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WAGE LABOUR ON A KENTISH MANOR: MEOPHAM 1307-75

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It is only fairly recently that the significance of paid labour in demesne cultivation has come to be appreciated for the medieval manorial economy. Far from being the case that customary labour services accounted for the major proportion of agricultural work performed on manorial demesnes, it is now evident that, even in heavily manorialized areas, customary services often played a minor part as compared with the permanent agricultural staff (the *famulus*) and paid seasonal labour. On estates all over the country the main burden of the agricultural work was performed by the *famulus*, whilst hired occasional labour also often figured prominently.¹ Rapid population growth in the thirteenth century could only serve to encourage this situation, which pertained on manors with very different types of economy, and was not merely a product of the breakdown of the manorial system.² In areas of heavy labour services, even when they were being exacted almost in full, servile labour often only accounted for one-half to two-thirds of the work performed by the *famuli*, and only about one-third of total demesne work.³ In areas of relatively light labour services the bulk of the year's work was performed by permanent servants, labour dues only assuming significance at such times as harvest and ploughing.⁴ In some cases this amounted to almost total dependence on the permanent paid labour force, servile labour merely performing a few days 'boonworks' during the course of the year, with casual paid labour playing a supplementary rôle at certain seasons.⁵

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¹ F. M. Page, *The Estates of Crowland Abbey*, Cambridge, 1934, 104-5. M. M. Postan, *The Famulus, The Estate Labourer in the XIIth and XIIIth Centuries*, *Economic History Review*, Supplement No. 2, Cambridge, 1954, 5.

² E. Miller, *The Abbey and Bishopric of Ely*, Cambridge, 1951, 90-3. For further evidence of the importance of paid labour during the latter part of the thirteenth century, see, J. A. Raftis, *The Estates of Ramsey Abbey*, Toronto, 1957, 199.

³ P. D. A. Harvey, *A medieval Oxfordshire Village: Cuxham*, Oxford, 1965, 75-86.

⁴ This was the case in the West Midlands, for instance. See, R. H. Hilton, *A Medieval Society*, London, 1966, 136-7.

⁵ R. H. Hilton, *The Economic Development of some Leicestershire Estates in the fourteenth and fifteenth Centuries*, Oxford, 1947, 77-8, 139. I. Kershaw, *Bolton Priory 1286-1325*, Oxford, 1973, 47-59.

Just such a situation existed on the estates of Canterbury Cathedral Priory in Kent, of which the manor of Meopham was a member.⁶ Week work was never performed in the county of Kent, labour services being largely confined to the carriage of food and the performance of boon services at harvest time. The *famuli* were the solid basis of the labour force, and due to piecemeal commutation of such customary services as had been required, alongside the carving out of free tenancies from reclaimed land, the Christ Church estates rested almost entirely on a money rent and wage labour basis by 1314. Even after the famine period of the 1310s and early 1320s had produced a reversal of policy by the priorate towards full exaction of such customary services as were required, this compulsory labour represented but a small fraction of the total labour force employed.⁷ As there are no grounds for regarding Meopham as in any way an exceptional case, one may assume that here also the bulk of the agricultural work of the demesne was performed by the *famulus* and by hired seasonal labour.

The composition of the *famuli* would appear to be remarkably alike on estates in different areas of the country, despite variations due to different agrarian economies and different sizes of manors. An average of between eight and fifteen full-time men would appear to be usual. Typically, this labour force would consist of one or two 'officials', a few ploughmen, one or more carters and singular workers with tasks relating to particular types of livestock.⁸ This general structure is also borne out in the case of Meopham. In the early years of the fourteenth century the Meopham *famulus* comprised a sergeant (or reeve), a beadle, four ploughmen (two drivers and two leaders), a first and second carter, a shepherd, a pig tender, a cowman and a dairymaid. As elsewhere, the composition of the *famulus* did not remain completely unchanged over time, although the only permanent change during the period before the Black Death was the disappearance of the second carter.

Temporary hired labour was also important at Meopham, as it was on

⁶ See, R. A. L. Smith, *Canterbury Cathedral Priory*, Cambridge, 1943, 119–127, and *passim*.

⁷ Unfortunately the Meopham account rolls give no detailed information regarding customary labour, and there is no custumal, which relates to the period under consideration here.

⁸ For the general size and structure of *famuli*, and for possible variations, see, J. E. Thorold Rogers, *A History of Agriculture and Prices in England*, Vol. 1, Oxford, 1866, 261; F. G. Davenport, *The economic Development of a Norfolk Manor, 1086–1565*, Cambridge, 1906, 24; Harvey, *op. cit.*, 75–6; Hilton, *A medieval Society*, 137; A. E. Levett, *Studies in manorial History*, Oxford, 1938, 288; Miller, *op. cit.*, 90–1; Raftis, *op. cit.* On very large demesnes, such as that of the Bishop of Winchester's manors of Downton or Bishop's Waltham, the size of the *famulus* could be much larger: M. M. Postan, *The medieval Economy and Society*, London, 1972, 133. The widespread existence of a labour force of this structure suggests that there were few manors without some interest in livestock of one form or another to balance against their emphasis on cereal growing.

many manors,⁹ particularly at harvest and lambing times. In autumn from 1318 onwards, a 'reapreeve' was regularly employed for between four and six weeks, whilst a boy was employed for the same period from 1307 through into the post-Black Death years. A stacker (*tassator*) was also employed for between seven and ten days at harvest time, although he disappears from the account for a short time in the 1340s whilst one or more 'shepherd's boys' are paid for between six and twelve weeks' work for most years for which accounts exist, and they are usually described as 'looking after the lambs'. For a time a gardener is employed on a half-yearly basis, and a rookherd (presumably a bird-scarer) is given a few weeks' work from the early 1330s through to the 1350s.

In the Meopham account rolls the payments to the labour force are entered under three heads: the food payment (or 'livery') for full-time and casual workers, the annual cash wages (stipend) of the *famulus*, and additional cash payments relating specifically to autumnal harvest work. Regarding the regular *famuli*, their annual cash wages formed a relatively small proportion of their total remuneration, amounting to about 20 per cent in the pre-Black Death period, although this percentage varied slightly between individual workers. In this respect, the sergeant was an exception, being paid almost wholly in cash, with the result that (although slight fluctuations occur according to harvest conditions) in all but exceptional years the cash payments amounted to roughly 25–30 per cent of the total value of wage payments. This situation whereby cash payments formed a relatively minor part of total wage payments is evident on other manors for which studies have been made.¹⁰ At Meopham the money wage was calculated at so much per term (there being four terms in the agricultural year), with the payment specified for the autumn term usually amounting to at least half of the annual wage. There is no indication of exactly when these payments were made, although it is likely that they were on a termly basis.

Regarding the food livery, at Meopham spring barley formed the basis of this form of payment throughout the period under consideration. All the regular members of the *famulus* received a payment in barley (except for the sergeant), and temporary hired labour was also often paid solely

⁹ Harvey, *op. cit.*, 81, 84–5; Hilton, *A medieval Society*, 136–7; Kershaw, *op. cit.*, 49–52; Miller, *op. cit.*, 90; Raftis, *op. cit.*

¹⁰ For the Winchester, Crowland and Earl of Cornwall estates, cash accounted for only 19–23 per cent of the total wage bill: Postan, *Famulus*, 27, 45–6. On the Ramsey estates, the proportion was roughly 25 per cent: Raftis, *op. cit.*, 200. For the St. Albans manor of St. Mary des Pres, Levett concluded that cash wage payments 'were little more than pocket money': A. E. Levett, *op. cit.*, 289, n. 1. Whilst this may be regarded as something of an exaggeration, it would appear to be the case that on every manor or estate for which a study exists the grain livery formed the major part of the remuneration of the *famulus*.

in this form.¹¹ Apart from the spring barley payment, for which a breakdown between the various *famuli* is provided on the account, highly variable quantities of other grains were paid to the *famulus* as a whole, for which no breakdown is provided. The major part of this supplement, which rarely amounted to as much as one-third of the basic spring barley payment in quantity, was made up of wheat and winter barley, with peas occasionally forming a significant proportion. Vetch and beans were also paid in very small quantities in occasional years, and a small but more regular payment of oats was made 'for the potage of the *famulus*'. It would be difficult to argue that such a composition was in any way typical; for such evidence as is available suggests that variations may well have been infinite.¹² The annual fluctuations in the composition of the food livery are not easily accountable for, appearing to bear little direct relationship to acreages of the various crops sown, and having no obvious association with harvest conditions (except perhaps in the exceptional circumstances of 1317-18). Trends in food payments over time, including these supplementary grains, will be dealt with more fully below. Suffice it to say that these supplementary payments may well have been essentially optional, in the nature of special provisions dependant on good service.

From the levels of cash and food payments to the *famulus* one can discern a hierarchy amongst the demesne labour force comprised of essentially three levels (at least, before the Black Death). Firstly, one has the 'official' group, in this case consisting of one sergeant, who is marked off from the rest by the high level of his wage, as well as by the fact that he was almost totally paid in cash. His importance is emphasized by a separate entry on the account roll of his 'vadia' (meaning, simply, wage) apart from his inclusion in the stipend clause, and one must assume that this reflected his responsibilities. The beadle's position is somewhat ambiguous, for whilst he receives one of the highest stipends before 1348, his grain allowance is paid at the lowest rate. This possibly reflects his position as an overseer rather than as a physical labourer. Amongst the rest of the *famulus*, the ploughmen and first carter stand out as the 'senior' group, with the shepherd occupying a halfway position between them and the dairymaid, second carter, pigman and cowman, who generally receive the lowest money wages, and food payments. Thus, whilst dividing lines are often blurred, the hierarchical nature of the *famulus* is evident, and one might assume that this was felt in terms of

¹¹ It was paid out at rates which varied from one quarter for sixteen to one quarter for eight weeks, and was probably distributed at these intervals, although on occasion the weekly rate is entered on the account.

¹² Contrast, for instance, Rogers, *op. cit.*, 288, and Raftis, *op. cit.*

status as well as being reflected in remunerations. A similar structure seems to have obtained elsewhere.¹³

Apart from the allocation of part of the annual cash stipend of the *famulus* for the autumn term, as noted above the account rolls contain a separate entry for autumn expenses. Unfortunately, no precise estimation of individuals' rates of pay is possible, for the total of autumn wages is entered as a collective sum. The total varies from year to year, though within fairly narrow margins in 'normal' years, whilst the composition of the autumn labour force and the period for which they are employed varies also. The fact that the sergeant is entered under this head, whilst an allowance is made in his 'vadia' for the period of autumn service, would seem to suggest that, like the other *famuli*, he received a higher rate of pay at harvest time. The beadle entered here is probably additional to the one mentioned elsewhere in the account. The total cost of additional autumn labour forms only a relatively small proportion of the total outlay of cash and food for labour, and one must assume that boon works were called upon at this time of the year, whilst regular members of the *famulus* may well have been required to undertake work not officially within their purview.¹⁴

In addition to the above payments in cash and kind, various 'tips' and small customary payments were also made from time to time. Thus, at harvest time a few pennies were paid for the 'gloves of the *famulus*', whilst in the early years of the fourteenth century a gift of herrings was regularly made. Occasionally, gifts of money were made to the *famulus* as a whole, usually described as Christmas and Easter payments. At periods of particular stress, for instance during the period of the Great Famine (1315–22) and regularly after the Black Death of 1348–49, the sergeant would be invited to the lord's table. Most of these payments find exact parallels on other estates.¹⁵

Little further detail about the lives of the Meopham *famuli* can be gleaned from the account rolls.¹⁶ But for the majority of the *famulus*, it

¹³ Harvey, *op. cit.*, Appendix 4; Hilton, *A medieval Society*, 137; Rogers, *op. cit.*, 288. This structure was hardly invariable, however, if remunerations are anything to go by: see Raftis, *op. cit.*, Table XLV.

¹⁴ This is a view confidently voiced by Rogers, and would appear to be a sensible one: Rogers, *op. cit.*, 261.

¹⁵ On the Bolton Priory estates, small additional payments in cash and kind were also made, usually during the harvest season, including a payment for gloves: Kershaw, *op. cit.*, 55. On the Ramsey estates, small cash gifts were made at Christmas and Easter: Raftis, *op. cit.*, 205. For some Westminster manors there appears to have been a tendency for such payments to disappear from the early fourteenth century, although they were always quick to be reintroduced in times of stress: Lord Beveridge, 'Westminster Wages in the manorial Era', *Economic History Review*, 2nd Series, viii (1955–6), 29, 35. This situation finds a close parallel in the case of Meopham.

¹⁶ Unlike for other manors, there is no indication of whether or not they live inside the *curia*, or whether or not they held any land: cf. Davenport, *op. cit.*, 24, and n. 3; Harvey, *op. cit.*, 77–8; Kershaw, *op. cit.*, 52–3.

would appear that their position was far from being one of complete security. When not required, one or more of the ploughmen were laid off for a few weeks, having their cash and food payments reduced accordingly. When no cows were being kept the cowman found himself without a job, whilst the second carter was also jettisoned when no longer required. Nevertheless, the occasional additional payments made to the *famulus* suggest that a certain amount of give-and-take must have gone on, and that the lord was not always in the position of being able to bargain from strength. Moreover, the fact that the bulk of their wage was paid in grain meant that the *famulus* had a completely inflation-proofed form of payment, for even when prices peaked in the Famine years of the early fourteenth century their basic payment in barley remained at the same level.¹⁷ Few smallholding peasants could have enjoyed such a position of security at such times of dearth as did those members of the *famulus* who were able to retain their employment.

Having up to now taken an essentially static view of the Meopham labour force, developments over time can now be traced, particularly regarding changes in the level of their remunerations. Many problems arise in attempting to estimate wage movements from the account rolls, even when a fairly complete run of accounts is available. Firstly, one has to allow for the changing composition of the *famulus* and seasonal labour force, a task which cannot be achieved with much accuracy where sums paid are entered collectively (as under autumn expenses). Secondly, there are problems caused by changes in the detail provided by the account rolls over time. For instance, and again under autumn expenses, the list of additional harvest workers is replaced in 1368–69 by the phrase 'sergeant, beadle and other members of the *famulus*', whilst for the years between 1346 and 1351 even this amount of detail is lacking. Thirdly, there is the obvious nuisance of gaps in the run of account rolls, the most unfortunate gap in the Meopham series occurring between 1353 and 1368. Finally, there is the problem of quantifying the level of food payments in any meaningful way.¹⁸

There are two methods which can be used to quantify the total level of food liveries paid, both of which have been calculated here. The first is simply to find the value in any one year of each type of grain, and to multiply out to give a cash total. The results obtained by this procedure are shown in Appendix 1. The grain prices used were those supplied by

¹⁷ On the Bolton Priory estates in these years food payments tended to be commuted to money payments. No similar procedure was used at Meopham.

¹⁸ Historians of particular estates or particular manors have tended to fight shy of this problem or have failed to come to terms with it in any systematic way. See, for instance, Harvey, *op. cit.*, 82–3; Raftis, *op. cit.*, 205.

Thorold Rogers.¹⁹ It was this method of quantification that was used for the Bolton Priory estates,²⁰ but it is really of only limited use. All this really shows is the amount of income foregone by the manorial lord in any one year. Although one cannot assume that the grain paid to the *famulus* was all consumed by the labourer and his family, or that he was completely immune to market conditions, it is likely that the *quantity* of grain received was a more important consideration than its cash value in any one year. The fact that even in years of acute dearth and hence high grain prices the basic food payment to the Meopham *famulus* (spring barley) remained at the same level would also suggest that the manorial authorities also perceived of the livery payment more in terms of the quantity of grain involved than in terms of its current cash value. The widely fluctuating annual money value of corn paid is thus a very unreliable indicator of wage movements.

For this reason an alternative calculation has been made in Appendix 2 in terms of the *quantity* of grain paid annually. To make it possible to compare grain payments the composition of which varied markedly from year to year, it is necessary to find a means of reducing different grains to a common unit. The method employed is to establish a ratio, using the Thorold Rogers price statistics, for the several different types of grain for each year.²¹ Having established this ratio for each year, it is possible to express all the different types of grain in terms of barley simply by multiplying each quantity by the appropriate percentage, and adding them all together. The resultant figure thus represents the number of 'barley quarters' of grain paid in each year. It is arguable that the 'conventional' evaluation of different types of grain might (particularly from the recipient's point of view) form a more suitable basis for the conversion of these grains to a common unit. Such a method was rejected, however, due to the problems involved in settling upon a suitable ratio for this evaluation, which may well, in any case, have changed over time.

It was not possible, however, to overcome all problems by the use of this method. No distinction, for instance, could be made between black and white peas, or between winter and spring barley. No allowance could be made for varying qualities of grain paid, whilst in some of the later accounts it has not proved possible to identify precisely the type of grain, which is indicated under certain heads (hence grain 'from the mill' has

¹⁹ Rogers, *op. cit.*, 228–35. Making use of the prices at which grain from the Meopham demesne was sold was considered, but finally rejected. These prices would reflect supply and demand conditions at large regional markets rather than relating specifically to the Meopham locality, and hence the extra effort involved would scarcely have been worthwhile.

²⁰ Kershaw, *op. cit.*, 57–9.

²¹ In this case one can be more confident in using Rogers' prices rather than local Meopham prices for although price levels may well have varied widely between localities, their *relative* levels are unlikely to have differed so significantly.

been assumed to have been barley). Nor has it proved possible to assess precisely the changing levels of food payments made to particular individuals, for the accounts simply do not provide a detailed enough breakdown. Nevertheless, by the use of this method one can establish a rough trend in the livery payments made to the *famulus* as a whole, which is infinitely more valuable than a calculation based simply on annual grain values.

During the pre-famine years the basic composition of the Meopham labour force remained static, although an additional 'sheepboy' was regularly employed for a few weeks beginning in the year 1309–10. The food livery paid over this period exhibits no marked upward or downward trend, and individual stipends were also unchanged. The exception here was the sergeant, whose stipend rose in 1313–14 from 13s. 4d. to 20s. 0d. Although the reason for this is not stated, the fact that this increase coincides with a slight expansion of the demesne acreage, and more significantly with a lengthening of the period of additional autumn employment, suggests that it was as a result of an enhancement of his duties or responsibilities. Other than this, any changes in payment are marginal. The autumn expenses show a slight tendency to rise, although a large jump in 1313–14 is due to a lengthening of the period of autumn service rather than an increase in wages. This slight tendency appears to be the only reflection on Meopham of the general rise of wages that is often attributed to these years, and often explained in terms of monetary factors.²² A second marginal tendency is the slight falling off in payments of a strictly customary nature. Thus, from 1313–14 the autumn herring payment is reduced from 10d. to 8d., food is no longer provided for the autumn workers, whilst the allowance of oats for the 'potage of the *famulus*' is reduced from 3 to 2½ quarters. These peripheral changes evident in 1313 would appear to represent either a positive attempt to gain greater economic efficiency *via* an expansion of production and a reduction of expenses where possible, or merely dissatisfaction with the performance of the labour force.

The agrarian crisis of the period 1315–22²³ is reflected more noticeably in temporary than in permanent changes in Meopham wage levels. The cash stipends of the regular *famulus* remain unchanged throughout this period, whilst the years of exceptionally poor harvests resulted in a temporary reduction of the level of grain payment by a little over 10 per cent (particularly in the years 1315–17 and 1321–23). This

²² See, for instance, N. J. Mayhew, 'Numismatic Evidence and falling Prices in the 14th Century', *Economic History Review*, 2nd Series, XXVII (1974); I. Kershaw, 'The great Famine and agrarian Crisis in England 1315–22', *Past and Present*, No. 59 (1973), 6.

²³ For the best account of this period and its impact, see Kershaw, *The Great Famine, passim*.

was achieved, as so often seems to have been the case, by a reduction of the more marginal and variable portions of the food livery, rather than by a reduction of the basic spring barley rates of payment. Part of the reduction can be explained by the fact that one, and in 1315–17 two, ploughmen were laid off for a short period, although this cannot explain the whole drop. The level of livery payments appears to have returned by the mid-1320s to an amount only marginally below that of the pre-famine period, despite the fact that one needs to make allowance for the employment of a gardener from 1324–5.

As one might expect, it is in regard to additional autumn expenses that the effects of the agrarian disruption of these years are most noticeable. In 1315–16 autumn expenses rise by roughly 20 per cent, although a small downward adjustment is made in the stacker's payment. The rise in wage levels (as far as they can be calculated from the crude totals available) appears to have been largely temporary, and was probably more in the nature of an attempt by the manorial authorities to ensure that as much as possible was salvaged from the very poor harvest than a reflection of labour shortage due to famine. The total cost of autumn payments remains at a high level in the following years due to the additional employment of a reapeeve and the regular appearance of the warden. This would seem to represent something of a drive towards greater efficiency in the face of economic difficulties, which is possibly also reflected in the reduction in the length of autumn service in 1320–21 and again in 1325–26, as possibly also in the cessation of the customary herring payment after 1319–20. What would seem to be clear is that no permanent rise in wage levels resulted. Although the changing composition of the autumn labour force and the variations in the period of employment make comparison difficult, no lasting changes are apparent. This can best be seen by comparing the year 1312–13 with 1325–26. In both years the period of employment was four weeks, whilst a difference in total wages of only 4s. 0d. is evident, despite the additional employment of a reapeeve in the latter year. And whilst it is not entirely clear whether or not the stacker received a portion of the total cash sum ascribed to autumn wages as well as the sum specifically stated to have been paid to him, whenever a day rate is mentioned, either before or after the famine period, it is always at 1d. per day. Thus, even

²⁴ This would appear to contradict the findings of previous research, which attributes a marked upward shift to these years: Rogers *op. cit.*, 264, 320–1; Beveridge, *op. cit.*, 20–4, 31. In Rogers' case, however, his crude reliance on decennial averages when analysing his own figures may well have led him into errors of interpretation. A more careful examination of the annual rates he presents will show that most of the increase attributed by him to the famine had already occurred by 1315. Beveridge's figures for eight Winchester manors clearly show a rise in wages after the famine years, although not original to them, whilst his Westminster figures would seem to suggest a return to levels only marginally above those of the early fourteenth century after a rise in the famine decade.

for the most sensitive, seasonal, forms of labour, the Meopham evidence appears to show that no more than a temporary rise in wage levels resulted from the famines, epidemics and murrains of these years.²⁴ As far as Meopham is concerned, at least, it is clear that the bargaining power of both regular and seasonal labour remained largely unchanged despite the high mortality of the famine period.²⁵

The only apparent effect of the period of agrarian crisis was the loss of a few weeks' employment each year by a ploughman and the total disappearance from the ranks of the *famulus* of the cowman between 1320 and 1326. It is stated in the account for 1319–20 that the cowman missed one term due to deaths of animals, and it would appear that the cattle plague of unprecedented dimensions, which swept the country in 1319–21, served to wipe out completely the Meopham herd.²⁶ No similarly drastic indications of the effects of sheep murrains, which were rife in 1315–17, are apparent, only a very small reduction in the grain livery paid to the shepherd being made in these years, and this might seem to confirm that in this respect the South of England escaped more lightly than did the North and East.²⁷

Developments from the 1320s through to the 1340s amongst the Meopham labour force were dominated by one factor – the economic difficulties, which the manor was so obviously experiencing. The acreage of demesne sown, which had stood at 308 acres in 1313–14, fell to 250 acres by 1327–28, and reached a low point of 190 acres in 1336–37. Not until the mid-40s was recovery under way (see, Appendix 3). The long period of very low prices which persisted through the 1330s and into the 1340s may well have been significant here.²⁸ But evidence of attempts to economize on labour date back quite clearly to the famine period itself. The symptoms of these problems are often small scale and apparently marginal. In total, however, they create a convincing overall impression of a long-drawn-out period of difficulties, which would appear to fit neatly into the picture drawn by R. A. L. Smith for the Christ Church estates as a whole at this time.²⁹

The changes are reflected least of all in the annual cash stipends paid to the regular *famulus*. As noted above, one ploughman was regularly laid off for a number of weeks each year throughout the 1320s. The cowman was missing several years during the 1320s also, and although he reappears in 1326, shortly after this time the second carter disappears completely from the account, never to return. For almost all of the

²⁵ This has been estimated to be roughly 10 per cent. See, Kershaw, *The great Famine*, 11 and n. 49.

²⁶ See, Kershaw, *The great Famine*, 24–6.

²⁷ But see, R. A. L. Smith, *op. cit.*, 156.

²⁸ See, Rogers, *op. cit.*, 230–3.

²⁹ Smith, *op. cit.*, 144–5, 165.

famulus the cash stipend remains static through to 1347 (though a collective extra 3s. 4d. is entered from 1340–1). In the case of the sergeant, however, moves were being made towards a reduction in this part of his payment from 1324 onwards. In the accounting year 1324–25 the sergeant's wage of 20s. 0d. is broken down into two parts: a basic payment of 13s. 4d., and an additional 6s. 8d. for his 'extra diligence' (*de gracia diligentia sua*). The entry remains the same each year through to 1327–28, when a gap in the run of account rolls occurs. By 1332–33, however, his stipend has been reduced to the basic 13s. 4d. which had been paid in 1312–13. Clearly, the manorial authorities felt that in view of the reduced acreage of the demesne the sergeant's responsibilities had declined accordingly, and thus his stipend was readjusted (through this justificatory technique) to its former level.

The changes in autumn labour more clearly demonstrate the decline of demesne production during this period. From 1318, a reapeeve was regularly employed at this time of the year, presumably to ensure that the harvest work was carried out efficiently, whilst the warden also began to appear on a regular basis. From 1322 onwards, the period of autumn employment is reduced from six to five weeks, a further reduction to four weeks occurring in 1325–26, although the stacker receives an extra three days' work. By 1339, the stacker had disappeared completely. The level of wage payments, allowing for the changing composition of the autumn labour force and the reduced period of employment, appears to remain roughly at the same level through the 1330s, if anything a slight decline being in evidence. By the 1340s, this decline is more clearly apparent. And even when in 1345–46 the period of autumn employment was again increased to six weeks, no doubt in response to the renewed expansion of the demesne, the wage levels do not appear to have responded accordingly. Although the account rolls for these years unfortunately provide less detail than for the earlier period, in the years before the Black Death there would appear to be slight downward pressure on seasonal wage levels,³⁰ and would appear at least to preclude one from viewing the period as one of increasing labour scarcity.

The livery payments of the 1330s and 1340s reinforce this picture. Although as early as 1321 the customary allowance of oats for the 'potage of the *famulus*' was reduced to two quarters, the level of grain payments in the mid-1320s appears to have differed very little from that of the early 1310s. But, as has been seen already, it was often the more peripheral payments which were first to be cut when economy was required, and by 1333 the quantity of the total food livery in terms of 'barley quarters' was significantly lower. Part of this decline, if not most of it, can be accounted for, however, by the disappearance of the second

³⁰ This is also evident in Rogers' figures: see, Rogers, *op. cit.*, 312.

carter and the reduced length of service of the gardener. Still, by the end of the 1330s the total food livery had been reduced still further, and from 1332 a 'rookherd' was regularly employed for a few weeks each year, presumably as an economy measure. Again, it is the supplementary payments which have been cut. After 1333-34, no more peas are included in the food livery, despite the fact that the acreage devoted to peas on the demesne appears to be expanding slightly. In 1340-41, the oats payment is once again reduced, whilst in the early 1340s the previously fairly regular payments of wheat and winter barley disappear completely. Thus, despite the fact that throughout the period the basic spring barley payments remain (like the annual stipend) virtually unchanged at either one quarter for eight weeks or one quarter for sixteen weeks, downward pressure on total grain payments is evident from the 1330s, and increasingly so in the 1340s. A close parallel with the trend in autumn payments is thus evident, the most significant fall occurring in the mid-1340s despite the fact that by this time the demesne acreage was again expanding.

This downward pressure on wage payments in the 1340s and earlier might lead one to suspect that in these years the bargaining power of labour was being reduced by population growth, and one might postulate a compensatory increase in births following upon the high death-rates of the years 1315-22. Evidence of price movements hardly supports such a view, however,³¹ and in some areas at least it is clear that wage rates were rising at this time.³² It is possibly as well to examine more parochial factors, which might serve to explain the Meopham wage trends before invoking wider explanations in terms of population trends or monetary movements. Thus, on the Christ Church estates the reversal of the trend towards commutation of labour services, which occurred after the famine period, may well have some bearing.³³ By the 1340s, these services were once more demanded in full by the priorate, although evidence directly relating to Meopham is not available. As mentioned above, however, even when demanded in full the total amount of customary labour was never very considerable. And whilst these re-impositions may help to explain developments relating specifically to harvest work or to carrying,³⁴ it is unlikely that in themselves they could

³¹ That this was a period of persistently low prices is clear from Rogers' figures: Rogers, *op. cit.*, 230-2. This makes it difficult to envisage this period as one of increasing population, for one would expect this consequent increased demand to be reflected in price levels. It may be the case that these price levels reflect peasant impoverishment, or the state of the money supply, rather than population trends.

³² Beveridge, *op. cit.*, Table 1, 21.

³³ See, Smith, *op. cit.*, 126-7.

³⁴ Carrying appears to have been perhaps the most important type of work performed on the Christ Church estates by compulsory labour. At Meopham the carrying services had been commuted by the early fourteenth century, and one might guess that they were subsequently re-imposed. See, Smith, *op. cit.*, 120.

have been responsible for the marked downward movement of payments made to the regular *famuli* in the 1340s, who would still be the sole source of labour for much of the year. One might also expect any 'competition' from customary labour to be at least partially offset by an increasing volume of work consequent upon the renewed expansion of the demesne acreage.

A second local factor deserving consideration, possibly related to the manor's attempts to economize noted above, concerns the apparently strained labour relations at Meopham in the two decades before the Black Death. From the late 1320s, an entry appears in the 'lodging' (*Hostilagium*) clause of the account roll referring to a few days over the Christmas period during which the *famulus* do not (and apparently will not) work. One has the impression that this was a traditional and accepted practice. In the mid-1330s, however, this period of withdrawal of services increases rapidly in length until it reaches over three weeks. This state of affairs lasts through into the post-Black Death period. Clearly, there is some link between this situation and the declining food livery paid to the *famulus*. It may well be, as suggested above, that the supplementary grains paid to the *famulus* apart from their basic quota of spring barley, were in the nature of payments dependent upon good service.³⁵ Thus the declining grain liveries might be a result of a decline in the co-operation of the *famulus* for whatever reason that occurred. Equally, these withdrawals of labour might have been caused by a gradual reduction in their payments in the post-famine years, which began with the more peripheral and minor perquisites, and later extended to more fundamental rewards. There is probably some truth in both views. For whilst it is likely that the labour discontent was in the first place stimulated by the manorial economies imposed in the face of financial difficulties, in its turn this very discontent must have served to justify the action of the manorial authorities in their own eyes, and make them loath to restore the reduced payments even when the fortunes of the manor again began to recover in the 1340s.

No precise explanation for these pre-Black Death wage trends can be offered. What is needed is similar studies of other manors of the Christ Church estates, as well as of other estates, in order that one may determine whether or not it was purely local factors, which were in operation at Meopham. What the Meopham situation does suggest is that greater flexibility existed in manorial labour relations than one might have thought, and it also points to the 1330s and 1340s as two very neglected and possibly interesting decades in regard to the manorial economy.

The Black Death of 1348–49, which killed roughly one-third of the population of the country (though with marked regional variations),

³⁵ There would be a parallel for this on the manor of Cuxham: Harvey, *op. cit.*, 76.

clearly had severe effects on the economy of the manor of Meopham. The previously expanding demesne acreage slumped from 253 acres in 1347–48 to 175 acres in 1349–50, an all-time low for the fourteenth century. By 1355–56, it had again recovered to about 220 acres, but although no wholesale leasing policy was adopted in the ensuing years, it would seem that this recovery was but a half-hearted one, and by the early 1370s the acreage had stabilized at about 200. Unfortunately, no account rolls survive for the period between 1353 and 1368.

The effects of the Black Death on wage payments to the Meopham labour force are clear, though perhaps undramatic. As in other times of stress, one finds an immediate increase in peripheral payments. Thus, in 1349–50, an extra cash payment of 6s. 0d. was made to the *famulus*,³⁶ whilst in 1351–52 the customary payment made for the gloves of the *famulus* increased from the 8d. at which it had stood since 1307 to 12d. From 1351–52, the sergeant was regularly invited to the lord's table, whilst the supplementary payments of other grains besides spring barley, which had disappeared in the 1340s, are once again being paid to the *famulus*. But what is perhaps more significant than these relatively minor changes is the fact that, for the first time in the fourteenth century, one finds an upward adjustment of the annual cash stipends and individual barley liveries paid, to some members of the labour force at least.

Regarding the cash stipends, the total sum paid rose in the plague year by roughly 10 per cent, and it was explained in the account that the cause was the heavy mortality of that year. In this year, it was those who were most actively involved in the basic essential agricultural operations, the ploughmen and the carter, who received the biggest increases, whilst every member of the *famulus* except the sergeant, beadle and dairymaid received an increase of at least 6d. The heights of the plague year were not long maintained, however. By 1352–53, the ploughmen's money wage had fallen back to 9s. 6d. and 9s. 0d. from the 11s. 6d. reached in 1348 and 1349. The wage of the carter was also back at 9s. 6d. (though in percentage terms this still represented the largest increase gained), whilst for the rest of the *famulus* wage payments had returned by this time to their pre-plague levels.³⁷

Regarding food liveries, an immediate increase of the order of 30 per cent occurred in the years 1348–50. As a detailed breakdown is only given for spring barley payments, one cannot be sure as to which members of the *famulus* benefited most. In terms of barley, an increased rate of payment is recorded only for the pigman, dairymaid and

³⁶ A similar payment was made at this time at Cuxham, to encourage the *famulus* to do their work better. See, Harvey, *op. cit.*, 78.

³⁷ This quite rapid falling off in increases gained in the years immediately following the Plague is paralleled elsewhere, for example at Cuxham: Harvey, *op. cit.*, Appendix 4, and Rogers, *op. cit.*, 306, 312.

cowman, whilst it is probable that other members of the *famulus* benefited from a share of the renewed (and substantial) wheat payment. But, once again, these increases were not all maintained. In 1350–51, labour was temporarily laid off, reducing heavily the food livery bill. When a full year was worked in 1351–52, total payments were only about 10 per cent higher than they had been in the mid-1340s. A change in the method of entering food payments in the account now allows us to see more clearly which individuals had benefited. Thus, it would appear that whilst the rates of payment of the carter, ploughmen, shepherd, beadle and temporary workers had returned to their pre-Black Death levels, increases had been exacted by the dairymaid and cowman, and to a lesser extent by the pigman. It was therefore the lower levels in the hierarchy of the *famulus* who gained most in terms of food payment after the immediate impact of the Plague had subsided, whilst in terms of cash payment they had profited least. On balance, the total payment made to the lesser *famuli* had increased by more than that made to the more superior *famuli*, whilst at this stage the ‘officials’ had benefited not at all.

Autumn expenses increased by roughly 25 per cent as a direct result of labour shortage caused by the Plague, although a higher level was reached in 1351–52 due to the long stay of the warden. But, here also, a slight falling off again is apparent by 1352–53, despite the fact that the stacker’s length of employment was increased significantly. Moreover, although the level of payments was up on that of the 1340s, they were still lower than in the 1330s, as indeed were the food liveries paid to the *famulus*.

It may well be the case that these declines in payments from the levels reached in 1349–50 indicate the effectiveness of the Statute of Labourers, which appears to have been enforced with some vigour in the early 1350s.³⁸ No doubt in part, they also reflect simply the passing of a period of acute dislocation, and the restoration of a new equilibrium. The number of crossings-out in the account rolls of sums paid and their replacement by lower sums evident in these years³⁹ might appear to indicate that methods of deception were being used by the manorial authorities to avoid the restrictive wage legislation. Such amendments were certainly not confined to Meopham in these years.⁴⁰ Thus, it is possible that the payments entered were not truly representative of the sums actually paid. But, even if one were to make allowance for this possibility, it would be unlikely to alter radically the picture of the short-term effects of the Black Death drawn above.

³⁸ B. Putnam, *The Enforcement of the Statute of Labourers*, New York, 1908, *passim*.

³⁹ For instance, in 1352–3 cash payments to two of the ploughmen were amended from 20s. 0d. to 19s. 0d.; the carter’s wage was amended from 11s. 0d. to 9s. 6d. Many other examples could be cited.

⁴⁰ Rogers, *op. cit.*, 300.

Unfortunately, no account rolls exist for Meopham for the period 1353–68, and thus one is ignorant of the developments in these years. By this later date, however, distinct further changes can be seen to have taken place. In terms of cash stipends, stability at a new level has been reached. The sergeant's wage has been restored to 20s. 0d., the ploughman and carter now all receive the same sum of 9s. 6d., whilst the shepherd now gets 7s. 6d. and the pigman 6s. 0d. Thus, within the *famulus* hierarchy a distinct levelling up has taken place. In terms of food payments, while the carter, ploughmen and shepherd still receive only one quarter for eight weeks which had formed their basic food payment since 1307, the pigman is now paid at the same rate.

These trends, towards convergence and towards levelling up, were by no means confined to Meopham in the post-Black Death years.⁴¹ What they would seem to indicate is the impact of progressive de-populations due to recurrent plague which, by making scarce labour of all kinds, particularly necessitated an increase in the lower wage levels. Perhaps, here we have just one small aspect of that breaking down of traditional social distinctions which was so apparent to contemporaries in the decade before the Peasants' Revolt.

The scarcity of labour in these years is attested by the high levels of autumn expenses reached. The total topped 80s. 0d. for the first time in 1369–70, and, as late as 1371–72, the gloves payment was still being augmented. In 1371–72 and 1372–73, the autumn workers were invited to the lord's table. The very elasticity of seasonal rates of payment in these years serves to indicate that labour was by now anything but abundant. What is perhaps interesting is that, taking not only autumn payments but also cash stipends into consideration, the proportion of the total wage bill now paid in money was significantly higher by the early 1370s than it had been in the pre-Black Death period. It is difficult to know the precise implications of this in view of our ignorance as to whether or not a substantial portion of the grain liveryies received by the *famulus* had been regularly converted into cash in earlier years. Nevertheless, it is possible that this feature may have served to encourage the increasing consumption of luxury or semi-luxury commodities by the labouring classes, which appears to have been taking place at this time.

Despite these significant wage enhancements evident by the early 1370s, the total wage bill of the manor was not a great deal higher by then than it had been in the early 1330s. Indeed, it may not have been any higher at all. This had been achieved by means of a reduction in the size of the labour force. Although a 'food preparer' for the *famulus* appears for the first time, this must be seen as yet another reflection of the need for the manorial authorities to keep the *famuli* contented. At the

⁴¹ Rogers, *op. cit.*, 266; Raftis, *op. cit.*, Table XIV; Harvey, *op. cit.*, Appendix 4.

same time, at some point between 1353 and 1368, both the dairymaid and the cowman disappear from the accounts, and in view of the fact that the dairymaid had earlier been retained even when no cows were kept at Meopham, it is unlikely that this merely reflects changing agrarian practice. The rookherd is no longer employed by this time either, whilst employment of the sheepboy becomes erratic. Clearly, either labour was simply not to be found by this time, or a conscious effort was being made to economize in the face of rising wage costs.⁴²

By the early 1370s, therefore, it is clear that the Meopham labour force was much more fortunately placed than it had been in the earlier years of the fourteenth century. The total wages of the individual labourers were higher, a higher proportion was paid in cash and many minor perquisites had been increased or were paid more regularly. The decisive factor here was, of course, the decline of population consequent upon recurrent plagues, the effects of which are apparent on wage levels and labour mobility on a national scale.⁴³

From the mid-1370s, falling grain prices⁴⁴ may well have resulted in a further improvement of the position of labourers at Meopham and elsewhere — that is in so far as they needed to supplement their food payments by buying in the market. What this quite sharp fall in grain prices did mean, from the manorial lord's point of view, was that, in the face of high wage costs (and perhaps also labour scarcity), the profitability of continued demesne exploitation was called into question. National evidence seems to point to the last quarter of the fourteenth century as the decisive period in the breakdown of the manorial economy,⁴⁵ and it was from this time that the demesnes of the manors of

⁴² A parallel situation can be found in the case of the estates of Ramsey Abbey: Raftis, *op. cit.*

⁴³ The evidence is abundant. See, for instance, the figures presented by Rogers, *op. cit.*, 320–2, and by E. H. Phelps-Brown and S. Hopkins, 'Seven Centuries of Wages and Prices', *Economica*, XXVIII, 1961. Numerous estate studies could also be cited. See, also, N. Kenyon, 'Labour Conditions in the Reign of Richard II', *Economic History Review*, 1st Series, 4, 1934. Contemporaries, such as Langland and Gower, provide further testimony.

⁴⁴ See, Rogers, *op. cit.*, 232–5. The decisive break in the mid-1370s is masked to some extent in the Phelps-Brown/Hopkins index by their inclusion of non-faraceous foodstuffs and canvas in their 'composite unit of consumables'.

⁴⁵ Demesne leasing on a significant scale is evident in some areas in the earlier years of the fourteenth century, for instance on the estates of Bolton Priory, of the Bishopric of Ely and of Tavistock Abbey in Devon: Kershaw, *Bolton Priory*, *op. cit.*, 37–8; Miller, *op. cit.*, 99–112; H. P. R. Finberg, *Tavistock Abbey*, Cambridge, 1951, 242. It is likely that the agrarian crisis of 1315–22 and the period of low prices throughout the 1330s were influential here. The process only became in any sense general in the later fourteenth century, however: Raftis, *op. cit.*, Page, *op. cit.*, 114, 129; Davenport, *op. cit.*, 51–2; F. R. H. Du Boulay, *The Lordship of Canterbury*, London, 1966, 218–37; G. A. Holmes, *The Estates of the higher Nobility in fourteenth Century England*, Cambridge, 1957; B. F. Harvey, 'The Leasing of the Abbot of Westminster's Demesnes in the later Middle Ages', *Economic History Review*, 2nd Series, XXII, 1969, 17–27; E. M. Halcrow, 'The Decline of Demesne Farming on the Estates of Durham Cathedral

the Christ Church estates began to be leased off on a significant scale.⁴⁶ The results of this process are reflected in the quantity and quality of the documentary evidence, which survives from this time forward. Account rolls survive in far fewer numbers, and those which are extant are much inferior in content and presentation to those drawn up during the years of seigneurial exploitation. This is not only the case for Meopham and the other Christ Church manors, but is evident on a far wider scale. The 1370s are, therefore, an appropriate point at which to close this examination of the Meopham demesne labour force.

From the static point of view, it has been shown above that in terms of its importance, its size and its structure, the Meopham labour force was fairly typical of those of other manors for which studies have been made, although the reliance on wage labour here was perhaps more total than in many areas (and one would still like to have more evidence regarding the changing importance of wage labour over time in different parts of the country). Regarding changes in levels of payment, the Meopham evidence has proved *roughly* comparable with previous research into wage movements, although such detailed studies have rarely been made. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the Meopham findings is the apparent depression of wages by the early 1340s which, it was suggested, might be best explained in terms of local factors relating to the economic problems of the manor in conjunction with labour troubles. But although the short-term and long-term effects of the Black Death on labour are now fairly clear, only after more detailed studies of this nature have been made will one have any precise knowledge of the conditions of labour in the decade prior to the Black Death or of the general effects of the Famine period on wage levels. And only then will one be able to extract the exceptional from the typical to see just what was happening to the demesne labour force over this very interesting period of the fourteenth century.

Priory', *Economic History Review*, 2nd Series, VII, 1955, 345-56; M. Morgan, *The English Lands of the Abbey of Bec*, Oxford, 1946, 117-8. For more general discussions of the chronology of demesne leasing, see, Kershaw, *The great Famine*, 29-35, and A. R. Bridbury, 'The Black Death', *Economic History Review*, 2nd Series, XXVI, 1973, 577-92.

⁴⁶ Smith, *op. cit.*, 192-3.

WAGE LABOUR ON A KENTISH MANOR

Appendix 1: Annual Cash Values of Food Livery*

£	s.	d.	£	s.	d.		
1307-08	22	11	4	1340-41	9	17	10
1308-09	10	14	4†	1341-42	9	12	5
1309-10	20	11	3	1342-43	—	—	—
1310-11	21	5	9	1343-44	10	2	7
1311-12	14	1	0	1344-45	—	—	—
1312-13	15	6	6	1345-46	7	14	7
1313-14	15	16	5	1346-47	10	17	11
1314-15	20	0	7	1347-48	13	5	7
1315-16	43	13	3	1348-49	—	—	—
1316-17	30	1	3	1349-50	—	—	—
1317-18	21	18	8	1350-51	18	5	6
1318-19	13	16	0	1351-52	20	5	3
1319-20	12	12	4	1352-53	17	7	3
1320-21	14	11	2	1353-54	—	—	—
1321-22	29	2	4	1354-55	—	—	—
1322-23	22	14	11	1355-56	—	—	—
1323-24	16	10	1	1356-57	—	—	—
1324-25	21	0	11	1357-58	—	—	—
1325-26	19	12	6	1358-59	—	—	—
1326-27	11	3	0	1359-60	—	—	—
1327-28	11	5	5	1360-61	—	—	—
1328-29	—	—	—	1361-62	—	—	—
1329-30	—	—	—	1362-63	—	—	—
1330-31	—	—	—	1363-64	—	—	—
1331-32	—	—	—	1364-65	—	—	—
1332-33	—	—	—	1365-66	—	—	—
1333-34	11	13	10	1366-67	—	—	—
1334-35	9	13	4	1367-68	—	—	—
1335-36	—	—	—	1368-69	12	2	4
1336-37	14	0	3	1369-70	22	3	11
1337-38	8	15	1	1370-71	—	—	—
1338-39	—	—	—	1371-72	9	19	10
1339-40	9	17	6	1372-73	12	14	11

* Prices to nearest penny per quarter, grain to nearest bushel.

† Incomplete year.

Appendix 2: Quantity of annual Food Livery, expressed in Terms of Barley

	qrs.	b.		qrs.	b.
1307-08	71	4	1340-41	69	0
1308-09	48	6†	1341-42	62	3
1309-10	78	5	1342-43	—	—
1310-11	83	5	1343-44	54	1
1311-12	75	1	1344-45	—	—
1312-13	78	2	1345-46	54	4
1313-14	79	1	1346-47	54	4
1314-15	75	0	1347-48	54	0
1315-16	66	5	1348-49	76	0
1316-17	68	1	1349-50	83	6
1317-18	78	3	1350-51	57	6
1318-19	78	6	1351-52	59	2
1319-20	74	0	1352-53	59	4
1320-21	70	1	1353-54	—	—
1321-22	68	5	1354-55	—	—
1322-23	69	1	1355-56	—	—
1323-24	76	1	1356-57	—	—
1324-25	77	6	1357-58	—	—
1325-26	78	1	1358-59	—	—
1326-27	72	3	1359-60	—	—
1327-28	77	2	1360-61	—	—
1328-29	—	—	1361-62	—	—
1329-30	—	—	1362-63	—	—
1330-31	—	—	1363-64	—	—
1331-32	—	—	1364-65	—	—
1332-33	—	—	1365-66	—	—
1333-34	70	2	1366-67	—	—
1334-35	66	3	1367-68	—	—
1335-36	—	—	1368-69	52	0
1336-37	74	5	1369-70	52	6
1337-38	68	0	1370-71	—	—
1338-39	—	—	1371-72	—	—
1339-40	63	4	1372-73	52	4

† Incomplete year.

WAGE LABOUR ON A KENTISH MANOR

Appendix 3: Demesne Acreages*

	acres		acres
1307-08	293	1343-44	244
1313-14	308	1346-47	244
1315-16	289	1347-48	253
1316-17	265½	1348-49	233
1319-20	259½	1349-50	175½
1320-21	245	1352-53	186½
1324-25	232	1368-69	200
1327-28	250½	1369-70	189
1333-34	212	1371-72	198½
1336-37	190½	1372-73	212
1339-40	222½		

* The years chosen for presentation are representative of long-term trends, or are years of particular interest.

