

The Rural Economy of Medieval Holderness

By D. J. SIDDLE

THE student of the medieval landscape is often confronted by apparently conflicting evidence. This fact is nowhere better illustrated than in the plain of Holderness, one of England's smallest and most distinctive regions. The chronicler of the Cistercian monastery of Meaux (in the Hull valley), recording the partition of lands which followed the Norman conquest, noted that the new earle of Holderness inherited a land; "... which was exceedingly barren and infertile at this time, so that it produced nothing but oats."¹ In his recent study of the Domesday material, Maxwell summarizes the Holderness returns in this way, "... in spite of its marshy nature, Holderness was the most prosperous part of the East Riding in the eleventh century."² One must admit at the outset that neither statement could ever be taken as incontestable. The Meaux Chronicle was compiled two hundred years after the Norman conquest. The analysis of Domesday documents in the Cambridge series of Domesday Geographies is designed to present irregular and uneven information as meaningfully as possible in the form of maps. Summaries of the significance of these data in terms of the medieval rural landscape are at best, tentative. Nevertheless, an examination of evidence in the light of this contradiction does suggest a plausible explanation of how both statements could be interpreted as carrying some measure of truth. It is hoped thereby to cast some light on the nature of the Holderness rural economy during the medieval period.

The plain of Holderness is the triangular peninsula which forms the south-eastern extremity of Yorkshire. The region is bounded to the west and north by the dip slopes of the Yorkshire Wolds, and to the south and east by the Humber estuary and the North Sea. In the case of Holderness, the use of the word plain is deceptive. Within the limits of its subdued relief, the region contains considerable topographical variety. In the east are a series of arcuate moraines, extending from north-east to south-east, representing various stages in the glacial retreat. They often rise to 25 ft, but are rarely above 50 ft. Much dissected by post-glacial stream erosion, these areas of boulder clay display little continuity, especially in south Holderness. Between the boulder clay hillocks are irregular kettleholes and depressions, outwash fans, and other smaller sand and gravel deposits. To the south of this area of glacial till are the gradually accumulating silt lands of the Humber shore. Separating the area from the flanks of the Wolds to the west, is the broad, flat, flood plain of the river Hull.

Today there is little to distinguish Holderness from most other areas of undulating glacial till in the English lowlands. During the medieval period, however, it is likely that a surprisingly large proportion of the region was either permanently, or seasonally, inundated. Apart from the physical evidence of lacustrine and marshland deposits recorded on geological drift maps, a convincing body of toponymic and historical evidence has been collected to substantiate this view by Dr June

¹ "Quae valde sterilis et infructuosa erat eo tempore nec gignebat nisi avenam."—*Chronica Monasterii de Melsa*, in *Rerum Britannicarum Medii Aevi Scriptores*, ed. A. E. Bond, I, 1890, p. 90. R. H. Smith possibly follows the same source when referring to Holderness as "practically an undrained swamp" at this time.—*Victoria County History of Yorkshire*, II, 1912, p. 74.

² H. C. Darby and I. S. Maxwell, *The Domesday Geography of Northern England*, 1962, pp. 203, 217, 230.

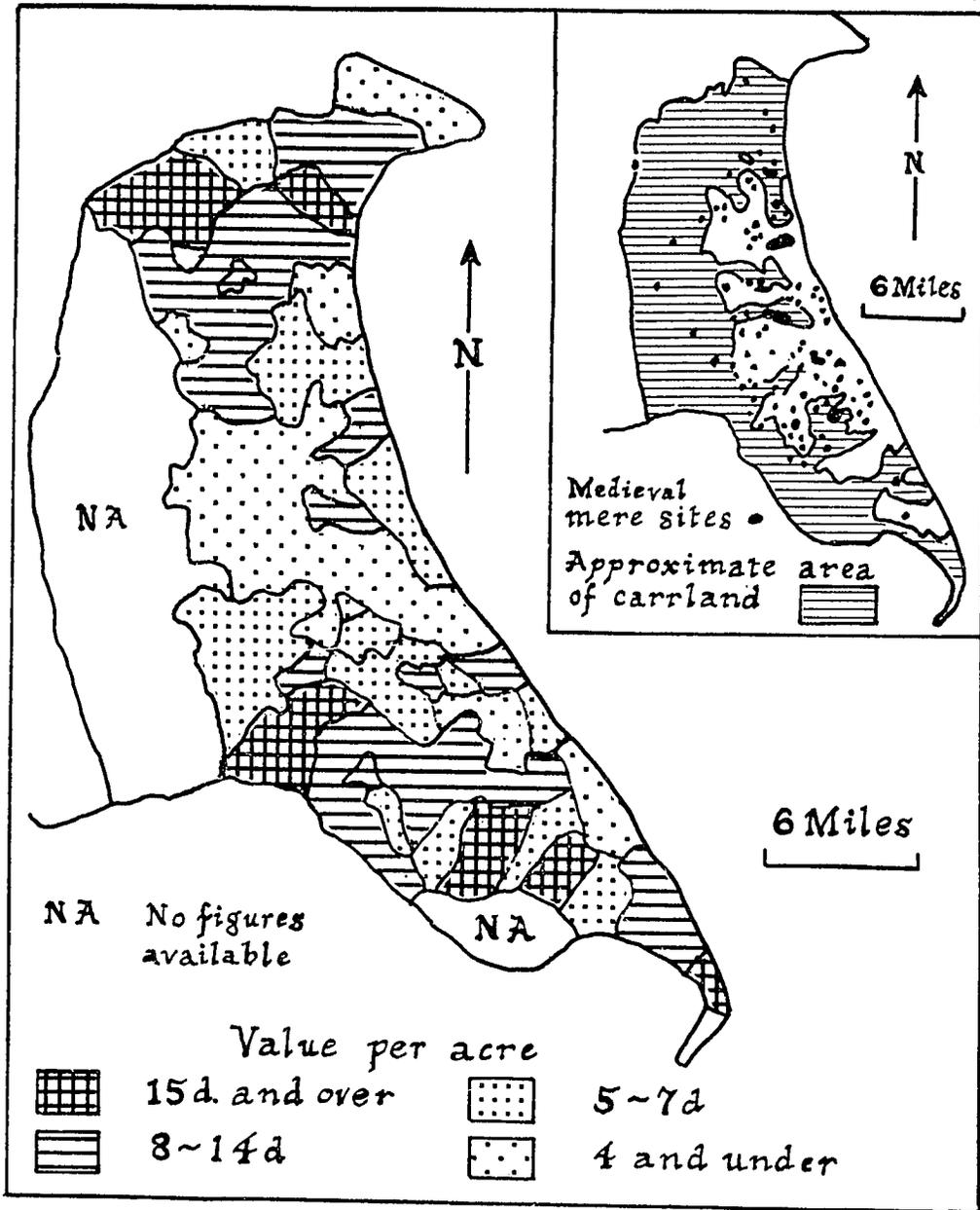


FIG. I

Sheppard.¹ It seems that approximately two-thirds of the region were affected in this way (Fig. I).

A landscape dominated by aqueous tracts

and cold, wet boulder clays would seem to justify the depressing evaluation made of the area in the Meaux Chronicle. Upon what bases, then, does Maxwell come to such a

¹ J. Sheppard, *The Draining of the Yorkshire marshlands*, London University Ph.D. thesis, 1956; 'The Mediaeval Meres of Holderness', *Trans. and Papers Institute of British Geographers*, xxiii, 1957, pp. 75-85.

different conclusion? Two features would appear to emerge from the Domesday evidence for Holderness: the relatively large number of plough-teams per square mile, and the comparatively high density of population. In both these aspects, Holderness—and particularly the southern two-thirds of the region—stands out clearly from most other areas of Yorkshire. It seems, however, a little misleading to deduce that the area was relatively prosperous upon the basis of such information, as it stands.

First, one must bear in mind the strictly relative nature of such comparisons. Domesday population densities in southern Holderness, where they were at their highest (3–6 persons per square mile), were only higher than most other areas in the East Riding. They were unremarkable when compared with other areas in northern England (e.g. between 8 and 13·8 persons per square mile in east Nottinghamshire). This is also true of the plough-team density of the area (1·0 per square mile in south Holderness, compared with 4·5 and above in east Nottinghamshire).¹ It is also important to remember that two-thirds of Holderness, where the 'high' densities occur, apparently escaped Norman wasting almost entirely.² They would therefore stand out from the rest of the East Riding which was fairly severely affected in this way.

Further evidence makes it difficult to believe that cropland provided much of a basis for prosperity, even of a 'relative' nature. Recent agricultural research would suggest

that the heavy undrained clays which comprised the bulk of potential arable land at this time, and throughout the medieval period, could scarcely have given reasonable yields of many crops other than oats.³ Historical evidence supports this view. Gray has pointed out that the more regular fallowing necessary on infertile soils was more suited to the two-field than the three-field system of cultivation.⁴ Harris has shown from his detailed study of open-field structures in Yorkshire, that of the forty-four parishes of Holderness, for which records survive, as many as thirty-six had a two-field system.⁵ On the neighbouring free-draining Wolds, over half were three-field villages. A drainage plea for Brandesburton in the time of Edward III furnishes further indication that poor drainage of retentive soils restricted Holderness villages to a less intensive two-field system. The award for drainage was encouraged because: "... one of the two fields of the township is lying idle in each year, and no profit ensuing therefrom."⁶

With the cold clays yielding generally poor returns, and a large proportion of the region made useless for agriculture by inundation, it appears that any prosperity which the region enjoyed did not depend on its arable wealth. Indeed, it is probable that in the attempt to create more cropland, practically all of the more accessible woodland had been cleared by the Middle Ages.⁷ So much so that the region was soon very short of timber. Remaining woodland became closely guarded⁸ and there are many records of charges of "break-

¹ H. C. Darby and I. S. Maxwell, *op. cit.*, pp. 189, 196, 252, 433.

² *Victoria County History of Yorkshire*, II, 1912, pp. 195 *et seq.* Only five vills were 'wasted': Rise, Brandesburton, Hilston, Owstwick, and Southcoates. For further comparison with other areas in northern England, see H. C. Darby and I. S. Maxwell, *op. cit.*, pp. 214, 445, 447, 449.

³ J. A. G. Watson and Wattie. J. West, *Agriculture; the Science and Practice of British Farming*, 1956, pp. 66–77; E. J. and E. W. Russell, *Soil Conditions and Plant Growth*, 1963, pp. 410–13.

⁴ H. L. Gray, *English Field Systems*, Cambridge, Mass., 1915, p. 73.

⁵ A. Harris, *Open Fields in the East Riding of Yorkshire*, East Yorkshire Local History Society, no. 4, 1961, p. 5.

⁶ Public Record Office, Brandesburton Papers. See also, *Yorks. Archaeolog. Soc. Rec. Ser.*, XII, p. 80.

⁷ H. C. Darby and I. S. Maxwell, *op. cit.*, p. 230.

⁸ In 1235–49, permission was sought to widen the moat surrounding the wood at Routh.—*Chronica Monasterii de Melsa*, *op. cit.*, II, p. 37. Wood was obviously in great demand. Records of the sale of faggots from this wood are frequent in the Meaux Chronicle.—*Ibid.*, I, p. 48; II, pp. 106, 110, 151, 245.

ing and entering a close and taking timber," often worth as much as £20.¹

If this prosperity was not based on arable farming, it seems reasonable to deduce that it was the marshland and lakes which provided the basis of the economy. It seems indeed that Holderness, like other better known areas of marshland in lowland England, depended to a considerable extent on these products.

The most obvious uses of the pure tracts of water were for fishing and fowling. The Domesday survey, however, mentions only five fisheries in Holderness, all in the Hull valley. It is probable that the record was remiss in this respect, for later medieval inquisitions dwell on the value of the fisheries of the region.² The following extracts from a fourteenth-century inquisition of the estates of the Lord of Holderness give some idea of the value of this activity in the region as a whole: "The take of eels from skipse and Fitbowker are worth 105s. . . . Sutton mere has a take of 4,000 eels . . . there are four meres and a half (in the estate) with fishery throughout the whole and also fishery in a lake called Langwath."³

The importance of fishing in the Middle Ages may be measured by its continued significance even when silting and drainage drastically diminished the area of water at the end of the period. Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century bequests frequently list "carr boats, fishing gear, and fowling nets."⁴ Even during the major drainage activities in the eigh-

teenth century, the word "filling" occurs frequently in contemporary records, denoting an area over which nets could still be drawn.⁵ Parish registers in Sutton and Leven, on the eastern margins of the Hull valley, reveal that people were listing their occupations as "fishermen" as late as 1830, and Blashill records that fishing feasts survived in Holderness into the nineteenth century.⁶

Fowling must have played an equally important part in the early economy of the region. Holderness lies on one of the main bird migration routes, especially of water birds, and was famous as a breeding ground for many types of water fowl.⁷ Many early charters include the rights of fowling with those of fishing. Even as late as 1790 when several of the meres had been filled in or drained it was possible to take as many as 400 ducks a day on the larger fens.⁸ The most interesting of the early references to this activity is found in the Humberstone Report of 1570, recording the lands in Holderness belonging to the House of Northumberland. "To the said manor of Leconfield belongeth a grate fen . . . there the Earle hath a grate mark of swannes and very much wild fowl. And very profitable fishing which the Earle has always reserved for the use and commoditie of his house, and has appointed four keepers as well of fowl as of fish. . . ."⁹

There is little doubt that turbarry also played an important part in the medieval economy especially with the growing shortage of timber

¹ *Yorks. Archaeolog. Soc. Rec. Ser.*, LXXXI, pp. 43, 50; xvii, pp. 113, 134, 153, 158, 164, 165.

² R. Lennard, *Rural England, 1086-1132*, 1959, p. 248, suggests that this is because only fishing "machinery" was recorded in the Domesday Book.

³ *Yorks. Archaeolog. Soc. Rec. Ser.*, xii, p. 83. See also pp. 6, 65, 78, 81, 82, 84. *Chronica Monasterii de Melsa*, I, p. 288. Useful material is also found in R. Denholme-Young, 'The Yorkshire Estates of Isabella de Fortibus', *Yorks. Archaeolog. Jnl*, xxxi, p. 389. This lady owned a third of Holderness in the mid-thirteenth century and sufficient water to employ as many water bailiffs as land bailiffs. Fish was sufficiently plentiful to distribute surpluses to the monasteries.

⁴ Borthwick Institute of Historical Research, York, Inventories of Wills, Misc. Bundles, 1690-1720.

⁵ *Yorks. Archaeolog. Soc. Rec. Ser.*, LXII, p. 58; A. Harris, *The Rural Landscape of the East Riding of Yorkshire*, 1961, p. 37.

⁶ Parish Records for Sutton, Leven, Lockington, and Brandesburton; T. Blashill, *History of Sutton-on-Hull*, 1890, p. 264.

⁷ The mud flats at Spurn Point are now a bird sanctuary.

⁸ *Yorks. Archaeolog. Soc. Rec. Ser.*, LIII, p. 29. Even in the nineteenth century the region retained fame as an area of wild fowl: "Geese and fowl were winging their way to distant Holderness."—Walter Scott, *Ivanhoe*, 1832, p. 185.

⁹ Public Record Office, E. 164, 37, 249.

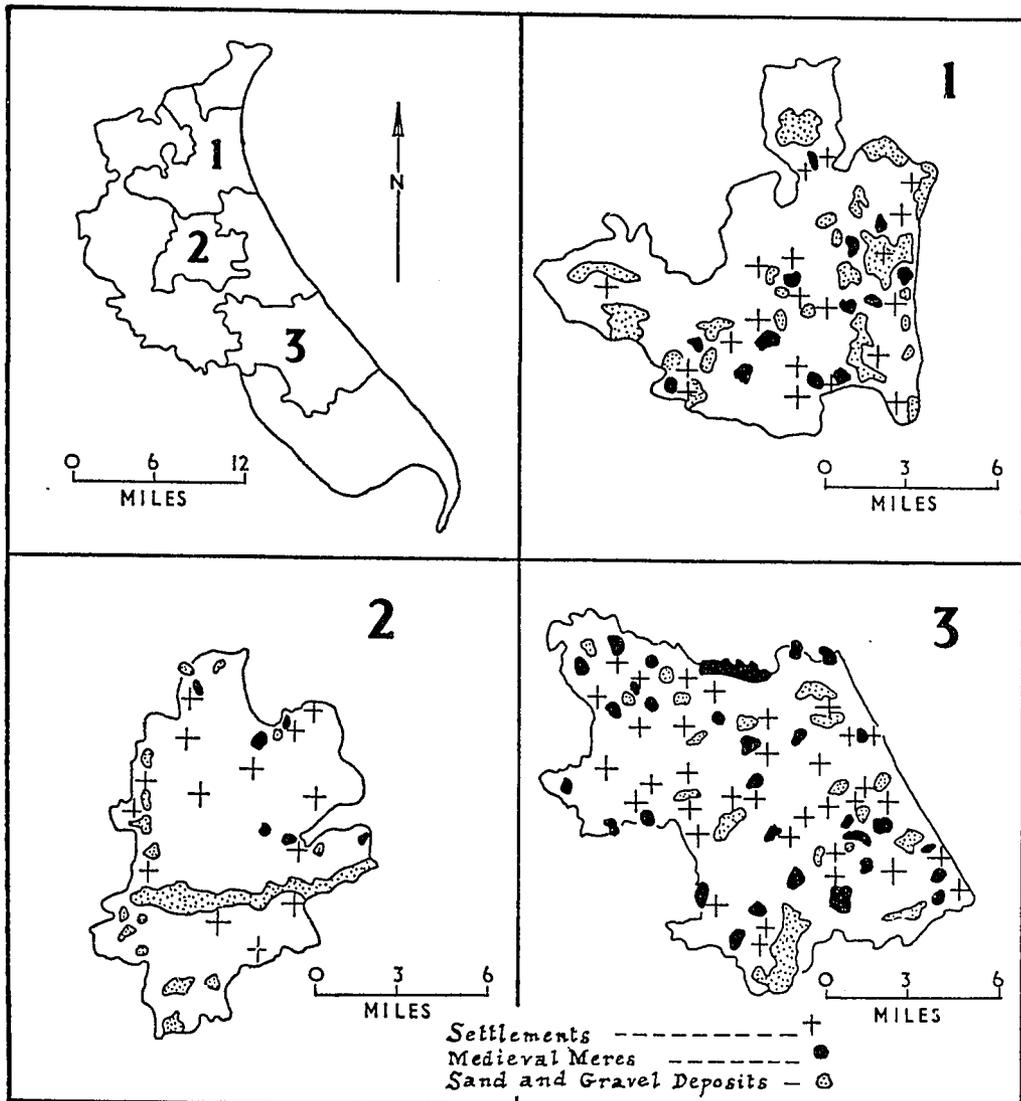


FIG. II

both in Holderness and on the Wolds. The Meaux Chronicle refers frequently to the practice of peat cutting.¹ Often as much as six acres of marsh were set aside for the purpose.² The Prior of Bridlington is noted as having the right to cut "fifty cartloads of turves" annually from a marsh near to the township.³

One may suppose that the activity provided a valuable source of trade with areas outside the region, although no direct evidence has been found to substantiate this view.

One of the most important uses of the periodically flooded bottom-lands (known as "carrs") was, however, the summer pasturage

¹ *Chronica de Melsa*, I, pp. 214, 356; II, pp. 5, 365.

² *Ibid.*, II, p. 216.

³ *Yorks. Archaeolog. Soc. Rec. Ser.*, xcv, p. 139. For its later importance, see East Riding Record Office, DDCV, 105-7.

of sheep and cattle. Its increasing value throughout the period was shared by all the great marshland areas. So common was this practice that restriction was often necessary to prevent over-exploitation, and there were frequent boundary disputes.¹

It is not surprising that the bottom-lands were often rated at a much higher value than arable land on the uplands.² The Lay Subsidy Returns for 1297, although not altogether complete for Holderness, reveal the higher rating of the villages holding a high proportion of carrland (Fig. I).

Historical evidence, then, would seem to support the view that the medieval economy of Holderness depended for any prosperity it may have shown, upon the wealth of its meres and marshes rather than its arable land. This is further substantiated by reference to the distribution of settlement sites.

Interpolation of evidence from glacial drift maps, the distribution of medieval meres and marshes, and the sites of settlements reveal interesting relationships. Not only does the

highest density of Domesday population occur in the southern claylands, where mere sites are most frequently found (Fig. II), but the closest clusters of settlement occur where meres were adjacent to the more easily cleared and worked sand and gravel hillocks, as in the north-east and south-east parts of the main moraine area. These areas were probably freer draining, and, at least initially, more fertile. Conversely, settlement was most sparse where these factors were widely spaced, as in the east-central moraine area.

Thus, whilst medieval Holderness, from the arable farmer's viewpoint, may have seemed a watery waste land whose heavy boulder clays produced low yields of most crops, it was nevertheless an area of fairly dense settlement. Like the better known marshland areas of Lincolnshire and Norfolk, Holderness too would seem to have depended for its prosperity upon the products of its marshes and meres. Such prosperity as existed may well have been 'because of' and not 'in spite of' these features.

¹ H. C. Darby, *The Draining of the Fens*, 1940, and the bibliography therein; J. Thirsk, *English Peasant Farming*, 1957, p. 49

² *Yorks. Archaeolog. Soc. Rec. Ser.*, XII, pp. 78, 79; Public Record Office, E, 164, 37, 249.

Notes and Comments

THE BRITISH AGRICULTURAL HISTORY SOCIETY

The joint winter conference of the Society with the Association of Agriculture was held at the Institute of Education, Malet Street, London, W.C.1, on Saturday, 3 December 1966. The subject was 'Agrarian Unrest in England'. The President of the Society, Professor H. P. R. Finberg, opened the conference, and the sessions were chaired by Mr Rex Russell of the University of Hull. At the morning session Dr E. J. Hobsbawm of Birkbeck College, London, spoke on 'The farm labourer's movements of the first half of the nineteenth century', and at the afternoon session Dr J. P. D. Dunbabin of St Edmund Hall, Oxford, spoke on 'The incidence and

organization of agricultural trades unionism in the 1870s'. This was followed by an interesting and stimulating discussion.

ESSAYS IN AGRARIAN HISTORY

Members may be interested to know that two volumes, edited by Professor W. E. Minchinton, of the more important articles on agrarian history published in this and other journals, will shortly be published by David and Charles Ltd. The first volume will cover the period up to about 1760, and the second will cover the later period. Members of the Society will be able to buy the volumes at the reduced rate. Further details will be included in the next issue.

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