source of income for peasant households with a marketable surplus. The result was an ascending spiral of economic development. As the profits of wool exports worked their way through the English rural economy, multiplier effects and inter-sectoral linkages encouraged an accelerated rate of economic growth.

It is hypothesised the long wool export-led boom faltered in the mid-1260s. Due to interruptions in wool exports and an adverse balance of trade, economic growth rates slumped between 1265–1281. During this period the economy was unable to absorb the increase in the number of landless and semi-landless wage earners in the countryside. The resulting increase in under-employment in the rural labour market did not, however, lead to a substantial fall in real wages. Because of customary notions of a fair living wage, estate owners were unable to bid real wages down to market-clearing levels.

The pool of surplus labour created in 1265–81 is likely to have persisted, despite the recovery in wool exports during the 1280s. Economic growth rates over the last quarter of the thirteenth century as a whole were probably too low to compensate for both the effects of the recession of the 1270s and the continued increase in the number of landless and semi-landless workers due to population growth. Moreover, massive net silver outflows during the period 1294–8 are likely to have provided a further check to economic expansion.

The persistence of rural under-employment resulted in a fall in the opportunity cost of family labour employed on the peasant farm relative to the market wage. This decline meant that peasants in many parts of the country responded to the progressive fall in mean holding size by increasing labour inputs per acre. The time and effort spent in preparatory tasks was increased, while attempts were made to reduce the area under a bare fallow and to improve the fertility of the soil through the more intensive application of fertilisers and a greater use of legumes. These trends resulted in a substantial rise in the marginal productivity of land in the peasant sector.

The relative inflexibility of real wages made it difficult for most estate owners to increase labour inputs per acre in the same manner as their tenants. However, greater opportunities for labour intensification in the demesne sector existed in some areas than in others. Where soils were light and fertile, or where demesne farms had access to urban markets, labour inputs in demesne agriculture could be increased past the point where the marginal product of labour was equal to the market wage on demesne farms elsewhere. The result was that the turn of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries saw the adoption of more labour intensive methods of husbandry in estate agriculture in parts of southern and eastern England.

This trend, however, was not sufficient to offset the overall rise in the marginal productivity of land in the peasant sector relative to that of land in the demesne sector. The same factors which encouraged labour intensification on demesne farms in particular areas, such as fertile soils and access to urban markets, also stimulated peasant efforts to increase labour inputs. In consequence, peasant husbandry in such regions, such as north-eastern Norfolk, may have reached new heights of labour intensification in the last quarter of the thirteenth century. Here, as elsewhere, the leasing out of demesne land to tenants was seen by estate owners as a profitable alternative to the continuance of direct management, as peasants were prepared to work rented holdings for a rate of return per hour lower than the market wage. The period after c.1270 therefore saw the beginnings of the slow retreat from direct management and the adoption of a *rentier* policy on many estates.

Evidence has been presented to suggest that the North-West European demographic regime may have prevailed in England during the century before the Black Death. It is possible therefore that subsistence pressures led to a slower rate of demographic increase towards 1300. Land hunger and diminishing employment prospects for wage earners almost certainly caused many young adults to delay marriage and forced many others below the economic threshold for matrimony. Later marriage and a rise in the proportions never marrying in turn would have meant a fall in fertility rates. Consequently, an equilibrium may have been maintained between population and resources without the intervention of rising death rates.

English wool exports peaked in the first decade of the fourteenth century. However, any export-led boom between 1305–10 was, however, soon followed by a period of severe agrarian crisis in 1315–22. Famines and murrains during these years led to the forced alienation of land by smallholders and middling tenants. Such a trend would have almost certainly increased the dependence of many peasant families on participation in the casual labour market, further exacerbating the surplus of labour in the countryside.

Any economic recovery after the crisis of 1315–22 was cut short by the onset of a deflationary trend in the mid-1320s. Falling wool export earnings meant net silver outflows, which in

turn led to a decline in the size of metallic currency. This trend worsened after 1336, as a result of the diversion by the English government of the profits of wool exports to pay for military campaigns and overseas alliances. Wages did not fall as fast, or as far, as prices after 1325, as workers were slow to adjust their notions of an acceptable living wage in response to the downward movement of prices. The result was that rural wages rose over the second quarter of the fourteenth century, despite the growing surplus of labour in the countryside due to sluggish economic growth.

The increase in rural under-employment after 1325 meant a further fall in the opportunity cost of labour on the family farm relative to the market price. This trend gave additional encouragement to the process of labour intensification in the peasant sector. Hence, it is reasonable to expect a widening of the existing gap between the marginal product of land in the peasant and demesne sectors. The combined effect of this rise, and the increased cost in real terms of hired labour, may account for the accelerated shift away from direct management during the years before the Black Death.

As in the late thirteenth century, rising subsistence pressures in the countryside after 1325 are likely to have resulted in a fall in marriage rates. There is no clear evidence for either a significant rise in mortality rates at this time, or for demographic decline. Instead, it is more likely that population growth was maintained at a sustainable level through the mechanism of welfare-dependent nuptiality.

Like D. L. Farmer, the author of this dissertation has sought to “soften some of the lines which Postan drew more sharply”. The alternative model advanced here takes as its point of departure Postan’s contention that the thirteenth century was a period of worsening land hunger and growing demographic pressure. But, whereas Postan argued that the English peasantry failed to meet the challenge of a swollen population, the author of this dissertation takes a slightly more optimistic view. It is argued that the crisis may not have been as severe as the Postan thesis assumed and that there were perhaps greater opportunities for a successful response to demographic pressure than the evidence available to Postan in the 1950s and 1960s suggested. In particular, the ability of peasant families to switch from land extensive to labour intensive forms of husbandry by substituting on-farm work for leisure or out-work provided a means by which the rural population could escape from the Malthusian trap evident by the end of the thirteenth century.¹

¹ In one sense, the thesis advanced here is as much an extension of the Postan thesis as a correction. It follows up possibilities which Postan was the first to raise, but which he eventually rejected for lack of evidence. Chapters Nine and Ten, for example, should be read in light of Postan’s comments regarding the changing possibilities for labour-intensification in medieval agriculture, and his observations of the effects of prudential marriage customs on the rate of family formation before the Black Death. Postan, *Medieval Economy and Society*, pp. 38, 48.

The hypotheses advanced in this dissertation are no less tentative than those which Postan set out before his audience at the 9th International Congress in 1950. Like the Postan thesis, the conclusions arrived at here rest on probabilities and inferences. The alternative model is, however, more consistent with the results of recent research into the state of the English economy in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth century than Postan's original hypotheses. For this reason, the author of this dissertation believes that model proposed here should be regarded as an alternative to Postan's model of the process of economic development in the pre-1348 period.