

The Role of the Peasantry in the Trade of Agricultural Horses: Evidence from Lay Subsidies

By

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1: Introduction

The previous chapter focused primarily on seigniorial evidence and established that demesnes did very little horse breeding; the internal production of working horses was often a secondary or tertiary form of horse acquisition behind the purchase of animals on the market and, on some demesnes, acquisitions through feudal perquisites. Overall, the demesnes in our study did not breed enough horses to meet their own demand, let alone an adequate surplus that could have supplied the total demand for draught horses of medieval England. If this pattern was typical of the majority of demesnes, then an obvious question follows: if demesnes were not producing these animals, who was? As the results of the second chapter have eliminated the seigniorial sector as England's source of work horses, attention must turn to the other sector of medieval English society: the peasantry.¹ Accordingly, this chapter will use a number of sources to examine the peasantry and their potential as suppliers of horses within the medieval English agrarian economy.

The most significant obstacle to this line of inquiry is one of evidence. Although the peasantry occupied between two-thirds and three-quarters of the land under cultivation in medieval England ca. 1300,² they have left significantly fewer surviving sources than their seigniorial counterparts. While landlords drew up accounts relating to their own demesne farms, and those have survived in great quantities, peasants produced few, if any, such documents, and none have survived. The surviving sources that concern peasants are also more tangential. By and large, extant documents that record the economic activities of peasants were drawn up by other people for other purposes and therefore provide partial glimpses rather than direct insights.

The main difficulty for this approach, then, is finding suitably robust sources that can provide insight into the nature and extent of peasant engagement in the breeding, rearing and trade of agricultural horses. While there are no extant sources on the peasantry that approach the scope or scale of documents like manorial accounts employed in previous chapters; the aim of this chapter is to assemble a body of evidence which can then be compared against the demesne data. Therefore, this paper will focus initially on snippets of anecdotal evidence about peasant livestock from various sources before moving on to a highly detailed, empirical, study of one high-quality local source: the 1283 lay subsidy return from the Blackbourne hundred in Suffolk. The Blackbourne subsidy is one of few medieval sources that contain high-resolution peasant data capable of sustaining quantifiable analysis. The exploration of this body of evidence, with both statistical methods and qualitative assessment, provides significant results which will be used for comparison with the data of the previous chapter.

¹ 'Peasant' is often a blanket term used to describe what was in reality a very heterogeneous group of people. However flawed, the term peasant is the best 'catch-all' term that we have to describe a mixed group of both free and villein tenants as well as any landless individuals who may have lived in a community.

² In a study of Hundred Rolls of 1279-80 from Huntingdonshire, Cambridgeshire, Bedfordshire, Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Warwickshire, E.A. Kosminsky calculated that of over half a million acres under cultivation, 31.8 percent was demesne, 40.5 percent was villein land and 27.7 percent was held by free peasants. See: E.A. Kosminsky, *Studies in the agrarian history of England in the thirtieth century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), 89.

2: Anecdotal Evidence

A limited number of anecdotal references occur in manorial accounts and elsewhere, which provide suggestive evidence about peasant engagement in horse breeding, rearing and trading. The problem with such anecdotal evidence is that it occurs arbitrarily, and therefore is scarce and unpredictable, and it also lacks a wider context in which the information can be analysed. Such evidence is therefore a useful starting point, but must be assessed within the context of more robust structural analyses of accompanying sources.

As a starting point, let us return to the 1310-11 manorial account from Fletchampstead (Warwickshire) discussed in Chapter 1. This account lists in the expenses of the demesne “two foals bought from a certain man of the homage.”³ “The homage” in its narrow sense could relate to the peasants required to perform suit of court on the lord’s manor or, in a wider way, to all those who were required to present themselves at the tithing courts or tithing sessions of the vill: that is, all males of twelve or older within the wider Fletchampstead community.⁴ Either way, this is a reference to a peasant of Fletchampstead selling two young horses to the lord’s demesne. However, as this is the lone reference of this kind encountered in all of the manorial accounts examined, how this snippet of information is interpreted is another matter. On its own, the reference could be regarded as either typical or atypical: that is, it may be representative of many other such sales, for which no explicit confirmation was recorded because it was so commonplace. Alternatively, it is possible that the scribe or official thought the acquisition of foals from this source so unusual that it merited noting specifically on the account. Considered alongside the other data explored in this chapter, however, the former scenario is most likely.

Other chance references also suggest that peasants were engaged in selling horses. The 1279 hundred roll⁵ includes in its assessment the Peterborough Abbey manor of Alwalton in Huntingdonshire. Outlined in the roll are the manor’s free tenants and resident villeins, and, for the latter, their individual holdings are listed and their obligations to their lord (in this case the abbot of Peterborough) are detailed. One villein, Hugh Miller, held a virgate of land for a rent of 3 s. 1d. In addition to this cash payment, he was required to work for a specified amount of time during the year, undertake certain carrying services and provide the demesne with a small amount of oats for seed (this payment in kind was very likely based on his occupation as a miller), along with poultry and eggs. In addition to these rents in cash, labour and kind, Hugh Miller was also required to pay the lord a fine in the event that he sold any mares for more than 10 s.⁶ Regulations on other manors similarly forbade villeins from selling certain livestock without their lord’s leave.⁷ The bishop of Ely stipulated specifically that villeins on his manors could not sell male colts and oxen of their own rearing without permission from the lord or bailiff.⁸ Such specific stipulations were fairly

³ “[I]n ii pullo empto de quodam hominum de homagium.” TNA: SC6 1040/21 m1^r.

⁴ Phillipp R. Schofield, “The Late Medieval View of Frankpledge and the Tithing System: An Essex Case Study” Zvi Razi and Richard Smith, eds., *Medieval Society and the Manor Court* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1996), 408.

⁵ The hundred rolls were the result of an inquiry of Edward I into land tenure and royal rights throughout England. For a thorough examination of the purpose, contents and implications of this source see: Sandra Raban, *A Second Domesday? The Hundred Rolls of 1279-80* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 1-37.

⁶ “[I]f he sells a brood mare in his court yard for 10s. or more, he shall give to the said abbot 4d., and if for less he shall give nothing to the aforesaid.” Edward P. Cheyney, “English Manorial Documents” in *Translations and Reprints from the Original Sources of European history Vol. III*, edited by J.H. Robinson (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1897), 5. Originally cited in: *Rotuli Hundredorum*, Vol. II, 658-9. I am grateful to Alex Sapoznik for drawing my attention to this reference.

⁷ **Cite more examples here.**

⁸ Farmer, *Marketing the Produce*, 385.

common aspects of villeinage,⁹ but the purpose of such regulations is difficult to pin down. Lords may have intended to use such rules to protect their right of heriot or to simply give the lord a preemptive ‘right of first refusal’ for livestock on the manor. However, fines for selling prohibited livestock were minimal, often only 1d. or 2d., so such regulations might also be seen rather as an acknowledgement of a fairly regular activity from which the lord stood to profit. In any event, these regulations and taxes are an acknowledgement of tenant horse (and livestock) breeding.

Demesne purchases of stock from the local community were also seemingly a regular occurrence in at least some parts of the country. In Suffolk, for instance, Framlingham castle, the seat of the Bigod family, procured livestock from a number of nearby communities. The demesne of Loudham also acquired fourteen cows from local individuals in 1372.¹⁰ In the case of Loudham specifically, the parson of the nearby community of Ufford supplied the demesne with two bovates.¹¹ In such cases, demesne managers and the lords they represented likely thought it good practice to buy livestock from local peasants. In many ways it could be seen as a proto-protectionist policy designed to provide tenants with income to pay rents and benefit the local economy. This was not a phenomenon unique to East Anglia, as the Bishop of Winchester also often created market opportunities for tenants on his manors.¹²

Another anecdotal reference reinforces the idea that horse rearing was a common peasant activity in the medieval world. The thirteenth-century French *exemplae* of Jacques de Vitry contain a parable about a woman who planned to use the profits from a range of different activities to eventually purchase and rear a young horse:

An old woman, while carrying milk to market in an earthen vessel, began to consider in what way she could become rich. Reflecting that she might sell her milk for three pence, she thought she would buy with them a young hen, from whose eggs she would get many chickens, which she would sell and buy a pig. This she would fatten and sell and buy a foal, which she would rear until it was suitable to ride. And she began to say to herself “I shall ride that horse and lead it to pasture and say to it ‘Io! Io!’” While she was thinking of these things she began to move her feet and heels as if she had spurs on them, clapped her hands for joy, so that by the motion of her feet and the clapping of her hands she broke the pitcher and the milk was spilled on the ground, and she was left with nothing in her hands.¹³

What is significant for this study is not the lesson that the story means to impart, but rather the context in which it is told. The story was meant to reflect the banalities of medieval life, a setting to which medieval audiences could immediately relate. This particular example therefore illustrates that the notion of a single woman of relatively humble wealth buying a young horse and rearing it herself was not at all unfamiliar to thirteenth-century congregations.

⁹ Such incidents of villeinage are named as reasons for inquiry, as on St. Paul’s manors c. 1320 and at Cuxham (Oxfordshire) in 1310. See: William Hale, ed. *The Domesday of St. Paul’s of the year M.CC.XXII : or, Registrum de visitatione maneriorum per Robertum Decanum, and other original documents relating to the manors and churches belonging to the Dean and Chapter of St. Paul’s, London, in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries* Camden First Series LXIX (London: Camden Society, 1858), 157; P.D.A. Harvey, ed., *Manorial Records of Cuxham, Oxfordshire circa 1200-1359*. (London: Her Majesty’s Stationary Office, 1976), 632.

¹⁰ Mark Bailey, *Medieval Suffolk: An Economic and Social History 1200-1500* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press), 172.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Richard Britnell, “Introduction” in Richard Britnell, ed., *The Winchester Pipe Rolls and Medieval English Society* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2003), 18.

¹³ Thomas Crane, ed. *The Exempla or Illustrative Stories from the Sermones vulgares of Jacques de Vitry* Folk-Lore Society Vol. 26 (London: 1890), 154-5.

At minimum, these references illustrate that livestock was regularly procured from outside the seigniorial system and that local people, of whom some were peasants, were raising and selling livestock. The parable taken from Jacques de Vitry provides an illustration of a French peasant who hoped to become engaged in the rearing of horses, and English manorial records support this idea and suggest further that these peasants may have regularly supplied demesnes with horses and other livestock. What the anecdotal evidence cannot tell us, however, is the scale of such activity. Just how common was peasant horse rearing? Where did this kind of activity fit within the household and family economies of medieval peasants? To address these questions more systematically, we must look closely at the nature of peasant horse ownership to see what potential for horse breeding and rearing existed off the demesne. This will be examined here through an investigation of a form of lay subsidy tax returns, which are a particularly rich source for peasant livestock information.

3: Lay Subsidy Evidence

Tax records are some of the few extant sources that allow insight into the material lives of medieval English peasants. Lay subsidies, a form of tax on the laity imposed by the crown, are suitably robust sources that can be explored systematically and statistically for information about peasant horse ownership, and their possible engagement with breeding and rearing. These were a royal tax, devised in the later medieval period and levied on personal property. The original principle for this type of taxation evolved from the crusade tithes of Henry II and occasional taxes imposed by Richard I and John.¹⁴ During the reign of Henry III this form of taxation was deployed with more regularity and was levied four times in 1225, 1232, 1237 and 1269. This carried on under Edward I, who imposed lay subsidies in 1275 and 1283,¹⁵ and the subsidies continued to be levied, in various forms, into the sixteenth century.¹⁶ Not all of these subsidies generated sources capable of sustaining the type of methodological inquiry central to this study, because only pre-1334 lay subsidy returns recorded comprehensive lists of the moveable goods and property—and therefore livestock—of individual peasant taxpayers. Even these survivals are rare, because they represented not the final tax assessment lists but some ‘rough copy’ listings of information upon which the final tax assessments were based..

The administrative process that led to the creation of these sources functioned as follows: when subsidies were assessed, tax assessors examined the eligible movable property owned by every individual in a community. If the total value of any individual’s property failed to meet the prescribed minimum (e.g. the exemption limit was half a mark, or 6s. 8d. worth of goods for the 1283 lay subsidy),¹⁷ the individual would be excused from the tax and his or her moveable property would not be recorded at all. All individuals whose total wealth was above the minimum, however, would have, in theory, the details of their property recorded in an itemized list, with the quantities and values of moveable goods. These itemized lists, called local assessment rolls, were then forwarded to the chief taxation official for the county, where a new list was drawn up, listing each individual and the tax they owed, but omitting, at this stage, the details about the moveable property upon which their tax was based. In these late thirteenth-century subsidies, property eligible for taxation was generally described as “moveable goods”; literally those belongings that could be moved from one place to another, and therefore excluding land as well as buildings and other permanent structures.¹⁸ Other items were exempted from various iterations of this tax. The war-

¹⁴ J.F. Willard, *Parliamentary Taxes on Personal Property 1290 to 1334* (Cambridge: Medieval Academy of America, 1934), 3.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ For example, see discussion of Tudor subsidy rolls in: S.A. Peyton, “The Village Population in the Tudor Lay Subsidy Rolls” *English Historical Review* 30, No. 118 (1915): 234-50.

¹⁷ Edgar Powell, ed. *A Suffolk Hundred in the Year 1283, the Assessment of the Hundred of Blackbourne for a Tax of One Thirtieth, and a Return Showing the Land Tenure There* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1910), xii.

¹⁸ Ibid.

horses, armour and jewels of the gentry were exempted from subsidies,¹⁹ and, generally speaking, those goods that were vital to the livelihood of the peasantry, such as farm implements, bedding, and cooking vessels were exempt.²⁰ Pertinent to our study, riding horses were also exempt from the 1283 lay subsidy.²¹ These early assessments have been employed fruitfully previously,²² and are useful for our study because they list the moveable property of villagers, assigning a value for each item. It was upon the total value of an individual's property that a fractional tax was then levied. As much of taxable peasant wealth was held in the form of livestock, these early lay subsidies provide, in relatively high resolution, a picture of the scale and composition of peasant horse ownership.

Due in large part to increasing problems with tax evasion, the crown began in 1334 to levy the tax using a different method. Under this new system, the community was taxed on a fixed lump sum each time the tax was levied, and the community determined itself how much each individual residing within the community had to contribute.²³ In this new paradigm, even the intermediary local rolls ceased to provide comprehensive information about property ownership. Therefore, we are forced here to rely on the surviving local assessment rolls of earlier subsidies.

4: The 1283 Lay Subsidy Returns from Blackbourne Hundred

Several lay subsidy returns are extant for the period of this study.²⁴ Of the many candidates, a return from the 1283 tax of a thirtieth²⁵ from Blackbourne Hundred in Suffolk was chosen. This particular subsidy was used to fund Edward I's second Welsh war.²⁶ This subsidy return has been transcribed and tabulated by Edward Powell, but to ensure accuracy this volume was checked against the original manuscript.²⁷ The data contained within the Blackbourne hundred returns is

¹⁹ Although these exemptions only applied in rural areas. These goods were, at least in theory, eligible for taxation in cities, boroughs and towns. See: Willard, *Parliamentary Taxes*, 77.

²⁰ Ibid., 77-8. The rules for exemption were not always consistent. Utensils and vessels were taxed in Buckinghamshire subsidies of 1327 and 1332. See: A.C. Chibnall, ed., *Early Taxation Returns* Buckingham Record Society Vol. 14 (Buckinghamshire, 1966), 2.

²¹ Postan, "Village Livestock", 220.

²² Postan used the Blackbourne subsidy in addition to two others, one for the *banlieu* of Ramsay Abbey from 1291 and a 1225 return from South Wiltshire, in a short study of how peasant pastoral farming differed from that of the demesne. See: Postan, "Village Livestock", *passim*. John Langdon studied the proportions of horses and oxen listed in eighteen different tax assessments. See: Langdon, *Horses, Oxen*, 188.

²³ For a detailed assessment of the evolution of these taxes see: H. Jenkinson, ed. *Surrey Taxation Returns*, Surrey Record Society No. 18, 1922, v-vi.

²⁴ For example, see: Powell, *A Suffolk Hundred*, J.A. Raftis and M.P. Hogan, eds. *Early Huntingdonshire Lay Subsidy Rolls* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1976), A.T. Gaydon, ed., *The Taxation of 1297*, Bedfordshire History Record Society Vol. 39 (Bedford, 1959), 1-73. W. Brown, ed., *The Yorkshire Lay Subsidy, 25 Edward I*, Yorkshire Archaeological Society Records Series 16 (York, 1894); P.D.A Harvey, ed., *Manorial Records of Cuxham*, Oxfordshire Oxfordshire Records Society Vol. 1 (Oxford, 1976), 712-14; A.C. Chibnall, ed., *Early Taxation Returns* Buckinghamshire Records Society Vol. 14 (Buckinghamshire, 1966).

²⁵ Powell, *A Suffolk Hundred*. Wiltshire: TNA: E 179/242/47; A small number of other early assessments also itemize moveable property, such as examples from Cambridgeshire, Lincolnshire and Kent. For Ramsay Abbey material see: British Library Additional Charter 34759; For Cambridgeshire, Lincolnshire and Kent see: Fred A. Cazel and Annarie P. Cazel, eds. *Rolls of the Fifteenth of the Ninth Year of the Reign of Henry III for Cambridgeshire, Lincolnshire and Wiltshire and Rolls of the Fortieth of the Seventeenth Year of the Reign of Henry III for Kent* (London: The Pipe Roll Society, 1983). Cited from: Michael Postan, "Village Livestock in the Thirteenth Century" *The Economic History Review* Vol. 15, No. 2 (1950): 220.

²⁶ Powell, *A Suffolk Hundred*, ix.

²⁷ The original returns consist of many manuscripts drawn up by a number of different scribes. They can be found in TNA: E179/242/41. There are some errors and anomalies in the Powell volume which have been checked against the original manuscript and corrected. The volume erroneously lists two different types of foals: *pulli* and *pullani*. This likely arose from a paleographic error in interpreting the original manuscript entries. The full masculine and feminine forms of the Latin word for foal are the singular *pullanus* (male) and *pullana* (female) and the plural *pullani* and

rich and multi-faceted. They contain much highly-detailed information on the numbers and types of horses owned by Blackbourne peasants, data which is of primary interest for this project. Even among other early lay subsidy returns, the Blackbourne subsidy is particularly rich, leading Postan to comment that “even a superficial comparison with other tax assessments of the same area will be sufficient to show that the assessment of 1283 was much more comprehensive – i.e. netted in more households and persons – than almost any other pre-nineteenth century assessment for tax known to historians.”²⁸ However, the nomenclature used to classify horses in the subsidy material is not completely similar to that of the manorial accounts. This is a methodological obstacle that had to be overcome. The returns also delineate (as manorial accounts generally do) between horses of different ages, and such information can provide data on, for instance, the proportion of mares and young horses to that of adult male animals, which can be used as a way to determine the potential peasants of Blackbourne had for breeding horses. However, as riding horses were exempt from this particular tax assessment,²⁹ the lay subsidy returns will not provide comprehensive data on the full extent of peasant horse ownership, and we must be aware of this limitation. Given the fluidity of distinction between plough-horses and cart-horses, we must also ask how riding horses were distinguished from non-riding animals by the tax assessors, and consider as a possibility that the numbers of agricultural horses were under-represented due to fraudulent declarations by their peasant owners. As we are restricted to the earlier subsidies, these records are also limited in their temporal and geographic scope, and consequently, cannot be studied as extensively as the manorial accounts.

Questions of accuracy and representativeness are the most significant issues surrounding the use of lay subsidy data in general, and the 1283 Blackbourne assessment, in particular. While the accuracy of lay subsidies has been the subject of some skepticism,³⁰ the Blackbourne returns have benefitted from intensive checking and cross-referencing by scholars over the years.³¹ As the pre-1334 subsidies were based upon the value of moveable property and included an exemption for the poorest segment of society, those with moveable property valued at less than half a mark were exempt from taxation in 1283. Therefore, the local assessment rolls reflect only a proportion of the

pullanae. In most cases these words are abbreviated in the manuscripts to either *pullan* or, more frequently, simply *pull*. Powell interpreted these differing abbreviations as separate categories, and, a customary from Bury St. Edmunds (British Library MS. Harley 1005, f. 84.) for reference, inferred that these indicated foals of different ages. In fact, the different scribes who compiled the individual membranes for each manor simply used different forms of abbreviation (even individual scribes can be inconsistent in abbreviation within the same document) for the singular term for foal. The Blackbourne subsidy returns do not differentiate between foals of different ages at all, and we must assume that those horses described as foals were under three years of age, which, as discussed in Chapter 1, was the typical point at which young horses were promoted to adult categories. Powell also differentiated between *equi*, which he described as male horses, and *equae* [medieval scribes often used the syncopated first declension nominative plural from of ‘e’, as opposed to the more familiar classical from of ‘ae’] which he assumed to be female animals. This is another distinction which is seemingly unique to the Blackbourne returns, having not been encountered in any manorial accounts, which exclusively use the term *equi* as a category which could include both male and female horses. However, having checked this against the original manuscript as well, it is apparent that horses in the female *equae* category are given as *equa* in the returns, so the scribes did in fact differentiate between male and female horses on the Blackbourne returns.

²⁸ Postan, “Village Livestock”, 220.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Langdon, *Horses, Oxen*, 182-5.

³¹ M.M. Postan, “Village Livestock”, 220-8. Postan went beyond ‘superficial comparison’ by undertaking a number of comparative exercises with other contemporary manorial documents from the same area. A comparison of the Blackbourne subsidy with manorial accounts of Hinderclay revealed that “little less than three-quarters of the names of peasants in the near-contemporary records of Hinderclay will be found among the 41 taxpayers in that village in 1283...” The accuracy of the Blackbourne subsidy is further corroborated by thorough comparison with the 1302 *Recognitiones* listings. However, Langdon has argued that Postan “would appear to have been overly optimistic in his assessment.” Langdon contends that the 1283 Blackbourne returns under assessed peasant livestock numbers, and especially horses by 15 percent or more. See: Postan, ‘Village Livestock’, 220-3; Langdon, *Horses, Oxen*, 184; Langdon, *Horses, Oxen and Technological Innovation*, PhD Thesis, 4, n.54 (pp. 318-20).

actual numbers of inhabitants in any given community, likely somewhere between the wealthiest two-thirds to three-quarters of inhabitants.³²

There are also questions of the accuracy of assessment among inhabitants who *were* taxed. Specifically in the case of livestock, it has been estimated that the numbers of animals were routinely under-counted, most likely as a form of tax evasion through the collusion of tax payers and the tax collectors. In the specific case of the Blackbourne assessment, the number of peasant horses may have been under-assessed.³³ For example, the 1302 Recognition (*Recognitiones*) of the Abbey of Bury St Edmunds allows us to check the accuracy of livestock listed in the 1283 Blackbourne assessment. Recognition was a seigniorial due paid by villein tenants in acknowledgement of the accession of a new lord, in this case a newly-elected Abbot of Bury St. Edmund's Abbey, Thomas of Tottington, who was elected in 1302.³⁴ Recognition was, like the lay subsidies, based on moveable property, although, in this case, only that of unfree peasants, rather than all inhabitants in the community. Bury St. Edmunds was located within Blackbourne hundred and, as livestock was a significant component of unfree peasant wealth, it is therefore possible to compare the animals enumerated in both sources.³⁵ At first glance, there is little difference between the animal lists given in the 1283 assessment and those in the *Recognitiones*. For example, the stock of seven Rickinghall villagers - Richard Aylemer, William Waryn, Thomas Waryn, Robert Othin, Henry le Brun, Walter Mercator, and Warren Sutor - are listed in both the 1283 subsidy and the 1302 *Recognitiones*. Eighty-three animals were listed for these seven peasants in the 1283 subsidy and ninety-six in the 1302 Recognition tax. Given the nine-year interval between the two assessments, the numbers of animals seem reasonably similar at 11.9 animals per individual in 1283 and 13.7 in 1302. However, what is more significant is the much greater incidence of tenants in the *Recognitiones* listed as owning two horses than those in the 1283 Blackbourne subsidy, where the majority of peasants were listed as owning only a single beast. For example, of the forty-eight tenants on the manors of Rickinghall Inferior and Coney Weston listed as having draught animals in 1302, one had two horses and three oxen, another had two horses and two oxen, one had four oxen, one had one horse and two oxen, three men had three horses each, eighteen had two horses, twenty had one horse, and three had a single ox - a proportion of horses over oxen of 83.3 per cent overall.³⁶ Altogether the data from the *Recognitiones* suggests that it was as likely for a man to have two horses as one. However, in the thirty-three villages of the 1283 assessment, 501 peasant taxpayers were taxed as having one horse, and only 142 as having two. The implication is that the tax assessors in 1283 may often have excused peasants one of their horses.³⁷ It does not seem that this happened in every case. If we assume that the real proportion of tenants having two horses as against those having only one was the same in 1283 as that indicated by the *Recognitiones*, then the underassessment in the number of horses would be about 15 per cent. It may even have been more if one considers the cases where peasants having no horses in the assessment might in actuality have had one, and so on.

It is possible to examine this from another angle. A 1304 tax assessment for Cuxham in Oxfordshire indicates that, on average, tenants on that manor owned one affor each. However, an examination of trespass cases in Cuxham court rolls contemporary to the assessment indicates that

³² Langdon estimates that the Blackbourne assessment may have excluded 30 – 35 percent of the actual number of heads of household in some villages. See: Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ 'Houses of Benedictine monks: Abbey of Bury St Edmunds,' in *A History of the County of Suffolk*: Volume 2, ed. William Page (London: Victoria County History, 1975), 56-72. Accessed December 15, 2015. <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/suff/vol2/pp56-72>.

³⁵ Mark Bailey, *The Decline of Serfdom*, 47-8, 262-4.

³⁶ Powell, *A Suffolk Hundred*, pp. 78-80, 89.

³⁷ Reminiscent of the Cuxham case above. John Langdon, *Horses, Oxen*, 182-3.

the figure might have been closer to two offers per tenant.³⁸ There is also clear evidence that the Cuxham assessment was not immune to deliberate, fraudulent under-assessment of moveable property in the community; Cuxham manorial accounts record bribes of up to ten shillings given to the tax collectors “so that they might be lenient in their assessment”.³⁹ However, it should be noted that this was a bribe paid by the Cuxham demesne which had significantly more resources for bribes and for which a lenient tax assessment stood to save considerably more than the average peasant would have gained from similar fraud.

While under-recording the raw numbers of livestock was one way to reduce a peasant’s overall tax burden, under valuing individual animals was another means of achieving the same end. As the prices attributed to horses (and other livestock) in the subsidies were valuations, or appraisals, rather than reflections of actual market values, they were more vulnerable to fraudulent manipulation than price data taken from market transactions. Therefore, caution is warranted when using price/value data taken from subsidy returns. This is also explored in more detail below.

The discussion above has attempted to outline both the potential of lay subsidies for assessing peasant involvement in horse ownership, and also the many methodological difficulties in harnessing the potential of the material. Compared to manorial accounts these sources present more methodological issues in both the interpretation of the sources and the reliability of information derived. While the numerous issues with lay subsidy material in particular have caused some historians to dismiss them entirely,⁴⁰ with the acknowledgement of the source’s limitations it is still possible to glean a wealth of useful information from this material. As, even if the absolute accuracy of the assessment is doubted, the precise nature and scale of its limitations are known. Within the bounds of this study, the use, in tandem, of a careful analysis of a specific lay subsidy return and a particular sample of court rolls will allow fruitful analysis of peasant horse ownership and horse-related activities, from which we can reliably extrapolate their involvement in the horse trade.

4.1: Composition of Horse Ownership in Blackbourne Hundred

What distinguishes this present analysis from earlier studies of the 1283 Blackbourne lay subsidy is the way in which the data is used. While the raw numbers of horses will be discussed briefly, where the lay subsidy material is most useful is in giving an indication of the potential that peasant farms - and by extension peasants themselves - had for horse breeding and rearing. Therefore, one of the key pieces of information that the lay subsidies can provide is the proportion of female and young horses kept by the peasantry. Much like the ‘snapshot’ view that the demesne sample from Chapter 1 provided, the Blackbourne thirtieth provides a good indication of the types of horses owned by the peasantry at a single point in time. Figure 3.1 gives the composition of horse ownership of all those taxed in the hundred in 1283.

³⁸ This is derived from Paul Harvey’s small survey of trespass presentments in the manorial court rolls of Cuxham. Harvey’s survey contains thirty-six trespass cases, of which eighteen concerned horses. Of these eighteen horse trespass cases, fifteen were instances where two horses were involved (two further cases involved four horses and a final case cited only a single horse). Taken at face value, this is at odds with the 1304 lay subsidy, where most peasants were assessed as owning only a single horse. See: P.D.A Harvey, *A Medieval Oxfordshire Village: Cuxham 1240-1400* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), Appendix VI. See below for a comparison of these horse trespass cases with those of other courts.

³⁹ P.D.A. Harvey, *A Medieval Oxfordshire Village*, 105. The discrepancy might be explained by the exclusion of riding horses as taxable property, as was the case in the 1283 tax of 1/30. For more on the corruption and collusion between tax collectors and tax payers, see: J.F. Willard, *Parliamentary Taxes on Personal Property 1290 to 1334* (Cambridge: Medieval Academy of America, 1934), 210-18.

⁴⁰ Louis F. Salzman, “Early Taxation of Sussex, Part II”, *Sussex Archaeological Collections* Vol. 19 (1962), xcix.

Using the categories employed in the local assessment rolls (and later compiled by Powell), the subsidy enumerates horses by using largely the same categories as the manorial accounts, but also provides specific categorical distinctions between male and female horses. The convention of the manorial accounts was to record horses by type, using masculine nouns like *affri* and *stotti*. If the animals enumerated within these categories were further distinguished by sex (a practice not universally adhered to) it was through an addendum at the end of the entry. The Blackbourne subsidy, however, has separate categories for horses of each gender. Therefore, the local rolls enumerated both male *equi* and female *eque*⁴¹ along with the traditional female category of *jumentae*. In addition to the familiar categories of cart-horses (*equi carectarri*), affers (*affri*), stotts (*stotti*), mares (*jumentae*), “*equi*” and foals (*pullani/ae*), the Blackbourne subsidy uses another distinct category, *veredes*, which were not encountered in accounts. Given their values and the contexts in which they were owned, it seems likely that these animals were cart-horses; the distinction between the two types may be similar to *stott* and *affer* where two categories are used to describe similar animals. In any case, the anomaly is not overly important as only two of these horses were recorded, both in a single community. To facilitate comparison with data from the manorial account sample, these categories must be integrated with those with which we are already familiar. Therefore, the female *eque* have been grouped in with mares, the *veredes* have been added to the cart-horses category, and the incorrectly demarcated *pulli* and *pullani* (see note 243 above) have been combined into a single ‘foals’ category.

Demesne property must also be removed from the Blackbourne data. As the lay subsidy was levied on all individuals who owned moveable property exceeding 6s. 8d.,⁴² the original local returns recorded the property of both peasants and demesnes. As the purpose here is to assess the peasantry, demesnes and their property must be sifted out before any analysis can be undertaken. This is not always a straightforward task. In some villis lord is easily identified. In Ashfield Magna, for instance, the demesne is easily identifiable as the lands of “Dominus W. Criketot” and is therefore easily removed. Similarly, the livestock of “Dominus Edmund de Hemgrave” represents demesne holdings on the manor of Barnham. On the manor of Culford, the property of the Abbot of Bury St. Edmund’s is also easily identified as a demesne holding. The difficulty arises when none of those listed on the tax lists are clearly identified as a seigniorial lord. On some occasions the types and value of property point towards seigniorial ownership (e.g. the ownership of large numbers of livestock or expensive cart-horses), but only those individuals who could definitively be proven as lords were excluded and, therefore, some demesnes may still be contained within the ‘peasant’ sample.⁴³ In other villis, the poorest inhabitants of the hundred, whose total moveable property was valued below this threshold, would have been overlooked by the subsidy assessors and therefore they do not appear in the tax lists. The resultant distribution of horses, along with our demesne sample from Chapter 1, is given in Table 1.

⁴¹ *Eque* being the syncopated medieval version of the first declension nominative plural *equae* of classical Latin.

⁴² Powell, *A Suffolk Hundred*, xx.

⁴³ I have largely followed Langdon’s methodology for determining seigniorial or peasant status here, that is, only removing those entries which can be clearly identified as demesnes. However, our final figures differ; Langdon determined there were forty-five demesne taxpayers in the Blackbourne subsidy, while I have only excluded forty two, meaning that there is a possibility that my sample contains a small number of demesnes. Others have used different approaches, using a defined criterion of property ownership to filter out demesnes. For example, assuming any entry with more than ten horses to be a demesne. I do not feel that applying such an arbitrary rule is appropriate for this present study.

Table 1:
Composition of Horse Ownership on Demesne Sample ca. 1300 and 1283 Blackbourne Hundred

	Demesne Sample	%	Blackbourne Hundred	%
Affers	1031	40.0	9	0.7
Stotts	419	16.3	349	27.3
Young Horses	403	15.6	184	14.4
Cart-horses	397	15.4	4	0.3
Mares	249	9.7	641	50.2
Equi	66	2.6	88	6.9
Veredes	0	0.0	2	0.2
Rouncies	5	0.2		
Mill Horses	4	0.2		
Stallions	2	0.1		
Total	2576	100.0%	1277	100.0%

The types of horses owned by demesnes (as illustrated by the demesne sample from 1) and peasants are broadly similar, and what differences exist can be easily explained. The notable distinctions between the two samples are the absence of rouncies, mill-horses and stallions on peasant holdings. The lack of rouncies can be explained simply. As riding horses, they were exempt from the 1283 thirtieth. Even if some peasants did own single-purpose riding horses, the tax assessment omitted them and they would not have been recorded.⁴⁴ However, as we have seen from the demesne evidence, riding rouncies were almost exclusively owned by wealthy individuals, and therefore the chance that the Blackbourne peasantry owned a significant number of riding horses is low. Stallions were quite rare on demesnes, accounting for well less than 1 percent of total stocks; the only two stallions in the demesne sample were found on the earl of Lincoln's stud farm at Igthenhill, which itself was used for breeding rouncies for the earl's stable. Specialized breeding stallions were, then, not kept by demesnes for the purposes of breeding working horses, and the peasantry were seemingly able to also breed without owning any stallions. In the absence of stallions on most demesnes and peasant holdings, insemination could have been conducted through a 'stud service' of some sort, where an intact male horse was brought in for the sole purpose of impregnating female horses. There is, however, no record of such activities in manorial accounts. It is more likely that un-gelded male horses were common among demesne and village livestock, and it is these animals that were used for breeding. Thomas Tusser's treatise on husbandry offers insight into pre-modern gelding practices. Though recorded in the sixteenth century, many of the practices discussed were broadly similar to the agricultural techniques of the medieval period. Tusser gives a clear indication that gelding was preferred for only certain horses, and many working animals were likely left intact:

⁴⁴ Powell notes the absence of riding horses in the Blackbourne assessment and notes that *chiuauchure* were specifically exempted from the tax assessment. *Chiuauchure* is described in the *Promptorium Parvulorum*, a fifteenth-century English-to-Latin dictionary as a horse "vor ridinge". The *runcini* documented in the manorial accounts were also riding horses; the two terms most likely describe a single class of horse, as do stott and affer. See: Powell, *A Suffolk Hundred*, xxiv.

Thy coltes for the sadle, geld yong to be light:
for cart doe not so, if thou iudgest a right.
Nor geld not, but when they be lusty and fat:
for there is a point, to be learned in that.

Geld marefoles but titts, ere and nine dayes of age:
they die els of gelding, some gelders wil gage.
But marefoles, both likely, of bulke and of bone:
kepr such to bring coltes, let their gelding alone.⁴⁵

The absence of any mention of horse gelding in manorial accounts, combined with Tusser's assertion that at some work horses were left intact, suggests that stallions were not required to sustain stocks. Even a small number of intact male horses would have been sufficient for breeding on both demesne and peasant farms, and this must have rendered specialized stallions unnecessary.

Mill-horses, as specialized animals working either as the engines of horse-mills or as pack animals, are also understandably absent from peasant stocks, as milling was largely the purview of the seigniorial sector ca. 1300, and horse mills would even then have constituted only a small proportion of overall tenant milling.⁴⁶ With these exceptions, then, the core categories of horses present on both demesnes and amongst the peasants of Blackbourne hundred are the familiar affers, stotts and cart-horses, as well as mares, *equi* and young horses.

Where the horse stocks of demesnes and Blackbourne peasants diverge is in the relative proportions of different types of horses. While affers were more common than stotts in the demesne sample (40 percent vs. 16 percent), peasants on Blackbourne Hundred manors owned significantly more stotts (26 percent to 0.7 percent). As discussed in 1, 'stott' was a regional term only encountered in East Anglia and the Thames Basin regions, so we would expect stotts to outnumber affers here. If the affer and stott categories are combined into a single 'plough-horse' category for comparison, we find that 56.3 percent of demesne horses were plough beasts (40 percent affers + 16.3 percent stotts), while only 27 percent of Blackbourne horses were plough animals (0.7 percent affers + 26.3 percent stotts).

How might this difference be explained? The surest way to approach this question would be a comparison of the total sown acreages for both demesnes in the sample and for Blackbourne peasants. This would facilitate the calculation of an acres/plough-horse figure that would further illuminate the difference in numbers of plough animals. Unfortunately, while this data could be easily obtained for demesnes, the 1283 lay subsidy taxed peasants only on moveable goods, and therefore does not provide information on the size of peasant land holdings (from which it would still be difficult to reliably estimate sown acreages), we have no corresponding data for the Blackbourne peasants.

We are left, then, with only the raw numbers of horses to consider. One possible explanation is that Blackbourne peasants relied more heavily upon ox power than horse power as source of animal traction. This could explain the lower proportion of horses relative to the demesne sample. However, only 387 oxen (*boves*) were listed in the subsidy for the whole of Blackbourne hundred, as compared to 1220 adult horses, meaning that adult work horses outnumbered oxen on peasant farms by more than 3:1. These figures are a clear indication that the horse was the predominant beast of burden on peasant lands, which echoes Langdon's finding that horse ploughing was

⁴⁵ Thomas Tusser, *A Hundredth Good Points of Husbandry*, (Amsterdam: Theatrum Orbis Terrarum, 1973), 53-4.

⁴⁶ Tenant mills accounted for only 9.6 percent of mills ca. 1300 in Langdon's survey of mills in medieval England. See: John Langdon, *Mills in the Medieval Economy: England 1300-1540* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 220.

embraced by East Anglian peasants to a greater degree than in any other part of the country.⁴⁷

The relative specialization of different types of horses, as well as peasant choices for animal traction, impacted upon both the proportions of both plough and cart-horses on Blackbourne peasant holdings. This is the most reasonable explanation for the differing proportions of plough horses on demesnes and peasant holdings. We have already discussed in 1 the rather specialized role of cart-horses on demesnes, in that they were used exclusively for carting while affers and stotts often performed a number of different roles. Cart-horses comprised 15.4 percent of demesne stocks but only 0.3 percent of peasant-owned animals on Blackbourne hundred,⁴⁸ indicating a monumental gap in cart-horse ownership between the seigniorial sector and the peasantry. Cart-horses were also the most expensive type of agricultural horse, whose cost was likely prohibitive to peasants of more modest means, and investment in specialized cart-horses was something that most peasants were either unable or unwilling to make.⁴⁹

As cart-horses were relatively more specialized than plough-horses (stotts and affers), with a distinct skill premium, plough-horses perhaps held a similar skill premium over mares, which could fulfill the dual roles of draught work and breeding. Therefore, the evidence suggests that Blackbourne peasants often chose to own mares in preference to male plough horses, which explains the lower proportion of peasant plough-horses and also the higher proportion of mares. This phenomenon is even more pronounced when peasant horse ownership is compared to the wealth of individual horse owners and on a village-by-village basis, both analyses discussed below.

The peasants of Blackbourne hundred also stocked comparatively more *equi* than demesnes (6.9 percent to 2.6 percent). As the precise nature of these horses is somewhat more ambiguous than in the other categories (see discussion Chapter 1) it is difficult to assess the significance of this difference. Langdon grouped the *equi* encountered in both lay subsidies and heriots in with cart-horses,⁵⁰ but his justification for doing so is not entirely clear. If we were to group the *equi* in both the demesne sample and for the Blackbourne hundred in with cart-horses the proportion of cart-horses would rise to 18 percent on demesnes and 7.2 percent on Blackbourne manors; in either scenario the proportions are similar, with demesnes owing 2.5 times the number of cart horses than Blackbourne peasants.

4.2: Values of Peasant Horses in Blackbourne Hundred

Having looked at the ways in which the composition of peasant horse stocks differed from that of the demesne, we must next consider the values of peasant horses compared to demesne animals. Figure 1 gives the ranges in value of a subsample of 722 Blackbourne peasant horses. In the creation of this subsample, only single values were taken, eliminating any instances where two or more horses were valued together, and thereby avoiding the inclusion of any average prices in the sample. As discussed above, it is important to distinguish between these valuations of peasant horses and the demesne purchase prices. Values taken from the Blackbourne subsidy are notional values assigned by tax assessors and not prices determined by a competitive market.

⁴⁷ Langdon, *Horses, Oxen*, 205 Table 29.

⁴⁸ This may be an over estimate if any demesnes have erroneously remained in the Blackbourne sample. Considering only the demesnes we have excluded from our Blackbourne peasant sample, the proportion of cart-horses on Blackbourne demesnes was 10 percent.

⁴⁹ Even so, the proportion of peasant cart-horses is especially low on Blackbourne manors. Unfortunately, Langdon did not separate cart-horses from affers and stotts in his detailed study of draught animals in lay subsidies, so we cannot compare our figures with subsidies from other parts of England. Langdon did, however, assess peasant cart-horse ownership using heriot data. Given that cart-horses were, on average, significantly more valuable than either affers or stotts, it would have been to the peasants' advantage to disguise cart-horses as lesser and cheaper animals. Peasants on Blackbourne manors may have, through either evasion or collusion with the tax assessors, caused the numbers of these animals to be under-recorded.

⁵⁰ Langdon, *Horses, Oxen*, 203, Table 28.

The distribution of horse values is given in figure 1. Assessors of the 1283 subsidy tended to appraise horses at intervals, and, as a result, most are bunched around specific points, as illustrated in Figure 2. The values of horses were even more closely clustered than the figure shows, as the vast majority of horses were assessed at discreet values at whole shilling intervals. For example, of the 164 horses whose value fell between 3.00 s. and 3.49 s., 155, or 95 percent, were valued at 3.00 s. Similarly, of the horses valued between 2.50 s. and 2.99 s., forty-three (88 percent) were valued at 2.50 s. This same trend is broadly applicable to all of the price strata illustrated in Figure 2. It seems that tax assessors imposed a rather rudimentary hierarchy of value to the horses (and other livestock as well) counted in Blackbourne communities, rather than spending unnecessary time determining more accurate values for individual animals. This makes using individual values on their own quite difficult, but the sample as a whole is still very instructive.

Figure 2: Ranges, Means and Medians of Horse Values on 1283 Blackbourne Hundred Lay Subsidy

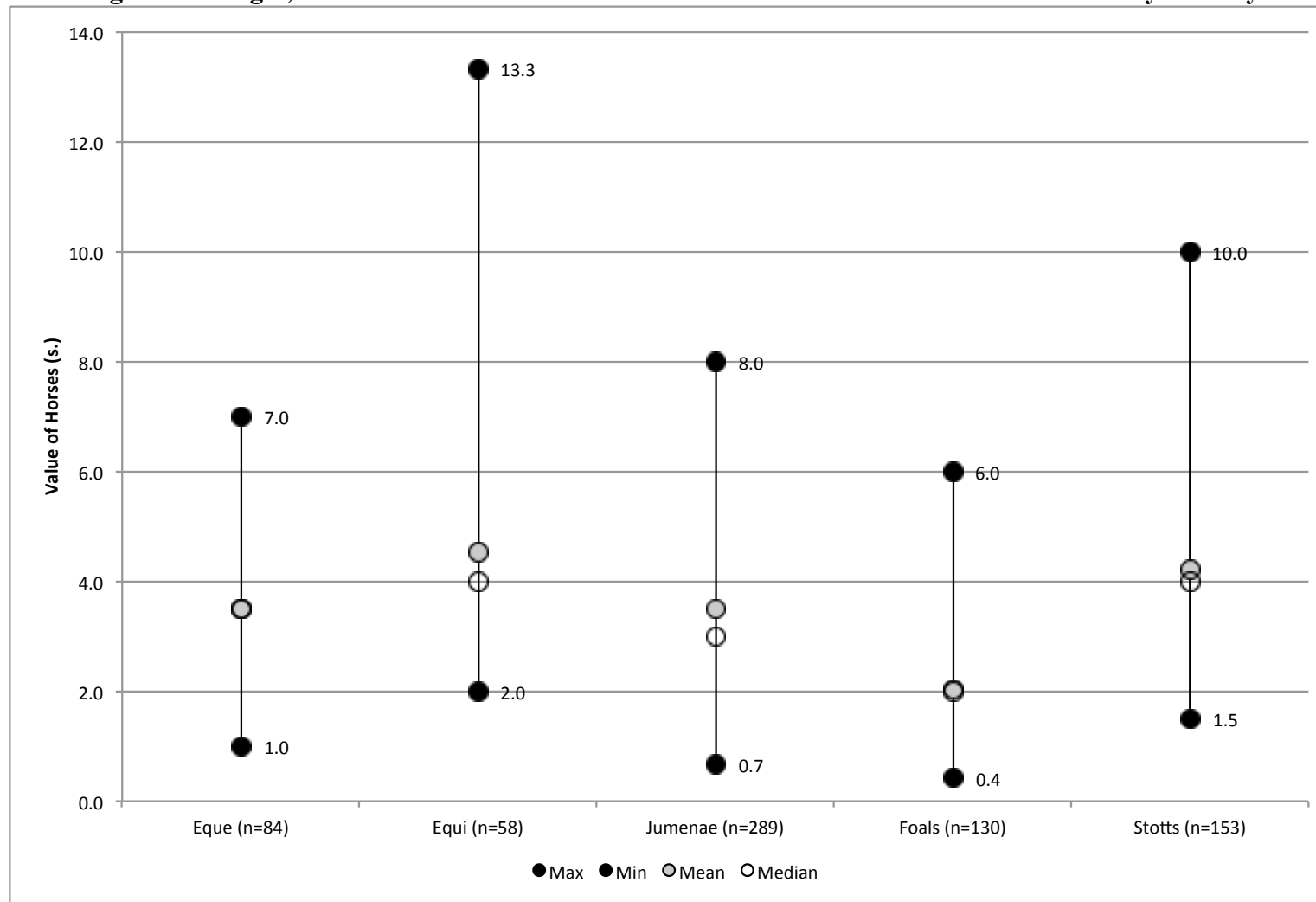
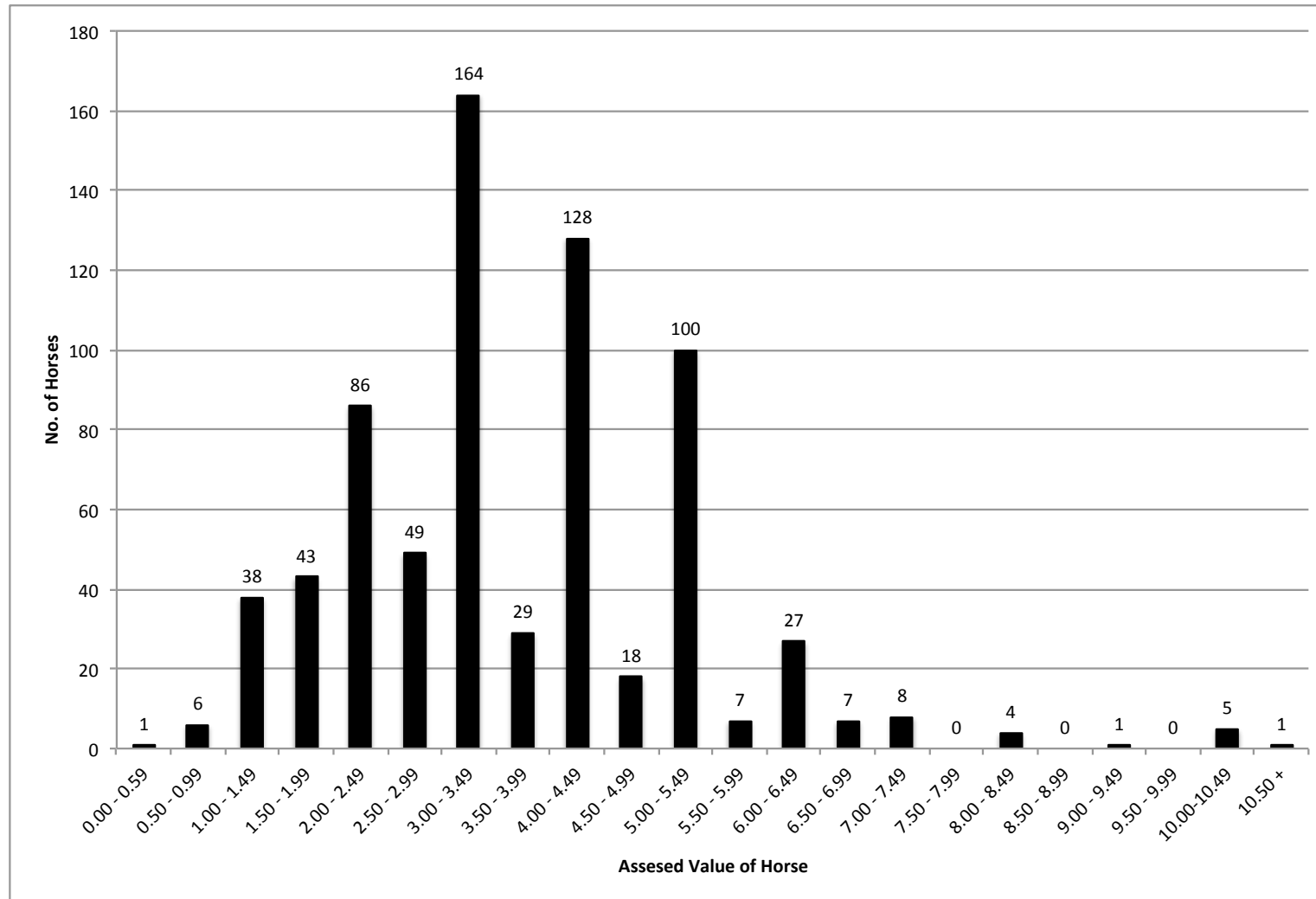


Figure 2: Distribution of Values of Blackbourne Peasant Horses (n=722)



In general, peasant horses on Blackbourne villages were valued significantly lower than demesne animals. For example, demesne stotts in East Anglia were purchased at prices ranging from 5.5s. to 30s. Peasant-owned stotts on Blackbourne villages, however, ranged in value from 1.5s to 10s. This is a substantial difference in value. Langdon has argued that peasant horses were, compared to demesne animals, of advanced age and generally poorer quality, often afflicted with blindness or other work-limiting factors,⁵¹ and our subsidy value data supports the idea that peasant horses were, by and large, inferior to demesne stocks.

4.3 Breeding Potential

Judging by the proportions of young and female horses owned by the peasantry, their potential for horse breeding and rearing was significant. The close analysis of seigniorial horse stocks of Chapter 1 determined that, on average, demesnes were net consumers of horses; they did not breed enough horses to sustain their own demand and instead relied on other sources to provide them with working animals.⁵² The situation of the peasantry, so far as it is represented by the Blackbourne data, is entirely different. The number of mares on demesnes accounted for just under 10 percent of total horse stocks, while the proportion of female horses amongst Blackbourne tenants was substantially higher at 51.1 percent. These figures require further qualification. The true proportion of female horses in our account sample is under-represented in manorial accounts if measured only by the number of *jumentae*, due to the tendency of scribes to lump affers and stotts of both sexes into the same categories. However, even if we were to assume that half of all demesne affers and stotts were female, the total proportion of female horses on demesnes would still trail the Blackbourne peasantry by over 10 percent.⁵³

What breeding capacity can be conjectured from this large proportion of female horses? The peasants of Blackbourne hundred owned 638 female horses, and, in theory, this would also mean 638 viable brood mares, but as we have seen in demesne evidence, medieval horse breeding was often hampered by sterility in female horses. If we make a modest assumption that half of these female horses were sterile, then that leaves a viable breeding pool of 319 mares. In addition to levels of sterility in the population of mares, length of pregnancy was also a factor. The author of the anonymous *Husbandry* treatise suggested that the gestation period of mares was forty-nine weeks,⁵⁴ so mares could have conceivably been bred every year. However, one foal per year was unlikely to have been sustainable over any significant period of time. It is perhaps most sensible to assume a breeding rate of one foal every three years, mirroring the development cycle of the demesne. This would have allowed peasants to keep one young 'trainee' horse alongside mature animals while limiting the work and responsibility of maintaining and rearing to one young horse at a time. If we take the 319 mares available for breeding as posited earlier and project that they were bred on average every three years ($319/3$), this would result in 106 new foals bred by Blackbourne Hundred peasants every year. Thus, the pool of peasant horses would have enabled them to breed a significant number of young animals every year, even by a conservative projection.⁵⁵

⁵¹ Langdon, *Horses, Oxen*, 250.

⁵² These calculations were based not on the proportion of young horses on demesnes, but on the number of horses which graduated from 'young' categories into the ranks of adult working animals, a more precise metric for determining the rate of internal breeding on demesnes. The lay subsidy data does not tell us how many young horses were on the cusp of reaching maturity; this must be projected from the numbers of female and young horses kept by peasants.

⁵³ The calculation is as follows: All categories are divided by two. (E.g. Affers ($1031/2 = 515.5$); Stotts ($419/2 = 209.5$); *Equi* ($66/2 = 33$); Rouncies ($5/2 = 2.5$); Mill Horses ($4/2 = 2$) $515.5 + 209.5 + 33 + 2.5 + 4 = 1011.5$). This then gives 1011.5 potential female horses. This figure is then divided by the total number of demesne horses ($1011.5/2576 = 39.3$ percent), giving an upper limit of 39.3 percent female to male sex ratio on demesnes.

⁵⁴ Dorothea Oschinsky, ed. *Walter of Henley and Other Treatises on Estate Management and Accounting* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 427.

⁵⁵ If, as discussed above, the Blackbourne subsidy under-recorded peasant horses, the reality of peasant breeding potential may have been even higher.

If this figure is taken as a reasonable minimum projection of peasant horse breeding potential, the figure of 106 foals per year would have been sufficient to create a surplus of horses that could have not only maintained the horse stocks of the Blackbourne peasantry, but also perhaps supplied demesnes and the local market as well. We can test this further, moving from projections to real figures. Using the number of foals enumerated on Blackbourne peasant farms, it is possible to estimate the size of such a surplus. The 1283 assessment recorded 184 foals on peasant farms. If we use the same three-year development cycle, then sixty-one (184 foals/3 years) foals would have needed to be replaced each year (assuming that one-third of all young horses were reaching maturity in any given year). The projection of 106 new foals born, exceeds this by forty-five animals, or 74 percent.

How reliable is this projection? The same exercise can be undertaken with the demesne sample to facilitate comparison. Starting with the 249 mares enumerated in the accounts, the eighty-eight from dedicated stud farms are removed,⁵⁶ leaving 161 mares in total. Given that this figure is likely an under-representation of the total number of female horses in the demesne sample, it is (conservatively) assumed that all 161 were fertile and viable for breeding. If these mares were bred once every three years, the demesnes in our sample could have produced, by our projection, fifty-four foals ($161/3 = 53.67$) in a single year. In reality, the demesnes actually doubled this projection, as 108 foals were born to demesnes in our sample, again excluding the stud farms mentioned above. The fact that demesnes in our sample eclipsed the same conservative projection applied to Blackbourne peasants, despite, as Chapter 1 has illustrated, ultimately not collectively breeding enough young animals to sustain their own demand, suggests that the Blackbourne peasantry, and perhaps by extension, peasants across medieval England, could have easily created the surplus of horses required to supply the medieval market.

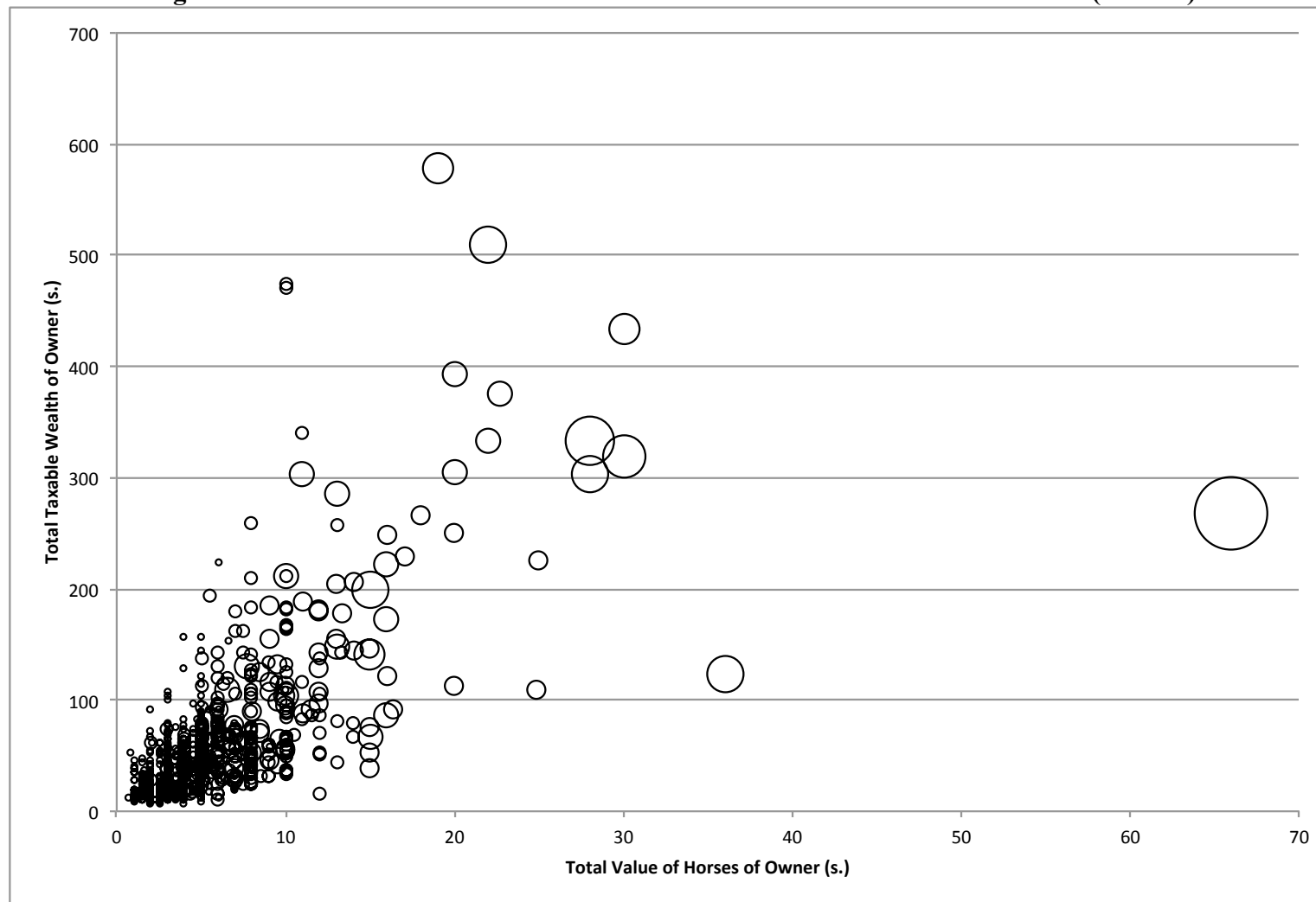
4.4: Distribution of Peasant Horse Stocks on Blackbourne Hundred

This exercise has projected the breeding potential of the horses owned by the Blackbourne peasants as a whole, but these peasants were a very heterogeneous group, and the subsidy material can provide further insight into how horse breeding was organized within these communities. Was horse breeding the likely purview of any identifiable sub-group, or were a wide range of peasants potentially engaged in horse breeding and rearing as an economic activity? Further, is there any trace of commercial or at least large-scale breeding among the peasantry, or were horses generally produced on a smaller scale?

To look at this more closely, the Blackbourne villis have been taken and analyzed peasant-by-peasant in terms of numbers of horses owned, their value, and the total value of taxable property for each individual, as a proxy for overall wealth. Figure 3 illustrates the relationship between total taxable wealth against the value and number of horses owned. In this figure, the sample of Blackbourne peasants is plotted, with the total value of horses owned by each of the 810 horse owners in the hundred on the x-axis to and the total taxable wealth of each horse owner taxable on the y-axis; the number of horses owned by each individual, which ranged from one to twelve animals, is represented by the size of the bubble plotted at each coordinate.

⁵⁶ Taken from end-of-year manorial account totals, these are forty-two from the Earl of Lincoln's Lancashire stud at Ightenhill, eighteen from Isabella de Fortibus' Yorkshire *Equitium*, and twenty-eight from Peterborough Abbey's *runcini* herd at Eye park.

Figure 3: Nominal Values of Horses Owned vs. Total Taxable Wealth of Owner (n = 810)

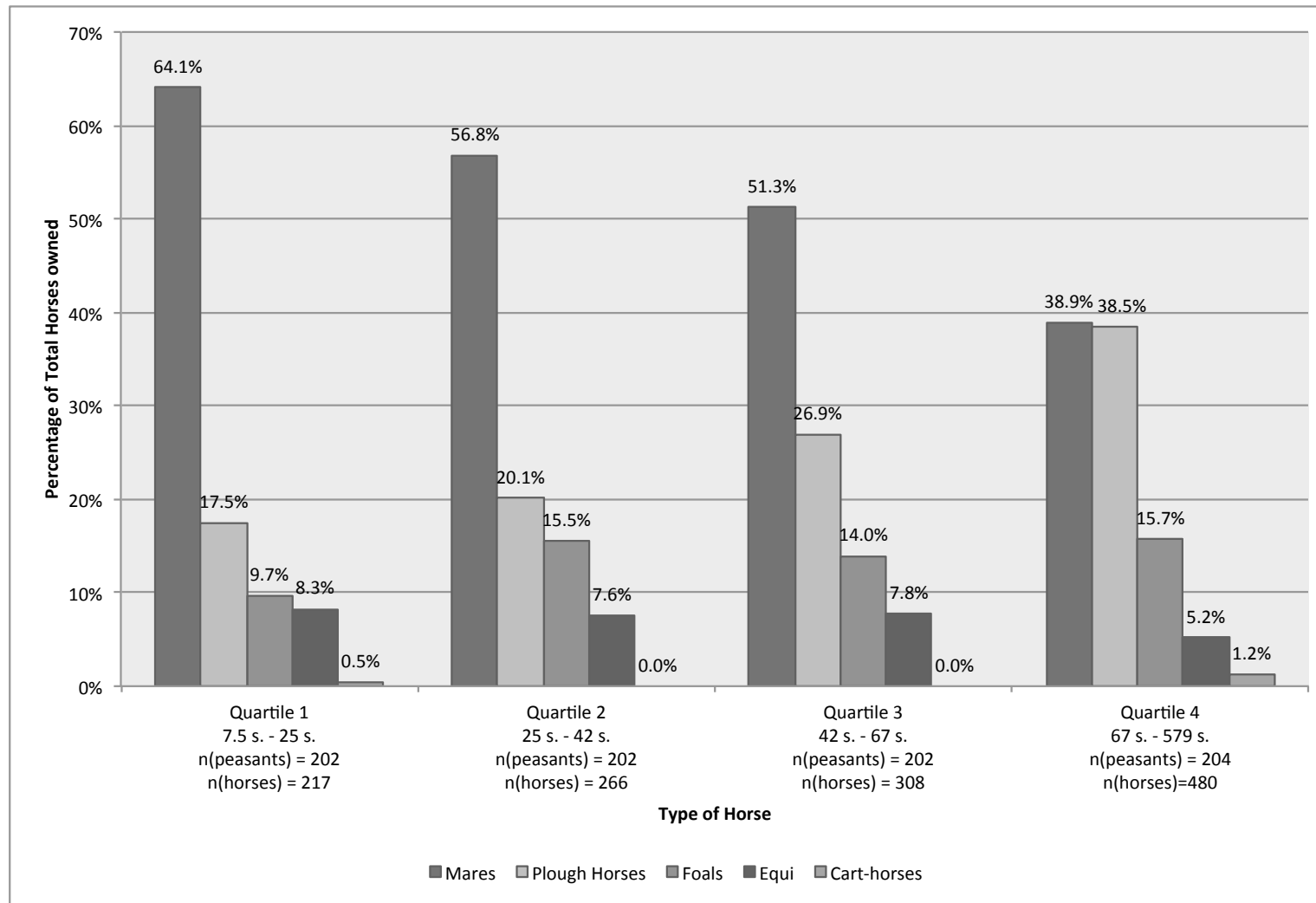


682 of the horse owners in the sample (84.2 percent) had total moveable property valued at less than 100s. and 10s. or less invested in horses. It is clear that most horses were concentrated in this lower left quadrant of the graph, indicating low-value animals and owners of relatively humble means. For a number of these individuals their animals were likely ‘convenience horses’ which served a range of purposes for their owners. This is especially clear when looking at individuals who, judging by their surnames, seemingly worked outside of the arable sector. People like Alexander Bercarius, a shepherd living in Rushford, who owned a single mare valued at 3s., or Richard Piscator, a fisherman from Rickinghall, who owned a stott valued at 3s. 4d. Ralph Faber, a smith from Hinderclay, owned a mare worth 5s. Adam Molendinarius, a miller from Norton, owned a single stott, likely a pack animal perhaps used for delivering milled flour. At Elmswell, one Peter Clericus was assessed as owing a lone foal, valued at 1s. Peter may have been planning on raising the foal himself, in the same way as the woman in the de Vitry example discussed earlier.

4.4: Quartile Analysis of Blackbourne Hundred data

Horse ownership was not spread evenly across the Blackbourne peasantry. If the group of peasants taxed in the 1283 subsidy is divided into quartiles according to total taxable wealth, different profiles of horse ownership between each segment become clear. Of the 814 horse-owning peasants listed in the Blackbourne subsidy, in 810 cases it was possible to derive data for both horse ownership and total taxable wealth. These 810 peasants were divided into four quartiles. As 810 does not divide into four equal parts, the first three quartiles are comprised of 202 peasants, while the fourth quartile (wealthiest peasants) contains 204 individuals.

Figure 4: Distribution of Horses by Quartiles of Total Taxable Peasant Wealth in the 1283 Blackbourne Hundred Lay Subsidy



The distribution of horse types for each quartile is given in Figure 4. Quartile 1 contains the poorest 202 horse-owning peasants. Total taxable wealth in this quartile ranged from individuals who were assessed at 7.5 s. to 25 s. In total, peasants in this quartile owned 217 horses, just over one horse per individual. Wealth in the second quartile ranged from 25 s. to 42 s., and horse ownership was slightly greater, with the 202 peasants owning 266 horses (1.32 horses/individual). A steady increase in the number of horses is apparent for peasants in the third quartile, who owned 308 animals (1.52 horses/individual), with wealth ranging from 42 s. to 67 s. The fourth quartile stands out from the rest in both the scale of wealth of the 204 peasants and the number of horses owned by the wealthiest Blackbourne peasants. While there were modest increases in wealth between the first three groups, the fourth quartile contained a number of significantly wealthier individuals who were assessed as having total moveable wealth ranging from 67 s. to 579 s. Therefore, the wealthiest Blackbourne peasant was assessed as having seventy-seven times the amount of moveable wealth compared with the poorest peasants in the assessment. This greater wealth also brought with it an increased number of horses, with 480 animals between the 204 individuals in the fourth quartile. This works out to 2.35 horses per individual, over twice the number of the first quartile.

Some interesting trends emerge when looking at the distribution of horses in this way. The most striking aspect of this analysis is the different number of mares owned by peasants in the four quartiles. Compared to other types of horses, mares were most numerous in the first quartile (the least wealthy peasants in the assessment) and less plentiful in each successive quartile. Mares accounted for over two-thirds of all horses in the first quartile, but comprised 57 percent in the second quartile, 51 percent for the third and only 39 percent among the wealthiest Blackbourne peasants. The poorest peasants had a tangible preference for mares over other types of horses, but this preference becomes less significant for wealthier peasants.

An opposite trend is apparent for plough-horses (affers and stotts). Returning to Figure 4, plough-horses accounted for fewer than one in five peasant horses in the first quartile, but this figure rises steadily in each wealthier quartile, accounting for 20 percent in the second quartile, 27 percent in the third and 39 percent of all horses owned by the wealthiest peasants in the fourth quartile. This is most likely an indication of the skill premium that plough-horses held over other horse types. Wealthier peasants were likely to have more extensive lands than their poorer neighbors and therefore greater draught needs. These needs were met by an increasingly large investment in more specialized plough horses.

The differing proportions of foals are more difficult to explain. Young horses accounted for 10 percent of peasant animals in the first quartile. The proportion is greater for the second quartile at 16 percent and the wealthiest two quartiles owned a similar proportion of young horses (14 percent for the third quartile and 16 percent for the fourth). With the highest proportion of mares, peasants in the first quartile would have had the greatest potential for breeding horses, yet this group has the lowest proportion young animals listed in the subsidy assessment. If peasants in this quartile were breeding mares at the conservative rate of one foal every three years (assuming again that only half of the mares were fertile), we would expect sixty-nine foals in that quartile.⁵⁷ However, there were far fewer foals (21) enumerated. Sterility may have impacted upon the ability of mares in this group to breed. If the poorest peasants generally owned horses of lower quality, it holds that the sterility of mares may have been greatest as well. Another possibility is the rate at which peasants in the first quartile disposed of excess foals. If we assume that the level of material wealth as

⁵⁷ 139 mares were owned by peasants in the first quartile. If it is assumed that half of these mares were fertile, there would have been seventy viable brood mares ($139/2 = 69.5$, rounded to 70). If it is then assumed that viable mares produced foals every three years, then this would result in an average annual cohort of twenty three foals ($70 \times .33 = 23.1$). Assuming that peasant horse development mirrored the demesne in terms of three years of immaturity before foals graduated to the adult ranks, then the annual cohort is multiplied by three ($23.1 \times 3 = 69.3$) estimate the total number of foals that would have been present among peasants in the quartile.

measured by moveable property was roughly correlated to the amount of land held by individual peasants, then we can make an attendant assumption that the poorest peasants held less land than peasants of the other quartiles (or perhaps had no land at all). Land-poor peasants had less land available to provide space and sustenance for the animals, but, more importantly, less need for horse traction. Given these modest traction requirements, the majority of foals bred by peasants in this quartile could have been sold for cash.

There is further evidence that traction requirements informed peasant decisions about horse ownership. If the lay subsidy data is broken down village-by-village, we can observe remarkable polarization in terms of the types of horses owned by Blackbourne peasants. This is illustrated in Table 2. The table is sorted according to the proportion of mares owned by peasants in each village. Significant here are the first five entries in the table. Collectively, peasants in Wordwell, Honington, Ingham, Fakenham Magna and Culford had an extremely strong preference for owning mares over other types of horse, with female horses accounting for three-quarters or more of all peasant horses in each village. At the opposite end of the spectrum, other villages, like Norton and Ashfield Parva, showed an equally strong preference for plough-horses; male plough animals comprised 84 and 76 percent of peasant horses in these two places, respectively. This polarization implies that female horses, and therefore the vast majority of breeding capacity, were concentrated in specific villages. Peasant-bred horses likely flowed from these villages to other localities and perhaps even to more distant markets.

Is this simply a random variation in the data, or was there something about these particular communities that would have led peasants to own significantly more mares than other types of horse? The answer likely lies in soil types and the area of available heathland. The villis of Culford, Honington, Ingham, Fakenham Magna and Wordwell all lay within the Breckland region of East Anglia, places which were characterized by a small proportion of arable land and vast tracts of low-grade heathland pasture.⁵⁸ Here, the arable land was comprised of very light soil. In contrast, Ashfield and Norton lay on heavier loams at the other end of Blackbourne Hundred, where tracts of heath and pasture were much smaller. These differences in soil type and pasture ground had two significant implications for horse rearing. First, ploughing on the Breckland's light soils would have been less onerous than on the loams, and therefore could be accomplished with mares.⁵⁹

Second, the vast heathlands with extensive common rights to graze horses provided ample and excellent pasture ground to rear horses. Indeed, peasant ownership and grazing of sheep on these heaths was tightly regulated, which would have encouraged the peasantry to focus upon horses.⁶⁰ Using damage presentments in medieval manorial court rolls, which revealed the dominance of horses over any other form of peasant livestock, Mark Bailey speculated that some parishes in the Breckland might have contained a pool of replacement horses for other areas of East Anglia.⁶¹ Our detailed analysis of the Blackbourne material confirms this speculation. It has shown that female horses were not obviously distributed among particular sub-groups within the peasantry, but they were concentrated among villis where soils were lightest and the extent of heathland pastures was greatest. Mares could cope with ploughing the light and easily-tilled soils at the heart of the Breckland and young horses could be reared on the surrounding heaths. The by-product of soil type and available heaths was the ability of these communities to act as horse-breeding hubs.

⁵⁸ Mark Bailey, *A Marginal Economy?*, 35-6.

⁵⁹ I am grateful to Professor Tom Williamson for sharing his ideas on this point. His arguments about the significance of soils in explaining landscape and agrarian development are developed fully in Williamson, *Shaping Medieval Landscapes, Settlement, Society, Environment* (Macclesfield: Windgather Press 2003).

⁶⁰ Bailey, *A Marginal Economy?*, 65-85; Mark Bailey, "Sand into Gold: The Evolution of the Foldcourse System in west Suffolk, 1200-1600" *Agricultural History Review* Vol. 38, (1990), 41-55.

⁶¹ Bailey, *A Marginal Economy?*, 94, 165; *Medieval Suffolk*, 81.

Table 2:
Peasant Horse Distribution in Blackbourne Villages, 1283 (Sorted by Mares as Proportion of Total Peasant Horse Stocks)

Manor	No. of Mares	% of Mares	No. of Foals	% of Foals	No. of Plough- horses	% of Plough- horses	No. of 'Equi'	% of 'Equi'	No. of Cart- horses	% of Cart- horses	Total No. of Horses
Wordwell (n = 25)	25	100.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	25
Honington (n = 40)	33	82.5	7	17.5	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	40
Ingham (n = 27)	22	81.5	5	18.5	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	27
Fakenham Magna (n = 18)	14	77.8	3	16.7	0	0.0	1	5.6	0	0.0	18
Culford (n = 21)	16	76.2	5	23.8	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	21
Thelnetham (n = 48)	36	75.0	1	2.1	11	22.9	0	0.0	0	0.0	48
Langham (n = 36)	26	72.2	0	0.0	10	27.8	0	0.0	0	0.0	36
Trotson (n = 32)	22	68.8	5	15.6	5	15.6	0	0.0	0	0.0	32
Euston (n = 41)	27	65.9	13	31.7	1	2.4	0	0.0	0	0.0	41
Livermere Parva (n = 14)	9	64.3	0	0.0	5	35.7	0	0.0	0	0.0	14
Rickingham (n = 44)	28	63.6	7	15.9	9	20.5	0	0.0	0	0.0	44
Barnham (n = 62)	39	62.9	18	29.0	3	4.8	2	3.2	0	0.0	62
Hopton (n = 70)	44	62.9	13	18.6	13	18.6	0	0.0	0	0.0	70
Sapiston (n = 27)	16	59.3	3	11.1	8	29.6	0	0.0	0	0.0	27
Rushford (n = 12)	7	58.3	2	16.7	0	0.0	3	25.0	0	0.0	12
West Stowe (n = 23)	12	52.2	3	13.0	6	26.1	2	8.7	0	0.0	23

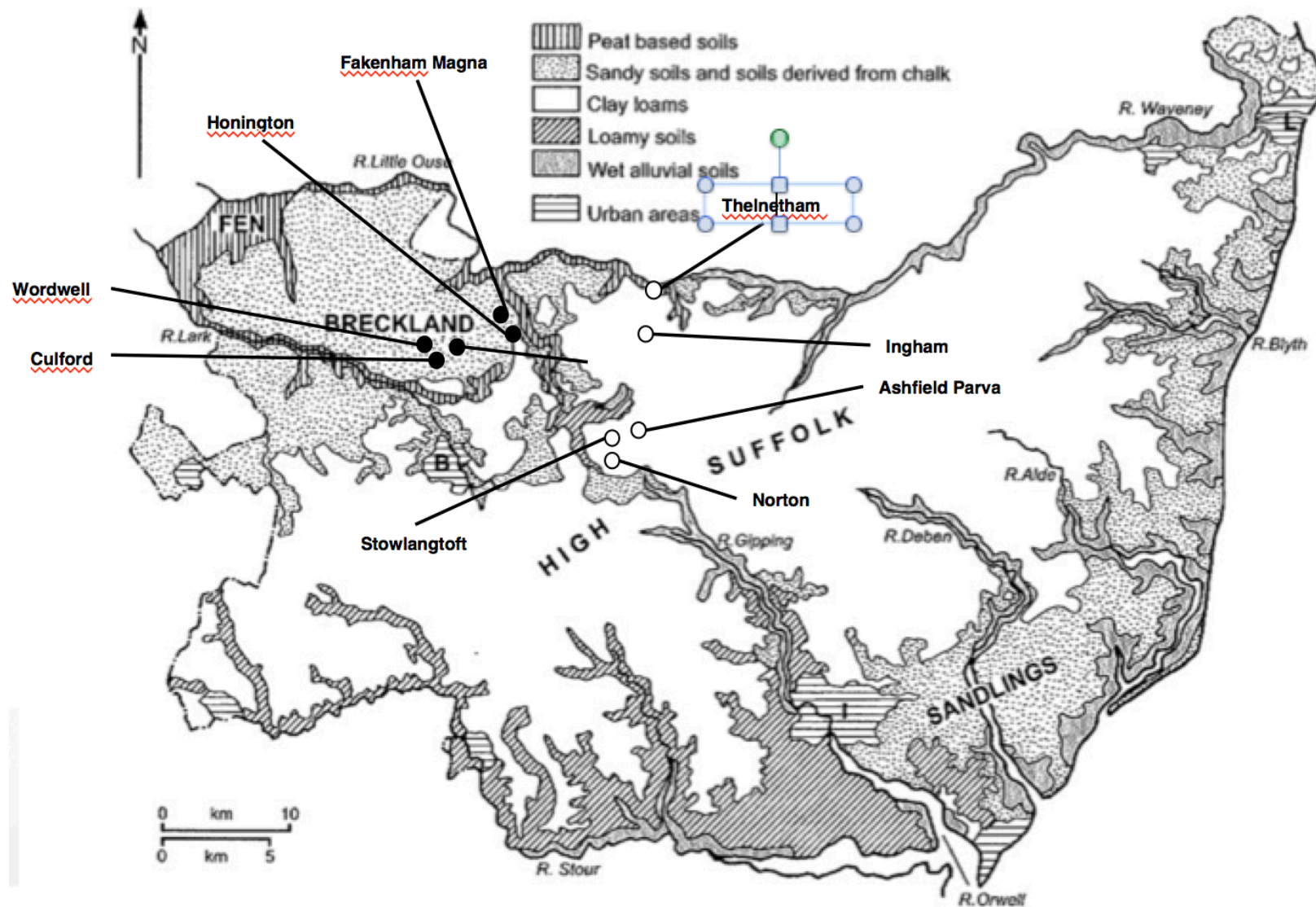
Table 2 (Continued):

Peasant Horse Distribution in Blackbourne Villages, 1283 (Sorted by Mares as Proportion of Total Peasant Horse Stocks)

Manor	No. of Mares	% of Mares	No. of Foals	% of Foals	No. of Plough- horses	% of Plough- horses	No. of 'Equi'	% of 'Equi'	No. of Cart- horses	% of Cart- horses	Total No. of Horses
Bardwell (n = 80)	40	50.0	14	17.5	21	26.3	3	3.8	2	2.5	80
Ixworth (n = 35)	17	48.6	0	0.0	9	25.7	9	25.7	0	0.0	35
Knattishall (n = 35)	16	45.7	19	54.3	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	35
Wattisfield (n = 55)	25	45.5	9	16.4	20	36.4	0	0.0	1	1.8	55
Hunston (n = 22)	9	40.9	2	9.1	11	50.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	22
Elmswell (n = 22)	9	40.9	2	9.1	11	50.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	22
Hinderclay (n = 41)	16	39.0	2	4.9	4	9.8	19	46.3	0	0.0	41
Market Weston (n = 39)	15	38.5	6	15.4	11	28.2	7	17.9	0	0.0	39
Barningham (n = 29)	11	37.9	5	17.2	12	41.4	1	3.4	0	0.0	29
Thorpe by Ixworth (n = 38)	13	34.2	9	23.7	4	10.5	12	31.6	0	0.0	38
Stanton (n = 72)	24	33.3	4	5.6	44	61.1	0	0.0	0	0.0	72
Ashfield Magna (n = 28)	9	32.1	1	3.6	18	64.3	0	0.0	0	0.0	28
Walsham le Willows (n = 93)	29	31.2	11	11.8	26	28.0	24	25.8	3	3.2	93
Ashfield Parva (n = 25)	6	24.0	0	0.0	19	76.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	25
Hepworth (n = 63)	15	23.8	9	14.3	34	54.0	4	6.3	1	1.6	63
Stowlangtowft (n = 28)	4	14.3	2	7.1	20	71.4	1	3.6	1	3.6	28
Norton (n = 31)	4	12.9	1	3.2	26	83.9	0	0.0	0	0.0	31

Source: *A Suffolk Hundred in the Year 1283*, Ed. Edgar Powell (Cambridge, 1910).

Map 1: Distribution of Blackbourne manors with high (black) and low (white) proportions of female horses⁶²



⁶² Base Map: Mark Bailey, *Medieval Suffolk* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2007), 4.

5: Conclusion

The systemic and quantitative analysis of horse rearing in demesne accounts points, largely through negative evidence, to the peasantry as the major source of horses in medieval England. What little anecdotal evidence can be gleaned from the same sources, and from Jacques de Vitry, all reinforces this observation. Unfortunately it is impossible to test this idea directly using sources from peasant farms, because they do not exist. Consequently, the historian is forced to subsist on scraps of anecdotal evidence from accounts and other sources. The fullest and most robust source of information about peasant livestock is provided in local assessments of peasant wealth drawn up for the purposes of pre-1334 lay subsidies. This chapter has selected the best surviving example of such material, the 1283 return for Blackbourne Hundred, and subjected it to detailed and novel statistical analysis.

This exercise has suggested that, as a group, the peasantry had the capacity for creating horse surpluses that could have supplied animals to a local market which was likely patronized by both demesnes and other peasants alike. The potential for horse breeding, as indicated by ownership of female horses and foals, was not concentrated in the upper echelons of the peasantry, but was rather spread throughout the ranks of individuals. Although the gender bias in peasant horse ownership indicates greater rearing *potential* in this sector than in the demesne sector, there is no direct indication of large or even medium-scale horse breeding in this sample. Of course, the sample may be atypical of peasant farms in general, or may not even properly represent the scale of peasant rearing in this area. But, taking the evidence on face value, it would indicate that any horse breeding and rearing on peasant farms was not a strong specialism, but it was an activity which was an adjunct to a regime of mixed farming, that is, in concert with the cultivation of crops.

In the pre Black Death period, most peasant holdings in England were relatively small, perhaps less than fifteen acres on average.⁶³ In East Anglia, where our lay subsidy sample is derived, the average peasant holding was even smaller, less than five acres in size.⁶⁴ The small size of these holdings limited the ability of peasants to accumulate the significant capital investment required for specialization in horse breeding, as did the limited availability and relatively high cost of suitable grazing land.⁶⁵ However, this did not deter *all* breeding activity. While breeding horses on a large or even medium scale was a capital-intensive endeavour, the capital investment required to own one or two horses was relatively low. The decision to invest in horses was chiefly due to productivity gains that the animals provided as draught animals, but the distribution of mares and foals suggests that breeding capacity was a secondary factor in peasant horse ownership, especially on more modest holdings. Therefore, the breeding of horses does not seem to have been a specialist endeavor, but rather an ancillary activity, with households engaging in horse breeding as a way to maintain their own stocks, but also to supplement family income through the sale of surplus animals. The scale of such activity in England as a whole remains murky. As an outer marker, peasant horse breeding might be seen as similar to brewing and spinning, in terms of widespread, but supplemental economic activities

⁶³ See Kominsky, *Studies in the Agrarian History of England in the Thirtieth Century*, 216, 223; Postan, *Medieval Economy and Society*, 143-5.

⁶⁴ B.M.S. Campbell, "Population Change and the Genesis of Commonfields on a Norfolk Manor" *Economic History Review*, Vol. 33, No.2,(1980): 177; Edward Miller and John Hatcher, *Medieval England: Rural Society and Economic Change 1086-1348* (London: Longman, 1978), 144.

⁶⁵ For example, the Suffolk manor of Hundon, where pasture commanded a price of 1s. 6d. per acre and arable only 4d. M.M. Postan, *The Medieval Economy and Society: An Economic History of Britain 1100-1500* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 60. See also Bailey, *Medieval Suffolk*, 84-6.

defined by low capital requirements and modest profits.⁶⁶ With the small average size of holdings, most peasant farms would not have the need or the means to employ more than one or two horses, so any extra animals were likely to have been sold on to neighbours.

⁶⁶ Bennett describes the medieval ale industry as “a small-scale, low-investment, low-profit, low-skilled industry”. Judith M. Bennett, *Ale, Beer, and Brewsters in England: Women’s Work in a Changing World: 1300-1600* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 34.