

# By The Numbers

*by Deward Hastings*



uring that brief interregnum between the collapse of Norman feudalism and the rise of mercantile/industrial capitalism in England, during, that is, the Tudor and early Stuart periods, there emerged a novel social class, essentially an agrarian bourgeois.

This new "class", the "Yeomen" of whom we hear so much in Elizabethan times, and praised later after they were in fact largely gone as the stalwart foundation of "the Empire", became for a time the mainstay of the rural economy, supplanting the Manor both in production and social significance as the foundation of rural life. They provided, as an aside, the agrarian model for the then new colonies in the Americas, where they persisted as "the family farmer" far past their demise in England, and well into the 20th century.

"Enclosure and the Yeoman, The Agricultural Development of the South Midlands 1450-1850", Robert C. Allen, Clarendon Press Oxford 1992, is 375 pages of \*serious\* economic analysis (an example: on p 207, in the chapter "Yeomen and Capitalist Farmers", sub heading "The History of Corn Yields" . . . "The regression analysis of the Oxfordshire probate inventories undermines the theory that the amalgamation of farms was responsible for the rise in yields since the data show no correlation between yield and farm size" ... with all the accompanying tables of figures that you might want). It is (sadly, I would suggest) more about the decline of the Yeoman and the creation in his place of the vast "rural poor" of the 18th and 19th centuries than about the life and times of the Yeoman in his heyday, but the numbers for the 16th are there too in most of the tables and charts, as well as the discussion... numbers that show productivity, prosperity, and success on an oft times surprising scale. No pictures, but 16 maps and figures, 91 tables and a 31 page bibliography.

Where this all matters to the historic reconstructionist is in the picture the numbers paint of the relationship between town and country in Tudor England. We are all aware of the substantial difference between life in the typical village and life in London. It does not follow, though, as many seem to assume, that there was little "awareness" shared between the one and the other, that rural England was necessarily rustic and crude (as exemplified by the saw (probably not true, if you discount the death of children) that the "average Englishman" lived and died within twenty miles of his place of birth). The 200,000 plus inhabitants of London in 1600 were fed, and their industry supplied, by the product of the fields, pastures and mines of a large surrounding area, and the farmers, husbandrymen and miners got their share of London's production in return, as well as trade goods from around the world. Political and religious ideas, fads, entertainments and social "styles" flowed freely with the commerce, the Yeoman "class" was a ready audience for anything new, and there was certainly no loss of connection between the remaining Manors and their more aristocratic brethren in London. As hard as it may be for some to believe today, people and ideas, got around quite readily even before the automobile and the internet. A "renaissance faire" then may reasonably include a wide range of activity, presentation and behavior which would not be found in the normal day to day of village life but which would neither have been completely foreign, or without interest, to the general village audience. In a time of as dramatic change and social reorganization as Elizabeth's England a "faire" event would surely have pushed the limits of novelty and social acceptability, and thus presents a broad palette indeed for the reconstructionist.

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