

Shillington (Bedfordshire) 1086-1349

'The Abbot (of St Benedict's of Ramsey) also holds Sethlindone. It answers for 10 hides. Land for 14 ploughs. In lordship 2 hides. 2 ploughs there. 27 villagers have 12 ploughs. 5 smallholders and 4 slaves. 1 broken mill which pays nothing; meadow for 6 ploughs; woodland 100 pigs. The value is £12 and always was as much'.¹

Ramsey Abbey had held Shillington since 1034 when it was bestowed by Aethelric, bishop of Dorchester, a former student at the abbey. It remained in the abbey's hands until the dissolution of the monasteries in Henry VIII's reign and, with the neighbouring village of Pegsdon with which it is sometimes associated in the abbey's records, Shillington was the most southern of the abbey's manors.

In 1086 both Shillington and Pegsdon had 10 hides with land for 14 ploughs and had been worth £12. There were, however, significant differences between them. Pegsdon was the more populous of the two: 49 villagers are listed in the Domesday Book compared with Shillington's 36 and it boasted 2 mills worth 27s 8d where as Shillington's was broken and worthless. However Pegsdon's value had declined to £10 by 1086 whereas Shillington remained at £12, an early indication of Pegsdon's lessening fortunes and Shillington's growing prosperity. By 1330 it was to be among the wealthiest of Ramsey Abbey's manors. By 1140, the combined worth of Shillington and Pegsdon was £40; by 1201, £80.² The clue as to why Shillington's value grew may lie in the extensive meadows, double the size of Pegsdon's and the greater expanse of woodland (100 as compared with 60 pigs). The potential for commercial exploitation was there.

Raftis' study of manorial extents³ shows that the manors nearest Ramsey Abbey were farmed to produce food in grain and livestock for direct use by the monastic community whereas those farther afield were more directly under the abbot's control as capital investment to boost the abbey's wealth and standing as one of the most prominent Benedictine establishments in England. The result for Shillington among these manors was an early definition and increasing delineation of the services the villagers owed and the exploitation of the manor for financial return.

¹ John Morris (ed.), *Domesday Book: Bedfordshire*

² J. Ambrose Raftis, *The Estates of Ramsey Abbey*, p.56

³ Raftis, *Ramsey Abbey*, pp.90ff

By the end of the thirteenth century, service included, for example, ploughing $\frac{1}{2}$ acre each week by those who owned ploughs except for a week at Easter and Pentecost, 13-15 days at Christmas and during harvest in August and September. Even if the villein was sick, he was expected to see the service was preformed. At harvest time, of course, demesne land was given priority. At most times of year, a working day for the lord abbot was defined as from 6 a.m. to 3 p.m. (Nones), the villager then being free to do his own work. At harvest time, however, this was over-ridden and the villager worked on; in compensation being given an evening meal of bread and meat and cheese.

At other times of year, the work to be done was determined by the reeve but the unit of work was carefully defined. For example if ditching was to be done, a work was the depth of one spade for $2\frac{1}{2}$ perches or if threshing, a work was 24 sheaves of wheat or 30 of barley.⁴ However, the move to define a [redacted] 'work' but also the working day meant there could be a discrepancy between the two. This, therefore, came to be covered in Shillington's regulations. 'How often so ever he will have mad his normal work, if, by chance, it is completed within a working day, he may be allocated for one similar work.'⁵ On the other hand, if, at the end of a working day, harrowing an area was not quite completed, the villein could be paid for completing the task.

This mention of payment indicates that as the thirteenth century progressed, one motivation for the delineation of a 'work' was the introduction of payment in lieu of service, either by the abbot to ensure the demesne was farmed more efficiently or by the villeins who could afforded to pay rather than give service. By the middle of the century, 35 virgates in Shillington were held at rent, a further 32 virgates held for 3 day's service a week.⁶ One further example of the exact delineation of services is in the requirement to carry goods to London, St Albans or Cambridge each month. A load was defined as half a quarter of corn or one pig or 2 sheep carcasses or a quarter of an ox.⁷ Clearly the carts were small! Instead, the villein could pay $7\frac{1}{2}$ d at Martinmas, a 'seem' of oats and 4 hens.⁸

Conversion from services to rents was probably in the interests of both the abbot and the wealthy villeins but created uncertainty for the cottars who possessed no land but the croft around their house. Definition of services and the length of the working day was presumably

⁴ C.E. Hanscomb, *Common Blood*, p.49

⁵ Raftis, *Ramsey Abbey*, p.95n

⁶ Joyce Godber, *History of Bedfordshire*, p.34

⁷ Hanscomb, *Common Blood*, p.49

⁸ Godber, *Bedfordshire*, p.35

achieved by some bargaining between the steward and leading villeins of a manor with consequent minor variation from manor to manor. Negotiation would be more likely to achieve the good will important to effective working: a resentful villein could subvert the intention behind the regulation by careless workmanship, provision of less good seed and other evasions. Conversion to rent, therefore, was welcomed: the villein who could afford rent won the freedom to run his own affairs within the constraints of the 2- or 3-field system, the abbot the wherewithal to employ those who would work well, as well as profit to be spent in other directions. For the cottar, however, the amount of work available would vary from year to year, poor harvests, for example, meaning less work, to say nothing of the consequent rise in prices that he could ill afford to pay. The fierce competition for work by the end of the thirteenth century meant the cottar, earning 2s to 5s a year together with 6½ bushels of less of corn, had bare sufficiency for survival.⁹ The 1255 inquisition shows the sharp divisions which had already developed in Shillington. There were 9 free tenants holding from a few acres to 2 hides paying rent to the abbey. Half the villeins held at least one virgate (30 acres) for which they, too, paid rent in place of services. In contrast a third of the villagers were cottars with only their small croft, some of who earned money through a craft like smith or specialised agricultural role like the shepherd but most of whom were dependent on seasonal labour.¹⁰

Besides rents, the principal source of revenue for the abbot appears to have been Shillington's sheep. The quantity and quality was less than on the fenland manors but, nevertheless Shillington returned 272 fleeces in 1361 with a further 131 from Pegsdon.¹¹ Although there are still some sheep in the area, a local farmer expressed surprise at the size of the flocks, considerably more than today.

A charter survives from 1251 for free warren.¹² No further evidence exists but if the abbot did establish a warren, it could have been another useful source of revenue. Rabbits were an expensive delicacy in the Middle Ages.

The land in the area was sufficiently productive for the abbot to acquire more when the opportunity offered. Abbot Hugh de Sulgrave (1255-68) bought 3 properties in Shillington, worth 55s as well as the manor of Gravenhurst, already served by a chaplain from All Saints,

⁹ Christopher Dyer, *Standards of Living in the later Middle Ages*, p.133

¹⁰ Godber, *Bedfordshire*, pp.88-90

¹¹ Raftis, *Ramsey Abbey*, p.???

¹² *Victoria County History of Bedfordshire*, p.294

Shillington. His successor, Abbot William, bought a further 4 virgates, worth £4. [reference?]

Raftis comments, 'As the dependence upon commutation of services and the parcelling of the demesne became a more regular feature from the thirteenth century, solvency in the demesne economy turned more and more upon the prosperity of the village community.'¹³ Detailed tax returns exist for both 1297 and 1301 so that it is possible to compare the amount of surplus crops and livestock, declared for tax purposes, the prices at which they are assessed and the income of individuals, which they had at their disposal once basic needs were met. The 1301 return is more precise in its details than 1297. For example, in 1297 every tax payer is shown as having a cow worth 5s whereas in 1301 not everyone has a cow, but cows, heifers, bullocks, calves at varying prices are particularised. Similarly, in 1297 the poorest taxpayers are shown as 'in all goods 9s' whereas even the poorest in 1301 have their goods detailed. In spite of these differences, comparisons are possible. There are also tax returns for 1309 and 1332 which lack the earlier detail but do give names and the amount paid from which income can be calculated.¹⁴

The prices quoted in 1297 and 1301 show no variation for livestock. Cows are worth 5s, pigs 2s and sheep 1s. Wheat also retained its value at 3s 4d a quarter but other cereals declined in value. Drage, a mixture of oats and barley still grown in the area till the middle of the twentieth century, dropped from 2s 6d a quarter in 1297 to 2s in 1301. Berecorn (a form of barley) declined even more steeply from 3s to 2s a quarter. Beans similarly declined in value from 3s a quarter in 1297 to 16d in 1301. This change in values makes the rise in income all the more striking as the sample from the returns shows. (See Appendix 1.)

What is striking about the returns is the considerable rise in prosperity between 1297 and 1301. In the latter there is a greater variety of stock recorded – it is not simply that cattle are particularised, but pigs and piglets are more frequently recorded, to say nothing of John atte Green's three geese and William atte Netherend's three beehives. However, there does not appear to be any appreciable increase overall. It is in the cereal and bean crops that the advance is notable. In 1301 the amount of wheat trebled from that grown in 1297. Also, in 1297 an individual is shown as having either some surplus drage or surplus oats with some berecorn to spare. By 1301, only 3 are shown with surplus oats but nearly everyone has

¹³ Raftis, *Ramsey Abbey*, p.301

¹⁴ A.T Gaydon (ed.), *Taxation of 1297*, Bedfordshire Historical Record Society, volume 39, 1297 tax details pp.58-9, 1301, pp.109-10; 'Two Bedfordshire Subsidies 1309 and 1332' in *Suffolk Green Books*, number 18.

surplus drage and 9 have berecorn as well. Overall, drage, oats and berecorn have also trebled in quantity. Even though cereals had dropped in price in 1301, the vastly increased quantity was sufficient to give a significant rise in income. There are 2 other differences worth noticing: in 1297 only 4 villagers are recorded with surplus peas or beans whereas in 1301, two thirds of the tax payers have surplus beans. Forage and hay are not recorded in 1297 but in 1301 everyone had some surplus varying in value between 3d and 4s. Even if there was a particularly good harvest in 1301 (and the drop in prices suggests this may be the case) trebling the surplus grain suggests more was afoot. Hallam¹⁵ states that the two field system was the norm in Bedfordshire before 1300, but that some manors adopted the three field system after that date. Perhaps Shillington was an early pioneer in the area and, in adopting the three field system, more land was brought into cultivation.

The 1309 return shows a further significant increase in income. This time details are lacking so it is not possible to know whether this represents a further increase in land brought into cultivation, but as 1309 was not a notable inflationary period and the increase is greater than a good harvest would suggest, it is quite possible that a further expansion of farming occurred. 1332 shows a drop in income from the high of 1309 but still greater than 1301. However, Shillington fared during the bad harvests 1315-22, the village still showed relative prosperity in 1332.

The tax returns also show how individuals fared and graphically illustrate the wide differences between them. In each return Richard de la Bere (Norman stock?) is much wealthier than anyone else, with at least double the income of his nearest 'competitor'. In 1309 he was taxed on 2 affers, 4 bullocks, 6 piglets, 8 quarters of wheat, 10 of drage and 3 of beans. His surplus hay was worth 4s and he had a copper pot worth 3s 4d. Nearest to him in income is Simon atte Well who has more livestock to spare: 2 affers, 2 young bullocks, 1 cow, 1 calf, 2 pigs and 6 sheep. However he has much less cereal with only 2 quarters of wheat and 4 of drage and a mere 2 bushels of berecorn and a quarter of beans. By 1309, his successor William atte Well has increased the income by less than 6s, a small increase compared with most. For example, William atte Netherend was appreciably poorer than Simon in 1301 but had well surpassed [him] by 1309. His return in 1301 shows much less stock to spare: 3 cows, 1 calf and 3 hives of bees but he had 4 quarters of wheat and 3 of drage and 15d of forage. Comparison of these tax payers at an approximately similar level of income show how variable fortunes can be.

¹⁵ H. E. Hallam, *Rural England 1066-1348*, p.???

All such returns, though, indicate that it is cereal crops which are the basis of a more comfortable living. This is particularly clear when the returns of the poorest are examined. John Herebord had an income of 7s 6d in 1301 based on a 5s cow, half a quarter of wheat and 10d worth of forage. It would only take a poor harvest to make him dependent on working for others. William Calewe's income was 3s 9d. He had a young bullock worth 2s, 2 bushels of wheat, half a quarter of beans and 3d worth of forage. These men were worlds away from Richard de la Bere in the same manor and yet better off than the famuli whom Dyer calculated earned between 2s and 5s a year at the end of the thirteenth century.¹⁶

The tax returns show a prosperous village, Ramsey Abbey's policy of defining services and commuting them for rent where possible had lined not only the pockets of the abbey but of a substantial number of villagers as well. On their continuing prosperity depended the well being of the poorest [*for whilst prosperity continued for the former they could afford to employ the latter as wage-labourers.*]

¹⁶ Dyer, *Standards of Living*, p.133

Appendix 1
Comparison of incomes

Villager	1297	1301	1309	1332
Richard de la Bere	58s 6d	90s*	200s	105s
Andrew atte Hull (1309 Andrea atte Hull)	11s 8d	43s 8d	68s 9d	[not listed]
John, son of Edith	15s 4d	28s 9d	72s	[not listed]
Thomas le Rede	15s 6d	37s 6d	45s 4d	[not listed]
Simon atte Well (1309 William atte Well) (1332 Edith atte Well)	20s	52 s 6d	58s 4d	35s
John atte Green	12s 7d	43s 3½d	64s 6d	27s 6d
William atte Netherend	11s 9d	38s 1½d	68s 9d	[not listed]
John Lewyne (1309 Walter Lewyne) (1332 Roger Lewyne)	15s 1d	18s 9d	27s 7d	55s
Roger Wyttefelawe	17s 9d	41s 3d	88s 6d	[not listed]
Robert Carter	9s	18s 9d	[not listed]	30s
William Faber (Smith)	12s 2d	[not listed]	35s 4d	17s 5d
Total village income				

* values in £ converted to shillings to facilitate comparison.

Sources:

A.T Gaydon (ed.), *Taxation of 1297*, Bedfordshire Historical Record Society, volume 39:
1297 tax details pp.58-9; 1301 details, pp.109-10.

'Two Bedfordshire Subsidies 1309 and 1332' in *Suffolk Green Books*, number 18.

The number of names in 1297 is thirty two, of which 14 names can be traced in three or four of the returns with a further 8 identified in 1297 appearing in 1309, though not in 1301.

The sample is representative of the whole.

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