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Lords of the manor: feudal law and its impact on rural village life

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Dr Spike Gibbs is an LSE Fellow in the Department of Economic History at LSE. His research interests are primarily in the economic and social history of late medieval and early modern England (c 1300-1600), focusing on rural communities and how villagers interacted with seigniorial lords, the crown and each other.

The narrative of the powerful elites lording it over powerless workers has endured for centuries, but research into the manor court system of the medieval and early modern period in England supports new interpretations. The relationship between lords and their tenants may not be as exploitative as previously believed, argues **Spike Gibbs**.

Medieval England is often characterised in books or film as one of extremes, where serfs toil the land while lords greedily profit from their labour. But examination of the records of manor courts has revealed a much more nuanced relationship between local rulers and those living on their land.

Land, village life and petty crime: the workings of the medieval legal system

Manor court records are a good mirror into the realities of life in rural England, believes Dr Spike Gibbs. He has been examining the manor court system in England from the 1300s to the 17th century. Found in many villages across the country, these small and very local institutions of government oversaw day-to-day issues such as ensuring access to resources, dealing with petty criminality such as assaults, and overseeing land transfers.

"These are all important issues to small village communities," says Dr Gibbs. "But these manor courts also imposed the power of feudal lords in society. If you were a servile person you had to pay if you got married by working on your lord's land for example. And so, previous Marxist theory has been that the system was primarily a tool to enable lords to impose their will on tenants, often in an exploitative way."



Instead of this conflict model between lords and tenants, I found that people were quite happy to collaborate with their lords. ”

It is this relationship that has been blamed for the crisis in the economy before the Black Death, although Dr Gibbs argues this link is not born out in the records. He explains: "One popular theory has been that the lords and tenants of medieval and early modern English villages were really at each other's throats - or as much as a tenant could be at a lord's throat given the power imbalance. So lords were powerful and tenants servile, and peasants were therefore often forced to carry out work for the owners of their land.

"Some even thought that lords, by being so extractive, caused the system to collapse by demanding more and more from their tenants, who couldn't even produce enough to support their families and resow the crops, and that this eventually this caused an economic crisis. But actually, the evidence is showing that the system was a lot more collaborative than that."

Where does the power lie?

Although today's court system bears no resemblance to that of medieval times, the system remained a powerful force in rural England for centuries, partially because of their connections to the everyday lives of those they oversaw. "Manor courts remained important from the 1300s to the 17th century, and that's partly because they were very flexible" Dr Gibbs explains. "They could be used by local communities to fulfil a large array of functions and as a result, the people considered them useful. So they saw value in the courts as a community rather than something that was simply imposed on them by their feudal lords.

"Instead of this conflict model between lords and tenants that has been argued in the past, with tenants trying to get out of doing what the lord wants them to do, I found that actually these people were quite happy to collaborate with their lords."

While Dr Gibbs is keen to stress that this was by no means an easy life for tenants, his research has found that the lords were savvy enough to understand that a collaborative relationship could benefit them both.

"On a day-to-day basis," he says, "the lords were aware that they wanted productive tenants, and that they would benefit from tenants who could pay their rents and who were economically viable. Healthy villages helped them to maintain their power. I think particularly they were willing to collaborate with their elite tenants a lot to make the system work."



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Lost animals and a land with no fences

One illustration of the ways that lords and tenants were able to work with the court system to mutual benefit is in the handling of stray animals, a problem at the time as fields were open with no fences. "If your horse got free it could do a lot of

damage in quite a short amount of time, which could be pretty devastating,” Dr Gibbs says.

To help manage this problem, the courts developed a system that provided potential benefit to both the lords and the peasants on their land. Anyone who found a stray animal was required to report it to the lord’s court. The lord would look after that animal for a year and a day, and if the owner had not collected it during that period, it would be claimed by the lord. In reality, however, they would often sell it to the person who found the animal a year earlier.

“This gave the owner time to track down their animal, but it also gave an incentive for people to hand stray animals in. The lord could gain if the animal was not reclaimed in the time period” says Dr Gibbs.

While it might appear that the lords could easily profit from such a system, Dr Gibbs, in collaboration with his colleague Dr Jordan Claridge, argues that this is not necessarily the case. “What we’ve shown is that it looks like the amount of money that was needed for the costs of keeping the animal for a year and a day actually outstripped its value,” he says. “So the lords are actually maintaining this hugely important system. Giving people the time to collect their property would have been hugely valuable to the farmers who had lost animals. It also protected farmland. By taking the animal in, the lord has stopped it from wandering around and potentially destroying more fields and crops.”

The evolution of systems such as this, where benefit was created for the wider community and not simply those with power, is one indication that the court system was not simply an instrument for control as previously believed, argues Dr Gibbs. “Tenants could see value in these institutions, and that means that their relationship with the lord is as much collaborative as it is conflict based.” ■

Dr Spike Gibbs was speaking to
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