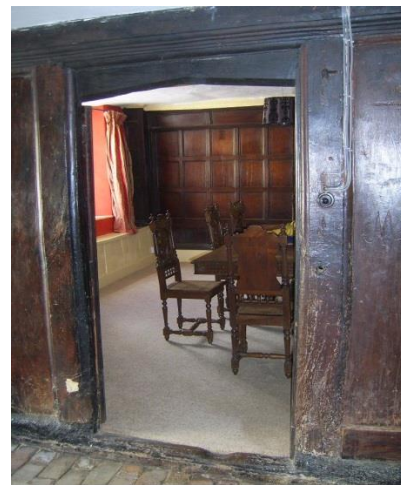


Documentary sources for understanding medieval localities

The subtitle of my talk for the *Long houses, hard lives* symposium in February was ‘how much blood can you get out of a stone?’ I was attempting to tackle the question of what we can say about the social history of a community in the middle ages if we do not have any suitable manorial records. What other documentary sources are there that can help, besides the archaeological and geographical evidence? To answer this question I took two communities on the eastern side of Dartmoor, namely Spitchwick manor and its parish of Widecombe and the manor of Moretonhampstead and the parish of the same name.

I started with two of the easiest-to-find comparable primary sources, namely the *Taxatio Ecclesiastica* of 1291 and the *Valor Ecclesiasticus* of 1535, to compare the value of livings in the Teignbridge hundred and deanery of Moreton.¹ The often-repeated thinking is that the increases in the value of livings reflect changes in tithe payments, which in turn reflect income and population. This would be nice if it were true. A comparison indicates sizeable increases in value for the smallest parishes. For example, Ideford, 1,440 acres, saw a 428% increase in value; Teigngrace, 1,496 acres, saw a 317% one. Smaller increases may be noted for the larger parishes, such as Moretonhampstead, 7,656 acres, 150%; and Widecombe, approximately 16,000 acres in its larger form (1260-1816), 48%. In reality, such increments tell us very little. The rectors and vicars of the smaller parishes could have been the beneficiaries of extended grants of land, not higher tithes. Even if the increments *were* due to fluctuations in tithe payments, there is nothing to say whether these were due to more people or more extensive farming practices or both.

The records of lay taxation are a more promising starting point, especially a comparison of the published lay subsidy rolls for 1334 and 1544.² The 1332 lay subsidy roll was the last one compiled by an assessment of named individuals’ actual wealth; from 1334 the amounts to be paid by each parish were re-assessed and standardised; these amounts remained in place for the next century and a half. In the sixteenth century, however, individual assessments were reintroduced, and the published examples of 1524-7 and 1544 permit easy comparison.



Photographs Copyright Ian Mortimer: 'Mearsdon, in Cross Street, Moretonhampstead, described as 'a burgage plot with messuage adjacent' when it was sold by Adam de Morton to Henry Suter in 1300 and which was sold along with other estates by Suter's descendant to the tinner and mayor of Exeter, William Peryam, in 1525'.

¹ T. Astle, S. Ayscough and J. Caley (EDS), *Taxatio ecclesiastica Angliae et Walliae, auctoritate Nicholai IV, circa A.D. 1291* (1802); *Valor Ecclesiasticus temp. Henr. VIII auctoritate regia institutus* (6 vols, 1810-34), volume 2 (1814).

² R. E. Glasscock (ed.), *The Lay Subsidy of 1334* (1975); T. L. Stoate, *Devon Lay Subsidy Rolls 1543-5* (Bristol, 1986). The 1332 subsidy rolls are transcribed in Audrey M. Erskine (ed.), *The Devonshire lay subsidy of 1332*, Devon & Cornwall Record Society, 14 (Torquay, 1969).

Parish	1332 Lay Subsidy (d)	1334 Lay Subsidy (d)	1544 Lay Subsidy (d)	Increment 1334-1544
Bovey Tracey, incl Howton (& Luscombe, 1334)	460 + 113 = <u>573</u>	480 + 156 + 18 = <u>654</u>	3,365	415%
Hennock	Missing	96	906	844%
Ilington	291	496	1,708	244%
Ideford	384	380	404	6%
Kingsteignton, incl Highweek	320 + 371 = <u>691</u>	384 + 484 = <u>868</u>	1,289 + 1,227 = <u>2,516</u>	190%
Lustleigh	424	240	820	242%
Manaton	208	258	958	271%
Moretonhampstead, incl Wray	420 + 104 = <u>524</u>	462 + 150 = <u>612</u>	1,384	126%
North Bovey	213	240	978	308%
Teigngrace	148	172	47	-73%
Widcombe (incl Spitchwick, Natsworthy and Blackadon)	54 + 138 + 24 + 36 = <u>252</u>	78 + 162 + 30 + 48 = <u>318</u>	4,716	1,383%

Such substantial increases – especially in the case of Widcombe – demand that we pursue the question of whether the extent of land under cultivation was expanding over this period. And if it was not, how else we might explain this substantial change.

Of course, without manorial records, measuring the extent of land under cultivation is not easy. Nevertheless, it is not impossible. And here our old friend Domesday Book (1086) proves to be a useful starting point. It suggests that in Spitchwick in the parish of Widcombe in 1086 there was land sufficient for eight ploughs (approximately 960 acres).³ There were 100 acres of pasture and the woods extended to about 120 acres. Although we need to bear in mind the possibility that these amounts might have been simply nominal, the figures given account for 47% of the usable land (i.e. land that was later farmed) in Spitchwick manor, with the implication that over half of what could have been cultivated was still moorland. As for the population, Spitchwick then had seventeen households (eight villeins, four bordars and five slaves). As there are 17,586 households mentioned in Domesday Book for Devon, it is likely that Spitchwick represented 17/17,586 of the population of the county which, according to the estimates by Stephen Broadberry's team of demographers, was 97,221 souls.⁴ In other words, the population of the manor of Spitchwick was about 94 souls.

³ The size of a ploughland in this part of Dartmoor is indicated by the overt reference to a 'quarter' being thirty acres in a survey of Doccombe, drawn up in 1289 and preserved in a copy dated 1472 in Lambeth Palace Library (ref: ED2056). This indicates the standard ploughland applied of 120 acres.

⁴ Stephen Broadberry, Bruce M. S. Campbell, Alexander Klein, Mark Overton and Bas van Leeuwen, *British Economic Growth* (Cambridge, 2015), p. 25. Note: this published figure differs very slightly from the

Shifting forward to the periods before and after the Black Death, the population of Devon as a whole rose to about 147,860 in 1290, according to Broadberry et al., and dropped to 86,239 in 1377 – represented by 45,635 taxpayers in the poll tax of that year. Spitchwick had 62 tax payers; Widecombe parish as whole had 98, and so the likely populations of the manor and parish in 1377 were 117 and 185 respectively. Importantly, however, all the farms on high ground – over 280m above sea level – were recorded before the Black Death. It seems that even more ground was farmed c. 1300, when the population was in the order of about 201 for the manor and 318 for the parish, than was cultivated in the nineteenth century. Yet extrapolating population figures from the lay subsidy rolls for 1525 (when the county population was about 161,548, and there were about 28,000 tax payers) reveals a theoretical population of Spitchwick manor of 363 and a parish population of 1,194. A similarly high number of tax payers are to be noted for 1544: 1,370 in the parish. Did the population really grow to such extraordinary heights at the end of the Middle Ages?

The best way to check these figures is to assess the parish records. Unfortunately these do not quite go back to the period in question. However, a burial register does survive for the 1560s, which should throw some light on the population of one life-expectancy earlier (i.e. around twenty to thirty years). Comparing the number of burials each year against the crude death rates for those years established by Wrigley & Schofield, and then taking a ten-year average, centred on burials in 1565, the suggestion is that the whole parish had a population of about 648 in 1535-45.⁵ A similar methodology applied to the baptism register (which is a much more reliable method of estimating population) suggests an average population for the years 1570-82 of 856. The population sank below 800 (in the range 600-800 in 1600-10 and again 1630-1650, only rising to 1,000 around 1660). There seems to be little doubt that the population of the parish was growing in the second half of the sixteenth century – as it was throughout England – but from a level far below the figures suggested by the lay subsidy records of 1524 and 1544. What then was the reason for the extra people and the massively increased income?

The answer is tin working. As Tom Greeves has shown, the early sixteenth century was the heyday for the exploitation of tin across the whole of Dartmoor.⁶ In fact, by coincidence, the house in which I am writing this piece, in Moretonhampstead, was bought with other properties in 1525 by the biggest coiner of tin in the Ashburton stannary, William Peryam, a self-made man and mayor of Exeter in 1532, whose considerable wealth came from tin worked by the people of Widecombe (to judge from the bequest in his will).⁷ Thus the irregularities of the population figures suggested by the 1524 and 1544 lay subsidy rolls are not insurmountable problems but an opportunity to estimate the level of the transitory tax-paying labour in the parish.

On the basis of the burial register, which suggests a population of Spitchwick manor in c.1535 of about 195, we would expect the taxed population of Spitchwick to be 34. However, there were actually 63 taxpayers for Spitchwick, so probably about 29 of them were temporarily resident for economic purposes. On the same basis, it seems 95 of those paying tax in the parish of Widecombe in the Moor (roughly 45%) to be temporarily resident for economic purposes. As the permanent residents of Widecombe in 1535-45 numbered about 648, the actual population

pre-publication draft circulated by the editors in 2013, as do the later figures. I have recalculated my populations based on the revised, published statistics, and there is no significant change.

⁵ Crude death rates and crude birth rates appear as Appendix 4 in E. A. Wrigley, R. S. Schofield, *The Population History of England 1541-1871: a reconstruction* (1981), pp. 537-62.

⁶ Tom Greeves, 'Four Devon Stannaries: a Comparative Study of Tinworking in the Sixteenth Century', in Todd Gray with Margery Rowe and Audrey Erskine (eds), *Tudor and Stuart Devon: the Common Estate and Government* (Exeter, 1992), pp. 39-74, esp. at p. 44.

⁷ The will of William Peryam, dated 1551, is in a bundle in the Devon Heritage Centre: ref: 337 add/62.

of the parish, including temporary economic settlers paying tax, was probably in the region of 743. It was largely these extra-parochial men, living off the booming tin trade, who contributed to the massive rise in the taxable wealth of the parish in the early sixteenth century.

One last point needs to be made here. Although no medieval records survive for the manor of Spitchwick, the lords of the manor are noted in the published *Feudal Aids* for the country.⁸ These indicate that in 1284, 1303 and 1346 the manor was in the hands of the de Spitchwick family but in the fourth survey, undertaken in 1428, it was in the hands of seven named proprietors. In other words, the manor farms had been sold off. Clarification as to when this happened is provided by a deed of 1418 by which Abraham Thomas, son of John Thomas, and descendant of Abraham Thomas, sold his messuages, lands and tenements in Uppacott in the manor of Spitchwick to William Beard in 1418.⁹ It further states that these were originally sold to Abraham Thomas the elder by John de Spitchwick, who is known to have been lord of the manor in 1350.¹⁰ In other words, the manor was dismembered around the time of the Black Death – probably in the aftermath of the drastic population decline, which, for Devon as a whole, according to Broadberry et al., was around 42%. In Spitchwick, the manorial population returned to its Domesday level, when only half the land was farmed. Lack of manpower seems to have been the principal reason for dismembering the manor.

When one undertakes a similar exercise for the manor and parish of Moretonhampstead, it is striking that the proportion of the cultivatable land that was worked in 1086 is almost exactly the same as in the manor of Spitchwick: 46%. The manorial population (28 households) was around 155, which probably rose to about 500 in 1290 before declining at the time of the Black Death to 295. However, unlike Spitchwick, the manor of Moreton was not dismembered. Some parts had been alienated at an earlier date, in the form of grants from the lord of the manor, but the bulk of the manor remained intact. The prime reason is clear from a comparison of the above population figures. Whereas in both places, the 46%-47% of the cultivatable land had increased to 100% by 1348, in Spitchwick the population fell back to the level of Domesday, which could only cultivate half the manor, whereas in Moreton, it remained at twice the Domesday population, which could continue to farm the whole manor. Therefore no sale of farms was necessary.

Moretonhampstead reveals no influx of population or sudden increase of wealth in the Middle Ages to compare with sixteenth-century Widecombe. Making allowance for the parts of the parish that fall outside the manor, and applying the same methodologies as outlined above, the population can be shown to have increased as follows:

- 1377-1524 from about c. 352 to c. 588 (0.35% per year)
- 1524-1544 from about c. 588 to c. 627 (0.32% per year)
- 1544-1579 from about c. 627 to c. 778 (0.66% per year)
- 1579-1606 from about c. 778 to c. 1,036 (1.02% per year)
- 1606-1660 from about c. 1,036 to c. 1,650 (0.95% per year)

Clearly the population growth in medieval Moreton was slightly later than in the parish of Widecombe, and this tallies with the growth of the market. Moreton had been a market town since 1207, and extant deeds from 1300 and 1370 for two properties on Cross Street attest to it having a formalised arrangement of burgage plots at an earlier date, but the first actual reference

⁸ *Feudal Aids: Inquisitions and assessments relating to Feudal Aids, 1284-1431 : Vol.1: Bedford to Devon* (1899)

⁹ Devon Heritage Centre: 48/14/38/1.

¹⁰ The National Archives, C241/128/88

to 'the borough of Moretonhampstead' is 1537.¹¹ This suggests that the lord of the manor started separately to administer the borough and the manor at about this time (records of this separate administration survive from the next century). This was very probably why the later growth was stronger in Moreton, so that its population in 1660 was 60% higher than that of Widecombe, having been lower than that of Widecombe in 1535-45.

In February I took this process of squeezing the evidence a little further, and to a more sophisticated methodological level – for example, showing how the seventeenth-century head rents for the borough of Moreton can be used to establish the boundaries of the built up area in the medieval period. Space does not allow the details to be laid out here. But the above passages indicate how the lack of a series of manorial records need not be an insurmountable problem when trying to write the socio-economic history of a community in the late Middle Ages. Furthermore, when there are different stories in each community, an examination of each and every one may be far more revealing than a glimpse of development in just these two.

¹¹ The deeds in question are Devon Heritage Centre: Z1/10/6 (Shelley of Shobrooke collection, this item being wrongly listed as pertaining to Crediton); Cornwall Record Office: EL/259/2/1 (Elliot papers). Release by William Howton to William Hogge and Thomasin his wife of lands in Hayne and 'a tenement in the borough of Moretonhampstide' sold 15 November 29 Henry VIII (1537). Devon Heritage Centre: transcript of Courtenay deeds, no. 255.