Title
Peasant Society as Revealed by a Thirteenth-Century Manorial Extent

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PEASANT SOCIETY AS REVEALED BY
A THIRTEENTH-CENTURY MANORIAL EXTENT[*]

Donald R. Abbott

Considerable historical treatment has been devoted to the copious local records of late medieval England. Charters, Hundred Rolls, court records, local annals, and extents have been studied in order to learn about the conditions of the age. Much of this primary material lends itself to studies of social history: inquiries into population, social classes and status, and the lifestyles of the common man can be assisted by the scrutiny of these sources. The use of manorial extents in social and class studies has, unfortunately, been lacking. No extensive analysis of extents from various areas of England has been made. This pilot project will examine one set of thirteenth-century extents from Ramsey Abbey in order to explore methods by which these documents may illuminate our understanding of the medieval English peasantry.

An extent was an inquisition conducted for the purpose of determining the holdings of a manorial lord, either for the local lord's own use or for a higher authority. These inquiries were not originally called 'extents' however, but customals. Reginald Lennard has argued in the *English Historical Review* that an extent must contain valuations in monetary terms for services and holdings.[1] A customal, on the other hand, was any one of a number of documents that recorded customary rents and services and the land holdings involved.[2] An extent then, in the original usage of the term, was a type of customal that elaborated the worth of the manor. However, even by the fourteenth century, 'extent' was being used to label any examination of a manor's holdings and holders. F. W. Maitland wrote before the turn of the century that an extent gave " . . . descriptions which

[1] R. Lennard, "What is a Manorial Extent?" *English Historical Review* 44 (1929): 256-263.

[2] G. C. Homans, *English Villagers of the Thirteenth Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1941), p. 8.

give us the number and names of the tenants, the size of their holdings, the legal character of their tenure, and the kind and amount of their service."[3] It is in this more general sense that the word is now usually employed and how it will be used here.[4]

Extents lend themselves particularly well to this type of inquiry for several reasons. First, for the period of the thirteenth century they are abundant and their use was widespread.[5] Second, the very factors which made extents of practical value to a medieval lord make these records useful for demographic and social research. The needs of the manor's administration required that the extents contain detailed information on holdings, fees, and services owed to the lord. Therefore, the names and particular duties of the manor's permanent tenants were listed, thus providing relatively complete pictures of a well-defined area. As they were drawn up locally, they are quite reliable. They are more dependable, in fact, than hearth tax counts such as Domesday.[6] A final reason for using extents is a purely practical one: many extents have been published and are generally available for research and scrutiny by the historical community. A complete study will require an examination of extents from many areas over the period of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, including many that have not yet been published, but sufficient records have been published to provide adequate data for this exploratory paper.

Against these decided advantages must be set a shortcoming which has deterred the use of extents in demographic and population studies. Since the lord of the manor was concerned only with what was owed him from the permanent, original tenants, only those who actually held land directly from the lord (*tenet* or *habet*) were recorded. Members of the lord's household, transient dwellers, and sub-tenants were excluded from the inquisition.[7] Several historians have argued that because of this, documents such as Hundred Rolls and manorial extents may not be accurately used as evidence of changing population or of the amount of land held by a peasant

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[3] F. W. Maitland, *Collected Papers*, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1911), 2: 48.

[4] See, for example, J. Ambrose Raftis, *Tenure and Mobility* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1964), p. 15.

[5] J. C. Russell, *British Medieval Population* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1948), p. 56.

[6] For a general discussion of the sources for medieval English social history and, more specifically, Domesday and extents, see Russell, chapters 3 and 4.

[7] The best treatment of these hired laborers during the late middle ages is M. M. Postan, *The Famulus*, The Economic History Review Supplements, no. 2 (London: Economic History Society, 1954); examples of sub-letting in Ramsey court rolls are provided by Raftis, *Tenure*, pp. 74-81.

household.[8] Clearly, there did exist a portion of the population that was not accounted for in the inquisitions, but to reject these documents out of hand because of this margin of error seems to be an extreme measure in light of the scarcity of alternatives for documentary evidence.[9] The noted Russian historian, E. A. Kosminsky, while admitting that the problem is very real,[10] maintains that the documents may still be of value and states that " . . . in any case even a statistical analysis of land as first allocated gives sufficiently striking results."[11] He then makes analysis of Hundred Rolls as evidence of the stratification of landholding. I suggest that the same 'striking results' may be obtained by thorough and widespread examinations of the manorial extents of the period of the thirteenth century.[12]

One set of extents will be employed in this study as a test case: those of Ramsey Abbey conducted about 1250.[13] This inquisition was the largest conducted between 1135 and 1275, the period in which the abbots of Ramsey employed extents. It is quite detailed, furnishing the names, holdings, and services of all tenants on nearly all the various Ramsey manors.

The most straightforward information provided by analysis of the Ramsey Abbey extents is the number of permanent tenants and the size of their holdings. However, a problem which confronts all demographers working with medieval records arises from the inconsistencies of land

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[8] Professor Postan states the position most clearly: " . . . extents are not as a rule a reliable guide to population; and even when admissible as evidence of population . . . they must be ruled out as evidence for the number of acres which each household in fact cultivated in any given year." M. M. Postan, *Essays on Medieval Agriculture and General Problems of the Medieval Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), p. 144. Raftis (*Tenure*, p. 31) confers with this opinion, stating that " . . . extents leave serious gaps as sources for village history."

[9] The alternatives which most social historians prefer for studies of the manor and its landholders are the court rolls of the manorial hallmotes. (Homans describes them as " . . . the foremost medieval sources for what is called social history." p. 8). While certainly invaluable material is contained in these records (as demonstrated by Raftis' study cited above) they are fraught with their own set of problems. See Zvi Razi, "The Toronto School's Reconstitution of Medieval Peasant Society: A Critical View" *Past and Present* 85 (1979): 140-157.

[10] E. A. Kosminsky, *Studies in the Agrarian History of England in the Thirteenth Century*, trans. Ruth Kisch, ed. R. H. Hilton (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1956), pp. 213-214.

[11] Ibid., p. 214.

[12] This controversy will not be settled here but must await further research and comment. A study such as I have suggested may prove to be the only method by which to demonstrate the usefulness of extents in peasant studies.

[13] *Rerum Britannicarum Medii Aevi Scriptores: Cartularium Monasterii de Rameseia*, 3 vols. (London: Kraus Reprint Ltd., 1965), 1: 281-496.

measurements throughout England, making direct comparison from one area to another difficult. Not only was the terminology varied, but even on a local or regional level the size of the land units changed to account for different productivities and traditions. It is fortunate for this examination of the Ramsey extents that in the mid-thirteenth century, a table of land values on the Ramsey manors was set down by order of the abbot.[14] In this record the landholdings of the manors and, more importantly, the size of the hyde and virgate in terms of acres is provided. While there were discrepancies in the exact size of an acre throughout England, it was an almost universally used term and was a fairly consistant basic unit of land.[15] Therefore, in order to compare holdings from one manor to another, large tracts of land (variable units) must be broken down into acres. (See Table 1).

TABLE 1

HIDAGE PERTAINING TO RAMSEY ABBEY ON VARIOUS MANORS MID-THIRTEENTH CENTURY

MANOR	ACRES/VIRGATE	VIRGATE/HYDE		ACRES/HYDE
Slepe	16	5	=	80
Holywell	18	5	=	90
Warboys	30	4	=	120
Ripton	15½	4	=	62
Broughton	32	6½	=	208
Upwood	20	4	=	80
Wistow	30	4	=	120
Hemmingford	16	6	=	96
Stukely	24	4	=	96
Shillington	12	4	=	48
Girton	30	4	=	120
Barton	24	4	=	96

14 Ibid., 3: 208-215.
15 J. Ambrose Raftis, *The Estates of Ramsey Abbey* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1957), p. 68.

Several additional terms of landholding were also employed in the extents. *Cotlanda* was a common term which denoted one-quarter of a virgate.[16] A *pythel* was literally a small piece of land and will be taken as less than an acre. A *roda* was commonly one-quarter of an acre. Of a more confusing nature are the terms *croftum*, *mesuagium*, and *mansum*.[17] Although these terms had originated in various places and at different times,[18] by the thirteenth century they had all come to signify similar holdings with only vague differences in size or configuration. All of these holdings were very small indeed and would have supported only vegetable gardens or small farm animals. They added no arable land to the manor's plowed lands but tenants who were listed as holding such were permanent members of the manor and must be included in any compilation of the land and its holders.

On nearly all manors of the Ramsey Estates were lands held by two or more persons. At various times these holdings (and services) had been received jointly by a group, for which all members were responsible.[19] The holding need not have been divided evenly, nor was this fact recorded or of interest to the lord (who had let out the holding as a single unit). These holdings should be viewed as single tenancies then, regardless of how many persons participated. However, they supported multiple households and this must be taken into account when determining the average land holdings.

With the basic unit of land established and the terms of land holding defined, the extent may be examined. The data drawn from the extent of 1250 are set forth in Table 2.

The average-holding figure (the simple mathematical average) for the Ramsey Abbey manors is 12.56 acres. However, scrutiny of the table quickly indicates that the largest number of tenants did not hold 12.5 acres. In fact, more tenants held one virgate (considerably more than 12.5 acres on all but one of the manors) than any other size parcel. This disparity is significant when one considers how the various tenants supported themselves and their families. Those who held land insufficient to support themselves worked for goods or payment on the land of the larger holders,

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16 A *quarterium* also denoted one-quarter virgate. See Raftis, *Estates*, p. 71.

17 *Mansum* referred to a dwelling place and the plot of land on which it sat. *Mesuagium* referred to the same small cottage and holding, but denoted some additional outbuilding or adjoining land. *Croftum* designated the small plot or adjoining land itself, apart from the dwelling place. Homans, pp. 53-54 and 71-74.

18 E.g., *mesuagium* was brought to England by the Normans. See R. E. Latham, *Revised Medieval Latin Word-List* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), s.v. "*mesuagium*".

19 Group landholding undoubtedly became more common as land demand grew during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

TABLE 2
LAND HOLDINGS ON RAMSEY MANORS IN 1250

Location	Recorded Holding	Acres	#Men	#Women	Groups #Holdings/#Persons	Total Persons	Total Acres
Slepe	1 hyde	80	2	0	0/0	2	160
	3 virgates	48	2	0	0/0	2	86
	1 virgate	16	33	2	8/19	54	678
	½ virgate	8	1	0	0/0	1	8
	1 mansum	0	1	0	0/0	1	0
						Total = 60	932
						Average holding = 15½ acres	
Holywell	2 virgates	36	2	0	0/0	2	72
	1 virgate	18	15	2	3/6	23	360
	1 cotlanda	4½	16	1	0/0	17	72½
	1 croftum	0	10	4	0/0	14	0
	1 roda	¼	1	1	0/0	2	½
						Total = 58	505
						Average holding = 9 acres	

Location	Recorded Holding		Acres	#Men	#Women	Groups #Holdings/#Persons	Total Persons	Total Acres
Warboys	2	virgates	60	1	0	0/0	1	60
	1½	virgates	45	1	0	0/0	1	45
	1	virgate	30	11	4	23/46	61	1140
	½	virgate	15	11	2	0/0	13	195
	1	acre	1	1	0	0/0	1	1
		croftum	0	30	3	0/0	33	0
		mansum	0	10	0	0/0	10	0
							Total = 120 Average holding = 12 acres	1441
Abbots Ripton	1½	virgates	23¼	5	1	0/0	6	139½
	1	virgate	15½	6	0	29/58	64	542½
	½	virgate	7¾	1	0	0/0	1	7¾
	1	cotlanda	4	8	1	0/0	9	36
		mansum	0	5	1	0/0	6	0
							Total = 86 Average holding = 8½ acres	725¾

Broughton							
2	virgates	64	4	1	0/0	5	320
1	virgate	32	11	0	22/44	55	1056
½	virgate	16	3	0	2/4	3	48
¼	virgate	8	2	0	0/0	6	32
1	pythel	1	0	1	0/0	1	1
½	acre	½	1	0	0/0	1	½
1	roda	¼	1	0	0/0	1	¼
	mansum	0	5	0	0/0	5	0
						Total = 77	1457¾
						Average holding = 19 acres	
Upwood							
1	hyde	80	1	0	0/0	1	80
½	hyde	40	1	0	0/0	1	40
3	virgates	60	0	0	1/7	7	60
2	virgates	40	1	0	0/0	1	40
1	virgate	20	20	0	5/10	30	500
½	virgate	10	1	0	0/0	10	10
3	acres	3	3	0	0/0	3	9
2	acres	2	9	1	0/0	10	20
1	acre	1	5	2	0/0	7	7
	mansum	0	2	0	0/0	2	0
						Total = 63	766
						Average holding = 12 acres	

Location	Recorded Holding		Acres	#Men	#Women	Groups #Holdings/#Persons	Total Persons	Total Acres
Wistow	2	virgates	60	0	0	1/4	4	60
	1	virgate	30	11	0	19/43	54	900
	½	virgate	15	3	0	0/0	3	45
	9	rodae	2¾	3	1	0/0	4	9
	½	acre	½	1	0	0/0	1	½
		croftum	0	12	1	0/0	13	0
		mesuagium	0	5	0	0/0	5	0
							Total = 84	1014½
							Average holding = 12 acres	
Hemmingford	3	virgates	48	1	0	0/0	1	48
	1½	virgates	24	13	0	0/0	13	312
	1	virgate	16	38	7	0/0	45	720
	½	virgate	8	3	1	0/0	4	32
	1	pythel	1	5	0	0/0	5	0
		croftum	0	10	8	1/2	20	0
		mesuagium	0	0	1	0/0	1	0
							Total = 89	1117
							Average holding = 12½ acres	

Stukely	2½ virgates	60	0	0	8/16	16	480
	1 virgate	24	3	0	0/0	3	72
	½ virgate	12	2	0	0/0	2	24
	croftum	0	3	0	0/0	3	0
	curtilage*	0	1	0	0/0	1	0
					Total = 25	576
					Average holding = 23 acres	
King's Ripton	2 virgates	31	1	0	0/0	1	31
	1 virgate	15½	5	1	0/0	6	93
	2 half-virgates	15½	0	0	11/22	22	170½
	½ virgate	7	1	0	0/0	1	7
	croftum	0	3	0	0/0	3	0
					Total = 33	302½
					Average holding = 9 acres	

*Curtilage is the English for *curtillagium*, meaning hamlet or courtyard.

Location	Recorded Holding		Acres	#Men	#Women	Groups #Holdings/#Persons	Total Persons	Total Acres
Shillington	3	hydes	144	1	0	0/0	1	144
	2	hydes	96	1	0	0/0	1	96
	½	hyde	24	1	0	0/0	1	24
	4	virgates	48	1	0	0/0	1	48
	3	virgates	36	1	0	0/0	1	36
	1½	virgates	18	1	0	0/0	1	18
	1	virgate	12	49	4	5/10	63	696
	½	virgate	6	17	1	0/0	18	108
	6	acres	6	1	0	0/0	1	6
	1	acre	1	5	0	0/0	5	5
		croftum	0	12	0	0/0	12	0
		mansum	0	10	1	0/0	11	0
						Total = 116		1181
						Average holding = 10 acres		
Girton	1	virgate	30	3	1	0/0	4	120
	½	virgate	15	21	3	0/0	24	360
	10	acres	10	5	0	0/0	5	50
	2	acres	2	1	0	0/0	1	2
		croftum	0	3	2	0/0	5	0
		mesuagium	0	2	0	0/0	2	0
						Total = 41		532
						Average holding = 13 acres		

Barton						
1	hyde	96	1	0	1	96
½	hyde	48	1	0	1	48
2	virgates	48	1	0	1	48
1	virgate	24	33	0	33	792
½	virgate	12	8	0	8	96
1	cotland	3	10	3	13	39
1	croftum	0	19	0	20	0

Total = 77   1119
Average holding = 14½ acres

0/0
0/0
0/0
0/0
0/0
0/0
0/0

GRAND TOTAL = 929   11,669¾

AVERAGE HOLDING ON RAMSEY MANORS = 12.56 acres

who would have needed extra hands during the busy seasons of plowing, sowing, and harvesting.[20] By this means, the overall holdings of a manor supported all of its tenants, directly or indirectly.

It should be noted that each manor was a closed unit and had a balance of land and tenants apart from any other manor. Villein peasants were not usually free to leave their manors to seek work elsewhere. A manor's average-holding indicates the balance (whether relatively rich or poor) on that particular manor. The overall average-holding represents an ideal, while the individual manor's average-holding represents an actual ratio of land to workers. The overall figure of 12.5 acres is, nevertheless, of value: it represents the total amount of land to workers (counted as households) over a broad range of manors.

The average-holdings on the various manors are remarkably close to the overall figure. Even on the manors with tenants who held relatively large tracts (such as Upwood and Shillington), the average-holding is close to twelve.[21] Therefore, the overall average-holding figure of 12.5 acres may be taken as fairly representative of the amount of land which supported a tenant and his household on the estates of Ramsey Abbey.

Several manors did deviate from the average figure, however. Abbot's Ripton, King's Ripton, and Holywell stand out as having relatively small average-holdings. A check of the table of land values (Table 1) suggests an explanation.[22] The productivity of the land was directly related to the number of acres (a fixed value) per virgate and hyde (flexible values). Ripton and Holywell both had few acres per virgate because their land was comparatively more productive and would have supported more tenants per acre; hence, the low average-holding. In the actual application of this theory, the relationship of average-holding to land values holds very well.[23]

The average-holding figure must be placed in its historical setting. That

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[20] "Poorer peasant families, whose land was neither adequate for subsistence nor extensive enough to absorb their labour, worked part-time (or in the case of younger sons full-time) either for their richer neighbours or on the manorial demesne." R. H. Hilton, *A Medieval Society: The West Midlands at the End of the Thirteenth Century* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1966), p. 89.

[21] This supports the assertion that where there were tenants with large tracts of land, other tenants were permanently settled on the manor to help work the fields.

[22] Raftis (*Estates*, pp. 68-69) makes an analysis of the varying land values on the Ramsey manors and notes the relationship between the size of the virgate and hyde and the productivity of the land.

[23] The only exception is the manor of Stukely, where the average-holding was very large (23 acres) and the land value normal. This deviation may have been the result of factors not apparent in the extents; e.g., the manor may have had a tradition of supporting more itinerants or subtenants.

is, does this figure represent the norm or an extreme in the English medieval picture? Several leading historians have argued that England was approaching its maximum population in the late thirteenth century. M. M. Postan and J. Z. Titow have repeatedly provided evidence to this effect using economic data.[24] Ian Kershaw has more recently supported this with agrarian evidence, demonstrating that the famine of 1315 was the result of overpopulation and was the herald of several famines that preceeded the Black Death of 1348.[25] If this is the case (as the present evidence indicates), the average-holding figure of 1250 would represent a level of population on the land near maximum capacity.[26] One household per 12.5 acres then, is close to the limit which the land would sustain on the Ramsey Estates during the Middle Ages.[27]

The 12.5 acre-per-household figure is an overall average, but the extents may be used to compare the holdings of the classes of tenants as well. To do so requires that the tenants be designated by some structure, and herein lies the problem of which system to use. In the legal sense, men who tilled the soil were divided into only two classes: freemen and villeins. The

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[24] Their arguments are best summarized in M. M. Postan, *Medieval Economy and Society* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1972); and J. Z. Titow, *English Rural Society* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1969). See also M. M. Postdan, "Some Agrarian Evidence of Declining Population in the Later Middle Ages," *Economic History Review*, 2nd. ser. 2 (1950): 221-246.

[25] Ian Kershaw, "The Great Famine and Agrarian Crises in England, 1315-1322," *Past and Present* 59 (May 1973): 3-50. There is considerable controversy about precisely when the period of growth and general prosperity came to an end. Postan, and Titow feel that it came at the end of the thirteenth century. Russell believes it did not arrive until well into the fourteenth century. See Titow, *English Rural Society*, chapter 3; M. M. Postan and J. Z. Titow, "Heriots and Prices on Winchester Manors," *Economic History Review*, 2nd. ser. 11 (1959): 150-185; and J. C. Russell, "The Pre-Plague Population of England," *Journal of British Studies* 5 (1966): 1-21.

[26] By way of comparison, Hilton (pp. 121-122) has suggested an average-holding figure for the west Midlands in the late thirteenth century of fifteen acres on productive land and twenty to twenty-five acres on less productive soil. A recent study (concentrating on the counties of Cumberland and Westmorland) has shown that the average-holding had dropped to yet lower levels in the years preceeding the famines of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. See A. Appleby, *Famine in Tudor and Stuart England* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1978), chapter 4.

[27] There is little consensus about the size of the medieval household. Some estimates have been made for specific areas with the benefit of unusual records that reveal household size. A good example is H. E. Hallam, "Some Thirteenth-Century Censuses," *Economic History Review*, 2nd ser. 10 (1958): 340-361. For a general review of the problem, see J. Krause, "The Medieval Household: Large or Small?" *Economic History Review*, 2nd. ser. 9 (1957): 420-432.

former were subject to royal jurisdiction and justice while the latter were subject to some lessor lord's.[28] This legal designation of free and villein corresponded roughly to an economic distinction: freemen usually paid rents for their holdings and villeins owed work services.[29] However, neither of these simple classifications will serve here for they make no discriminations of the tenant's wealth. Freemen held both large and small tracts of land, as did villeins.[30]

A good method of distinguishing the tenants is as they viewed themselves: by their standing in the manor community.[31] This social categorizing takes into account wealth, freedom, and labor services. At the top of the community were freemen who held large tracts of land. They were often termed franklins, held one-half to one hyde, and were expected to help the manor support its quota of knights.[32] These men held a peculiar position. They did not owe military service because their holdings were too small, and yet they were not gentry. Nor did they labor in the fields for the lord. Instead, they paid rent and as a result were the most independent members of the feudal manorial structure.

The middle group of tenants are listed in the extents as *consuetudinarii* (owing customary services), though this must be carefully qualified. They were not all legally villeins, nor were all who held land for labor services included in this class. They would more accurately be termed husbonds: i.e., men who were bound to the manor and had a house.[33] What actually distinguished this group in the eyes of their fellow tenants was the size of their holding; one-half virgate (or about ten acres) to one virgate. Freemen

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[28] This discussion of status and class is partially drawn from Homans, pp. 232-249; and H. S. Bennett, *Life on the English Manor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956), pp. 63-67.

[29] This was not absolute however; a freeman might hold land in a villein tenure and so owe labor services.

[30] In the extents, rent tenants are recorded as holding land *de dominico*. Villeins held land *libere, ad censum, de terra assiza,* and *operarii*. This would indicate that the legal distinction between free and villein no longer corresponded to an individual's landholding.

[31] This system has been adopted by several leading historians. It was put forward in its essential features by Homans, pp. 242-250. More recently, Postan (*Medieval Economy*, p. 143) has written that "There is some evidence to suggest that the villagers themselves did not rate the differences of [legal] status as highly as the amount of land they cultivated." See also, Titow, pp. 55-57. This method of designating the peasants is not, however, the only one in use. See J. Ambrose Raftis, "Social Structures in Five East Midland Villages," *Economic History Review*, 2nd. ser. 18 (1965): 83-99; and the comments by Razi, pp. 146-149.

[32] *Cartularium Rameseia*, 3: 49.

[33] Homans, pp. 242-243.

who held such size holdings, while not owing labor services, may also be called husbonds and must have held a social position close to that of villeins who held similar lands. Also, a group of villeins called *censuarii* are included as husbonds. These men held their land *ad censum*, for though they were legally villeins, their services had been commuted to money rents.[34]

The lowest class of those included in the extents were cottars and they were often clearly labeled as cottars, cotmen, or as holding a *cotlanda*. These were men who held small portions of land in the fields or who held only the plots on which sat their cottages. They owed either rents or services and the class included men who were both legally free and villein. They were distinguished by their meager holdings (less than ten acres) and so owed the lord relatively little.

These are the social classes into which the tenants will be divided: franklins, husbonds, and cottars. The data for the Ramsey manors are set forth in Table 3.

From these data it is readily apparent that vast differences in wealth existed between the social classes. By a considerable margin, the largest group on the manors was the husbonds, comprising 70 percent of the tenants. Their average-holding was fifteen acres, quite close to the overall average-holding of 12.5 acres. The majority of the households of the manor then, lived on land sufficient to support them in normal times. Holding this significant body of land (85 percent of the manor's land) made the husbonds important to the lord. Collectively, they owed rents and labor services that comprised the majority of the lord's livelihood.

The cottars comprised the second largest group of permanent members of the manor (27 percent of the tenants). They held, however, only 2 percent of the land on the manor and so contributed little to the lord's income. Their average-holding (one acre) makes it clear that they required some form of outside income. The land held by the franklins would have provided that income. Comprising only 3 percent of the manor population and holding 13 percent of the land, they needed hands to perform all the manifold functions of sowing and harvesting.

The classes of the Ramsey estates are suprisingly distinct; there were remarkably few tenants who stood between two classes. The franklins were clearly a separate class: no villein held land sufficient to place him on par with the free (and wealthy) franklins. Almost without exception, the cottars

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[34] For more on the situation of land held *ad censum*, see Hilton, pp. 138-139.

TABLE 3

HOLDINGS BY SOCIAL CLASS ON RAMSEY MANORS

Location	Franklins			Husbonds			Cottars		
	# Tenants	Total Holdings	Average Holding	# Tenants	Total Holdings	Average Holding	# Tenants	Total Holdings	Average Holding
Slepe	4	246	61½	55	686	12½	1	0	0
Holywell	2	72	36	23	360	15½	33	73	2
Warboys	2	105	52½	74	1335	18	44	1	0
Abbot's Ripton	0	0	—	71	689	10	15	36	2½
Broughton	5	320	64	58	1104	19	14	33¾	2½
Upwood	3*	160	53	38	570	15	22	36	1½
Wistow	0*	0	—	61	1005	16½	23	9½	½
Hemmingford	1	48	48	62	1064	17	26	5	⅛
Stukely	0*	0	—	21	576	27	4	0	0
King's Ripton	1	31	31	29	271	9½	3	0	0
Shillington	5	348	69½	82	812	10	29	11	½
Girton	0	0	—	33	530	16	8	2	¼
Barton	3	192	64	41	858	21	33	39	1
Totals	26	1522	58½	648	9861	15	255	247	1

NOTE: To be included here as a franklin, a tenant had to hold at least one-half hyde and a husbond should have held no more than 1½ virgates. However, as some manor's values of a virgate and hyde varied from the norm, a further distinction was necessary. Therefore, those who held over forty acres (though it might be recorded as less than one-half hyde) were included with the franklins; those who held less than forty acres were counted as husbonds. This situation was very infrequent. All land measurements are in acres.

   *Groups who were listed as holding more than one-half hyde are here counted as husbonds since the acreage divided up among the holders would place them in that class.

held less than five acres. As a result of these economic distinctions, the tenants had precisely defined social classes.[35]

This examination by social class supports the belief of several historians that freemen tended more often to be members of the highest and lowest classes.[36] Although on the Ramsey Estates there were freemen in the husbond class, the majority of husbonds owed labor services rather than rent and so were villein (or perhaps freemen in villein tenures). It is difficult to determine which cottars were free and which were villein, but all franklins were recorded as freemen. It makes sense that a lord would desire to retain his husbonds under feudal bond because of their economic importance, while he would be more willing to release the less important cottars from villein services. This explains, in part, why there were few free husbonds.

Since the extents listed each tenant by name, it is possible to determine the number of women who held land of their own. In the extents they are recorded alongside men with no distinctions. They owed rents and labor services, the latter presumably performed by male members of the household (such as sons, sons-in-law, or *famuli*). Many of the women tenants are listed as widows (*vidua*) and it is readily evident why they held land. The other women, however, held land independent of any previous relationships apparent in the extents. They must have inherited the right to the land just as a son or brother would have.[37] The data from the 1250 extents are set forth in Table 4.

In the champion country in which the Ramsey manors were situated (and in which primogeniture was practiced),[38] one would expect there to have been many fewer women than men tenants. In agreement with this, the ratio of women to men was small (about four percent) in the franklin and husbond classes. But in the cottar class their numbers were grossly out of proportion (fifteen percent) and some explanation is necessary.

Traditionally, the explanation has been set forward that it was difficult for a woman to inherit an important holding against the ambitions of other tenants or the concern of the lord. If the lord felt that there was a danger of

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[35] The classes were internally consistent not only among tenants but among the manors. The average-holding was fifteen acres among husbonds, the standard deviation being only 3.75 acres. The figures for the cottars and franklins are more consistent yet.

[36] E.g., Homans, p. 244; and Hilton, p. 131.

[37] A good introduction to inheritance among the peasantry in medieval England is provided by Homans, chapters 8 and 9. For a more thorough and recent study, see R. Faith, "Peasant Families and Inheritance Customs in Medieval England," *Agricultural History Review* 14 (1966): 77-95.

[38] Homans, p. 138.

TABLE 4

WOMEN TENANTS ON RAMSEY MANORS IN 1250

Class	# Women	# Men	Percentage of Class
Franklins	1	25	4
Husbonds	28	620	4½
Cottars	36	219	15
Totals	65	864	7

NOTE: Women in groups of tenants were not included in this count. They usually held such land with a male of the same name and so would not have been truly independent tenants. Their numbers were quite small.

not receiving his rents or labor services,[39] he could have made it difficult for the surviving widow or daughter to meet the entry fine (over which he had control). Other ambitious tenants might have demonstrated to the lord that they could be more productive or be willing to pay higher rents. The result would have reduced the women to unimportant cottage holdings. There is little conclusive evidence in court records to support this view, but the increasing value of land in the mid-thirteenth century may have made it difficult for a woman to retain land which otherwise she should legally have held.

The chief objection to this explanation is the numerous occasions when women did inherit land, as witnessed in the court rolls of Ramsey Abbey.[40] The high number of women with cottar holdings may, in fact, attest to the independent inheritance by females rather than argue against it. Recent work by Eleanor Searle has convincingly demonstrated that women inherited dowries (maritagium) apart from their father's or husband's holdings and that the payment of the merchet was the lord's fee for the

[39] This situation occurred with some regularity and is documented in the court rolls of Ramsey. Some widows were ordered to find husbonds or give up their holdings. Raftis provides examples and comments in Tenure, pp. 39-40 and 194.

[40] Raftis, Tenure, pp. 36-38 and 52-55.

transfer of such property.[41] Non-inheriting daughters (i.e. daughters without brothers) were given not only chattels or money but occasionally received small holdings of land as dowry to hold through their lifetimes and to pass on to their daughters.[42] This practice would account for many of the non-widows in the cottar class and while a definitive statement must await further research, the disproportionate number of women landholders with small plots supports this view of dowry and independent land holding by women.

The use of manorial extents, although practiced for some years now, has been limited to exclude the study of class distinctions, land holdings, and the place of female peasants in the latter middle ages. The present study has demonstrated that all these areas may be assisted by such documents. An average-landholding figure of 12.5 acres has been established for the mid-thirteenth century in a limited area of England. This figure represents the near minimum, lying as it does within a half century of the peak population of England during the middle ages. Class distinctions have been established among the peasantry, and much needed information concerning the currently debated role of women has been provided. Whether or not a complete and thorough examination of manorial extents will be sufficiently accurate or what margin of error will exist cannot be established yet. More studies, perhaps with court rolls acting as checks on results, will need to be made in order to fully demonstrate the value of manorial extents in social history. However, even the tentative conclusions drawn here hold promise of future explorations which will reveal areas of peasant history now abstruse or unknown. Such documents, regardless of their shortcomings, must be examined.

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41 E. Searle, "Seigneurial Control of Women's Marriage: The Antecedents and Function of Merchet in England," *Past and Present* 82 (1979): 3-43.

42 "Evidence of peasant dowries is abundant. Girls were given land, chattels or coin at, or before, their marriages as their part of the inheritance. . . . Such lands may have remained 'women's property' for generations, . . . Dowries in chattels were very likely more common than land-dowry for those peasant girls fortunate enough to receive a dowry at all." Ibid., p. 19,.