

Standards of Living in the Middle Ages

This article was originally published in *Teaching History* c.1995 as a review article, not by a learned research historian but by an enthusiast who has had the good fortune to read and teach about the Middle Ages. It was partly inspired by the tendency to see the people of the Middle Ages as engrimed in muck and misery and an ignorant lot - simply because their lives were different from ours. Therefore one of its themes is how the images of medieval social life conveyed through early National Curriculum 'Medieval Realms' textbooks compared with those being developed by current research. Do the two types of books present the same view of medieval living standards? If they don't, does it matter? And if it does, can something of this academic view be conveyed to Year 7 in a way that stands a chance of combating the impact of, for example, Tony Robinson's *Maid Marian*? The challenge is to get Year 7s to see the commonality between us and them as well as the differences.

I hope this article still has something to offer, especially to teachers who aren't too familiar with the topic and would like an up-date, although obviously it's not as up to date as it was! Hopefully I'll get round to properly up-dating it sometime.

Peasant Housing and Living Standards

What can we learn about standards of living from 'Medieval Realms' texts? Let's begin with villagers' homes. Texts do not differ much in their portrayal of 'simple cottages with no windows and mud floors', 'so small and badly built that very few survived'. Cottages measured 5m by 3m, were self-built, shared by animals and contained 'little furniture, just a few stools, a table, a few pots and a mattress'. Some texts paint a slightly less awful image, not always through detail but by avoiding words such as 'shack' or 'hut'.

A different picture, in detail and tone, emerges from Christopher Dyer's *Everyday Life in Medieval England*, (The Hambleton Press, 1994), a collection of articles first published in journals between 1982 and 1992. Amongst Dyer's topics are diet, gardens, wages and earnings and peasant housing. This last topic is worth considering in some detail because of the contrast that emerges. Dyer's starting point is peasant housing in the West Midlands between 1350 and 1500. The sources – archaeology,

court rolls, wills and poetry amongst them – show that of 113 Worcestershire buildings only 2% were smaller than 4.6m x 9.2m and 84% were between this size and 4.6m x 13.8m, substantially bigger than the homes described in textbooks. These buildings were rarely longhouses where family and animals shared the same roof. The better-off peasants had several buildings, amongst them free-standing kitchens and separate barns for animals. By the 14th century such houses had stone foundations and their timber frames were the work of specialist carpenters. A 3-bay house required timber from at least 20 trees and iron-work for hinges, locks and keys. Masons, thatchers and daubers were amongst other specialist craftsmen employed by peasants.

This may not be surprising given the assumption that the rapid population fall from the 1340s led to higher standards of living for the survivors. However Dyer argues that these features of peasant housing were found to a significant degree in the thirteenth century. Why don't such houses survive in numbers today? His answer is not that they were inherently flimsy but that they were torn down later to make way for new fashions in homes, notably the desire for two-storey buildings.

None of this detail (and Dyer's consideration of regional variations) denies that peasant housing was gloomy and unhealthy. However it does challenge assumptions that houses were not cleaned, did not change throughout the period and that people had no desire for improvement. Dyer concludes that 'modern observers have tended to underestimate the capacities and achievements of the medieval peasantry', at least partly because the word 'peasant' engendered low expectations and researchers only found what they expected to find. Dyer firmly tells us that 'peasants lived in houses not huts'.

This general argument about living standards and the timing and pace of change is developed in other articles in this collection and more generally in Dyer's *Standards of Living in the later Middle Ages*, (Cambridge, 1989), another book that had me interrupting conversations with 'Wow, did you know ...?' Overall Dyer's work raises questions about the portrayal of peasant living standards in early 'Medieval Realms' textbooks. Firstly, living standards were somewhat better than most texts suggest. Secondly there were significant changes during the period whereas some texts portray

a stagnant medievalism in which no-one sought improvement. Thirdly the period of change seems to predate the Black Death and therefore suggests that we ought to be seeking other reasons for those changes that did take place. Do the same issues arise in other fields of research?

Towns and Commerce

The portrayal of towns and commerce in Key Stage 3 textbooks is much closer to the conclusions of academic work. Historians who blanch at the words ‘economic and social’ may not rush to read R.H. Britnell’s *The Commercialisation of English Society 1000 - 1500*, (Cambridge 1992) but happily the themes of the book are as much about people as about the mechanics of commerce.

Again a central theme is development, one that textbooks do convey through their concentration on the growth of towns, markets and fairs. England by 1300 was significantly more commercialised than in 1100, judged by the volume of commerce, the coinage in circulation (increasing from £25,000 to £900,000) and the size of the urban population. By 1300 money rents had largely replaced labour services – which raises questions about what the rebels of 1381 were after. Many of them would have been freemen, not villeins. The period up to 1500 then saw a decline in these raw totals but the volume of trade and the currency in circulation per capita was probably higher. Commerce was still growing in importance.

Why was commerce developing? Britnell argues that population growth played an important part but also significant were many small improvements in techniques and trading practices as generations passed on their knowledge, another reminder that the people of the Middle Ages could be as creative and as determined on improvement as any in later centuries. Another factor was the demand created by nobles and gentry for agricultural produce and craftsmen’s goods, a demand high enough to encourage specialisation, even in rural communities.

Was commerce important? Britnell argues that commerce did contribute significantly to changes in standards of living in countryside as well as town, a view developed in his article *Commercialisation and Economic Development in England 1000 -1300* in R.H. Britnell and B.M.S. Campbell, (eds.) *A Commercialising Economy: England*

1086 - c.1300, (Manchester University Press, 1995). This article is an ideal introduction to the topic, partly because its clarity and structure boosted my confidence by leading me through the trends and detail of the argument. Later articles in this collection explore medieval commerce to a depth that I had not realised was possible. If you wish to know how GDP can be calculated for 1086 here are suggestions, even if the sources do not allow definite conclusions.

The pattern of developing commercialisation and urbanisation emerging from these books parallels conclusions about peasant housing, diet and wages. Trade must be ranked alongside changes in climate, harvest quality and population size as a factor that affected all sectors of the population. Change was well-established before 1300, so what was the role of the Black Death'?

The Black Death

For years I tried to persuade my students that the Black Death was the most important event in British history and a vital long-term cause of the Industrial Revolution. I don't necessarily believe this but it does shake up their assumptions about the relative significance of political events and factors such as climate and disease! If they are enthused they now have the ideal source book in Rosemary Horrox (trans. and ed.), *The Black Death*, (Manchester University Press, 1994). Here are nearly thirty accounts of the spread of the pestilence through Europe and Britain, fifty examples of explanations and responses (making a wonderful source for GCSE Medicine through Time) and a further fifty extracts looking at the impact and consequences of the plague, each section prefaced by an introduction discussing key issues and arguments.

Another book from Manchester University Press, B.M.S. Campbell (ed), *Before the Black Death, Studies in the 'crisis' of the Early Fourteenth Century*, (1991), challenges my wild and provocative generalisations about the plague. Here a series of essays discuss the degree to which England was changing before the impact of plague. Population, the agrarian and industrial economics and government are discussed, prefaced by an excellent introduction by Barbara Harvey which sets out the debates. This is an important book, linking work that shows change and improvements in the thirteenth century to the more rapid changes of the later fourteenth century.

The Roles of Women in the Middle Ages

Key Stage 3 authors create a real sense of the diversity of women's experiences, from female guild-members to formidable ladies of the manor, but does this reflect the realities of Middle Ages or our 1990s desire to show women in a variety of positive roles? Diversity is clear in P.J.P Goldberg's *Woman is a Worthy Wight: Women in English Society c.1200-1500*, (Alan Sutton, 1992) but there were different strands to this diversity. For example, when it came to the freedom to choose a husband or to remain single, women had more or less freedom depending upon their class, whether they lived in town or countryside and upon when they lived, for women had more independence from the late fourteenth century to the early fifteenth century, the period of labour shortages.

During the later middle ages unmarried women in towns usually lived away from their parents, often working as servants, and this social and economic independence led women to delay marriage and to choose their partners. Women in rural villages usually had less freedom because they lived with their parents and had fewer opportunities to earn an independent living. Whether their wishes about their future partners were considered was dependent on parental flexibility. Benevolent fathers respected daughters' wishes, domestic tyrants – both fathers and mothers – did not, often marrying their daughters to members of the extended family.

Goldberg's arguments further demonstrate that society in 1500 was profoundly different from society in 1066 and that the pattern of change within the period was not constant. However, while current work on commerce and topics such as peasant housing is pushing back the period of change from the post-Black Death era to the thirteenth century and perhaps even earlier, it appears from this collection of essays that the period of most significant change for women was the late fourteenth century.

Other articles in this collection which have a particular bearing on issues discussed in Key Stage 3 texts are those by Helena Graham and Rowena Archer. Graham's study of women's work in the countryside stresses that women took a full part in manual labour in the fields but were excluded from specialised trades such as butchery and baking. Women were more likely to find work in brewing or petty retailing. Archer's study of aristocratic women as landholders and administrators makes clear the

difference between the theory of female subordination and the rough and ready equality that existed throughout society. Expectations of women's ability to run estates and organize levies of troops were high.

This field is also explored in Jennifer C. Ward's *English Noblewomen in the Later Middle Ages*, (Longman 1992). Dr Ward deals with marriages, widowhood, parenthood, travel, estate management and other themes, demonstrating the richness and diversity of the lives of many noblewomen. This is particularly successful in her detailed running theme of the life of Elizabeth de Burgh, niece of Edward I. Dr Ward's recently published collection of source material *Women of the English Nobility and Gentry 1066 - 1500*, (Manchester University Press, 1995), should prove extremely useful.

Together these books demonstrate that Key Stage 3 textbooks' emphasis on the variety of women's experience is well judged, particularly in relation to the later middle ages. This theme also illustrates the common experience of people over the centuries rather than simply emphasising what was different about the past and again shows that this was a period of change and development, not of stagnation.

Change and Continuity in the Middle Ages

My reading of this collection of academic books suggests that historians assume considerable changes in medieval society and are concerned to explain those changes and identify the pattern of change. However there is a danger that Key Stage 3 texts underestimate the degree of change, except in the case of the disappearance of villeinage, credited to the Black Death and the Revolt of 1381. In many texts life, especially in the villages, was unchanging until an element of improvement crept in during the fifteenth century. The gruesome experience of Piers Plowman stands for peasant life in every century and even in every decade. It can be difficult to believe from some books that anyone smiled between 1066 and 1500.

One of the best antidotes to this picture of a stagnant medieval world is M.H. Keen's *English Society in the Later Middle Ages 1348-1500*, (Penguin, 1990). Keen is one of the most distinguished historians of the period but for the novice medievalist his great virtue is the clarity of his explanation. This is not the kind of book you abandon

because you get lost in the historical undergrowth. Keen argues powerfully for the significance of the period, England emerging ‘more English, more insular and more individual, and with a consciousness of its individuality that had not been there before.’ Many readers may be stopped in their tracks by the suggestion that ‘to look back into the world of John or Edward I will drive home the force of the adage that ‘the past is a foreign country’ infinitely more sharply than will looking back to the age of Richard III or Henry VII.’ If only there was a companion volume on the period 1000 to 1348. For the moment the nearest we have are the two volumes by E. Miller and J. Hatcher in Longman’s Social and Economic History series of which *Medieval England: Towns, Commerce and Crafts 1086-1348* was published in 1995.

Another survey is Rosemary Horrox (ed.) *Fifteenth-century attitudes: Perceptions of Society in Late Medieval England*, (Cambridge, 1994) which brings together essays by a dozen historians on themes such as Rural society, Urban society, The Poor, Women, Aristocracy, presenting a vivid picture of the wealth, opportunities, ideals and anxieties of the fifteenth century people. It is in addition well-illustrated and has a quite beautiful cover, a book that is a pleasure to handle as well as to read.

A book bringing together the themes discussed earlier is the one I approached with most foreboding, S.H. Rigby’s *English Society in the Later Middle Ages: Class, Status and Gender*, (Macmillan, 1995). References in the preface to ‘dominant paradigms’ and ‘sociological theories’ suggested exactly the approaches to history that had led me to flee modern history for the primitive simplicities of the Wars of the Roses. Nowadays I know that those wars were not primitive and nor were the combatants simple in their motives and ideals. Since reading this book I am also far less wary of the various theories and concepts Dr Rigby so clearly describes. Dr Rigby discusses medieval social structure, its development and the reasons for development. His exploration of reasons covers population changes, commercial growth and the extent to which class conflict led to structural change. He also explores other varieties of social inequality including the changing place of women and of the Jews.

This book could have been a nightmare given my tendency to flinch at any ‘-ism’ that crosses my path. However the author patiently explains his terminology, sets out the

arguments and competing theories with clarity and keeps his overall themes in the reader's mind. Why did the structure of society change? Dr Rigby emphasises the importance of peasant struggles against landlords but not so much the high drama of 1381 as myriad local disputes which began well before the onset of the Black Death. However he also argues that it is not possible to establish the primacy of one factor and that population change and the growth of commerce were also central to the emergence of a very different social structure in these centuries.

Conclusions

How has this changed my own picture of medieval England? My perception had been one of considerable change, particularly in the fifteenth century. This change I attributed to population growth and decline and particularly the liberating impact of the Black Death. My reading has certainly amended the latter perception with significant change taking place (in at least some aspects of society) in the 1200s and perhaps earlier as a result of several other factors of which the least quantifiable component is the human desire for improvement. That stereotypical medieval village full of self-sufficient villeins was in retreat long before the 1300s with a high percentage of free peasants deciding what to grow and manufacture according to the needs of local markets and lords and themselves using the skills of specialist craftsmen.

Can any of this be conveyed at Key Stage 3? There are two separate issues here one of detail and one of overview. In terms of detail it may not be enough to describe peasant housing, for example, in more positive terms. Pupils' existing images (and many do have preconceptions) are based on TV programmes such as 'Maid Marian' and here they see mud shacks not solidly-built peasant homes. How can two lessons compete with a six-episode repeated series and all that glorious dirt, vulgarity and laughter? Our 'correct' interpretations will simply bounce off pupils' preconceptions because they don't have the time to take root. Therefore pupils' preconceptions need to be explicitly identified and contrasted with the evidence. Only then will pupils' existing ideas begin to be altered.

A second area for debate is that of overall interpretations of the period. By and large the Middle Ages is seen as a period of continuity. This may be to create a contrast

with later periods when the pace of change was more rapid. It may be because pupils can only take on board continuity and that to discuss degrees of change is too complex. However a third reason may be the absence of summarising narrative text which provides the links and patterns for pupils to follow. Pupils study lots of interesting topics in manageable chunks but patterns over the whole period are rarely addressed. The possible result is that, six months on, pupils have retained snippets of information but have no sense of the significance of the period as a whole and therefore have little to build on when they move on to study Britain after 1500.

Space does not permit further development of these themes but they seem important if pupils' understanding of medieval life is to be enhanced. However I'll finish with an indulgence! My favourite 'read' amongst this collection was Barbara Hanawalt's, *Growing up in Medieval London*, (Oxford University Press, 1993). Professor Hanawalt's exploration of the daily lives and relationships of children and adolescents is the tale of real, named individuals whose experiences can be found in contemporary records, adorned with the author's imaginative reconstructions of incidents. Purists may question such reconstructions but they are good reading and had made me checking the footnotes to see how much was based on sources and how much was the author's interpretation. I left this book with the feeling that medieval children may have lived very different lives in some ways but that there were key elements of their relationships and their emotions that were no different from those of children today – and it's available in paperback!