

COMMUNITY, CLASS AND
CAREERISM

CHESHIRE AND LANCASHIRE
SOCIETY IN THE AGE OF
SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT

MICHAEL J. BENNETT
Lecturer in History, University of Tasmania



CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE

LONDON NEW YORK NEW ROCHELLE

MELBOURNE SYDNEY

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York NY 10011-4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

<http://www.cambridge.org>

© Cambridge University Press 1983

This book is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception
and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,
no reproduction of any part may take place without
the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 1983

First paperback edition 2002

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress catalogue card number: 82-4354

ISBN 0 521 24744 6 hardback

ISBN 0 521 52182 3 paperback

TO MY MOTHER
IN HONOUR OF MY FATHER

CONTENTS

<i>List of maps and tables</i>	vi
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	vii
<i>Abbreviations</i>	viii
<i>Genealogical table</i>	x
<i>Introduction</i>	I
I THE REGIONAL SOCIETY	5
2 THE COUNTY COMMUNITIES	21
3 LESSER SOLIDARITIES	41
4 THE POPULATION	53
5 LANDED SOCIETY	67
6 THE PEASANTRY	90
7 TOWNS, TRADE AND INDUSTRY	108
8 THE CHURCH	134
9 MILITARY SERVICE	162
10 POWER, PATRONAGE AND PROVINCIAL CULTURE	192
11 CONCLUSION	236
<i>Bibliography</i>	251
<i>Index</i>	269

MAPS

1	Outline map: Cheshire and Lancashire	xi
2	The world of the <i>Gawain</i> -poet	xii

TABLES

1	J. C. Russell's estimated population of England in 1377	54
2	Mise assessments for three Cheshire parishes	62
3	Numbers of tax-payers in certain Lancashire vills in 1379	63
4	The tenancies of rebels on the St Werburgh's estate	94
5	Average holdings/rents on four manors of the St Werburgh's estate in 1398	98
6	Tenancies on four manors of the St Werburgh's estate in 1398	100
7	Rents paid for the forty-five standardised tenancies at will at Ashton under Lyne in 1422	101
8	Holdings by acreage at Newbold Astbury and Bosley	102
9	The occupational structure of three Lancashire vills in 1379	113
10	Geographical distribution of Cheshire merchants and craftsmen	114
11	Occupational structure of Chester in the reign of Henry V	118

INTRODUCTION

There are few studies of English society in the later middle ages to match the impressive array of scholarship for the period between the Reformation and the Civil War. Of course historians working on the age of Chaucer and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* are far more constrained by their sources than colleagues writing on Shakespearian England. Yet, while the dearth of personal and unofficial sorts of evidence is to be lamented, relevant documentation is by no means lacking. In fact, even in the study of a relatively small region the copiousness of the source material is often formidable. In addition to the magnificent series of records produced by the chancery, the exchequer and the law courts at Westminster, there are classes of record specific to particular localities. With regard to the Northwest there are the archives of the palatinates of Chester and Lancaster, the diocesan material at Lichfield, and the muniment collections of local gentry. Demonstrably, to work unaided through more than a fraction of this evidence would take a life-time. Fortunately in the past hundred years or so much learned effort has been expended in cataloguing, sorting and abstracting the more important material. The achievement of the Public Record Office and numerous record societies in calendaring and publishing material from the later middle ages has been impressive. At the same time the labours of several generations of antiquarians and historians, at both a national and local level, in combing through the records to compile lists of office-holders, manorial histories, biographical registers and so on, have provided the necessary groundwork for the systematic study of English society in this period.¹ If the sources are less plentiful and varied than the materials surviving from later epochs, it must be conceded that a far higher proportion of the extant material is available to the historian in accessible and digestible form. To emulate the

¹ For historians of Cheshire and Lancashire society, the work of G. Ormerod, J. P. Earwaker and W. Farrer is of inestimable importance: G. Ormerod, *The History of the County Palatine and City of Chester*, ed. T. Helsby, 2nd edn (3 vols., London, 1882); J. P. Earwaker, *East Cheshire* (2 vols., London, 1877-80); *V.C.H. Lancaster*, 6 vols. See also Chester R. O., Earwaker MSS., and Manchester Central Reference Library, Farrer MSS.

Introduction

achievements of colleagues in later centuries, the historian of late medieval English society must build on this advantage.

In attempting a study of English society in the later middle ages there are few clear models to follow. For the most part, scholarship in this field has been disarmingly modest and unassuming in its approach to social phenomena. Deference to the sources has been its great virtue, and the institutions which produced the records, and the activities which they documented, have been studied in considerable detail. Through the researches of successive generations of scholars, all the more important institutions of national life – crown and parliament, the royal administration and the courts of law, the church and universities, military organisation and local government – have been meticulously dissected and rendered comprehensible. Indeed what can perhaps be regarded as the ‘great tradition’ in late medieval English social history – the analysis of the manorial records of the large ecclesiastical estates – has proved enormously successful in providing quantifiable data in serial form on many aspects of social life.² Yet there are problems in approaching late medieval society exclusively through the institutions which kept and preserved records. Obviously all classes of evidence provide only limited, and potentially distorted perspectives on the past. It needs little stressing that governmental, fiscal, judicial, military and other sorts of administrative record present only an official version of relationships, and offer only fragmentary visions of a wider society. For all their richness of detail and depth of coverage, the manorial records of ecclesiastical corporations likewise have their hidden biases, and tell little about the lives of the vast majority of English villagers who did not live on large estates. Indeed the main limitation of this approach is its inability to provide a framework around which a more complete and balanced model of late medieval English society can be constructed. It is instructive that, in their attempts to present a wider view of social life, historians tend to turn from the formal records to the one category of evidence which seems to offer a fairly generalised vision of the social past – contemporary literature. To read F. R. H. du Boulay’s *Lordship of Canterbury* and his *An Age of Ambition* in close succession, however, is to become aware of the wide gap between careful research and inspired synthesis which seems to characterise even the best work in the field.³ The one is a fine piece of scholarship based on the archiepiscopal

² See the magnificent work of B. Harvey on the Westminster estates and the detailed studies on individual manors by the pupils of J. A. Raftis: B. Harvey, *Westminster Abbey and its Estates in the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1977); E. B. Dewindt, *Land and People in Holywell-cum-Needingworth, Structures of Tenure and Patterns of Social Organisation in an East Midlands Village, 1272–1457* (Toronto, 1972).

³ F. R. H. du Boulay, *The Lordship of Canterbury. An Essay on Medieval Society* (London, 1966), *An Age of Ambition. English Society in the Late Middle Ages* (London, 1970).

Introduction

archives at Lambeth: the other is a stimulating overview of English society in the later middle ages, with a felicitous use of literary sources. It must be confessed, nonetheless, that somehow the two studies seem to depict totally different worlds. It is almost as if Chaucer's pilgrims never met up with the archbishop's bailiffs on the long road to Canterbury.

This study is committed to the attempt, albeit vain in absolute terms, to present a more 'rounded' picture of English society in the later middle ages. Drawing inspiration from R. H. Hilton's work on the West Midlands in the late thirteenth century,⁴ recent scholarship on Tudor and Stuart England, and the approach of modern social anthropologists, it is founded on the conviction that this goal can best be approached through a conspectus of regional studies, in which individuals, groups and communities can be observed interacting in the widest possible range of capacities. Needless to say, in defining a field of investigation, it was felt more appropriate to be guided by reference to geographical factors and observable patterns of social life than by archival convenience. At the same time it was considered important that the region under discussion should be sufficiently large to have maintained a reasonably wide complement of institutions and activities, but at the same time sufficiently small to make possible a consideration of most of the available documentation and a more than passing acquaintance with all the main *dramatis personae*. Similarly, with regard to the chronological scale of the study, it was felt appropriate to steer a middle course between a detailed examination of social life at a particular cross-section in time and an exploration of social change over a much longer time-span. In the event, the region selected for study was the northwestern corner of England, though it soon became apparent that the Ribble represented a major divide in social terms, and that Cheshire and south Lancashire would make a more coherent field of investigation. Finally, the period chosen for study was the last quarter of the fourteenth century and the first quarter of the fifteenth century. Enclosing the reigns of Richard II and the first two Lancastrian kings, and witnessing the flowering and decay of a vigorous literary culture whose finest product was *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the fifty years between 1375 and 1425 are not without their special significance in Cheshire and Lancashire history.⁵

The following study of Cheshire and Lancashire society is organised in eleven chapters grouped into three sections. Naturally enough, the first

⁴ R. H. Hilton, *A Medieval Society. The West Midlands at the End of the Thirteenth Century* (London, 1966).

⁵ See in general M. J. Bennett, 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and the literary achievement of the North-West Midlands: the historical background', *Journal of Medieval History*, 5 (1979), 63-88.

Introduction

main section is concerned with the social geography of the Northwest, and after a preliminary survey demonstrating the physical and historical identity of the lands between the Dee and the Ribble, there are chapters discussing the importance of solidarities based on the region, counties and lesser administrative units in the functioning of English society. In the second main group of chapters the social structure of the Northwest is viewed from a rather more conventional perspective. After an initial chapter on the Cheshire and Lancashire population at this time, there follow chapters on the two main 'classes' in the region: the 'lords' and the 'peasants'. Moving outside the restricted world of rural society, the third main section considers the local men involved in trades and professions, and discusses their experience of careerism both inside and outside their native region. Accordingly there are separate chapters on manufacturing and commerce, the church, and military service, while the first half of the tenth chapter is concerned with the legal profession and government service. In the second half of this chapter there is a survey of the relations between the Northwest and the centres of power and influence in the kingdom, and an assessment is made of the impact of royal patronage and local careerism on the political, social and cultural life of the region. Finally, an attempt is made in the concluding chapter to assess the 'typicality' of the Cheshire and Lancashire experience, and to discuss in general terms the nature of social change in the period under consideration.