

FOUR SHILLINGS A QUARTER: PEASANT ECONOMIC ATTITUDES IN ENGLAND IN THE LATE MIDDLE AGES

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Objective:

A detailed investigation of seigneurial agriculture on the estates of the Durham Cathedral Priory in the long fourteenth century. This investigation will allow for a more detailed understanding of decision-making in medieval agriculture during a period of climatic and demographic change. Furthermore, and perhaps most interestingly, seigneurial agriculture allows for an important insight into peasant agriculture in the period.

Demographic and Climatic Shocks:

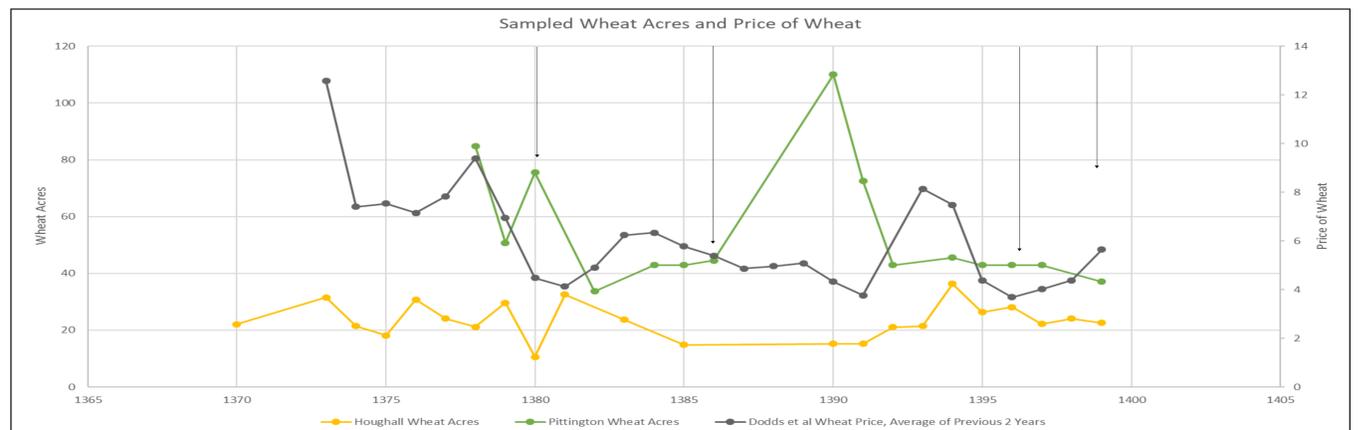
- * The Black Death killed between roughly 30-65% of the population of Europe and at least 45% of the population of England.¹
- * Clerical death rates likely mirrored those of their lay countrymen.²
- * From the 1270s, the climate began to cool, reaching the coldest point around 1350 and negatively impacting harvests.
- * Brief warming period in 1370s and 1380s, termed the Chaucerian Maximum by Campbell.
- * Chaucerian Maximum roughly corresponds to the Indian Summer of Demesne Agriculture. Drastically cooler temperatures from 1400s.³

Sources & Methodology:

- * Extant manorial accounts from the bursar's estates. For this case study, Fulwell, Ketton, Houghall, and Pittington provide most of the material.
- * Though the records can be patchy at times, they provide some of the best material for the study of medieval agriculture in the North.
- * Using these accounts, data on labour, expenditure, and arable farming was gathered and compiled. Yield per seed and sown acreage were calculated where necessary.
- * This data can then be used to chart agricultural changes over time and, eventually, to make comparisons to the rest of England.

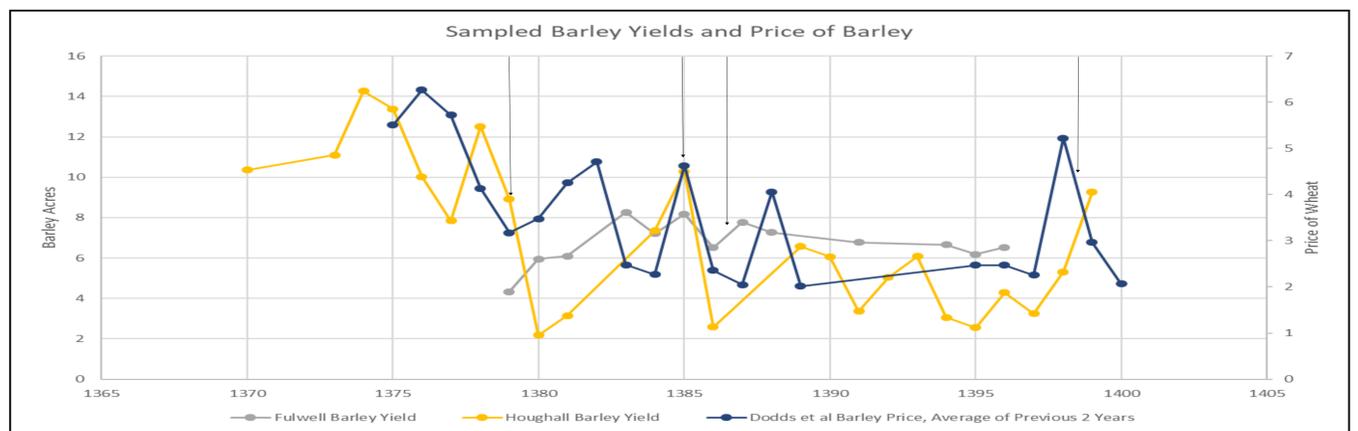
Graph I:

- * Houghall and Pittington used, most complete set.
- * There are apparent adjustments between intensive and extensive agriculture.



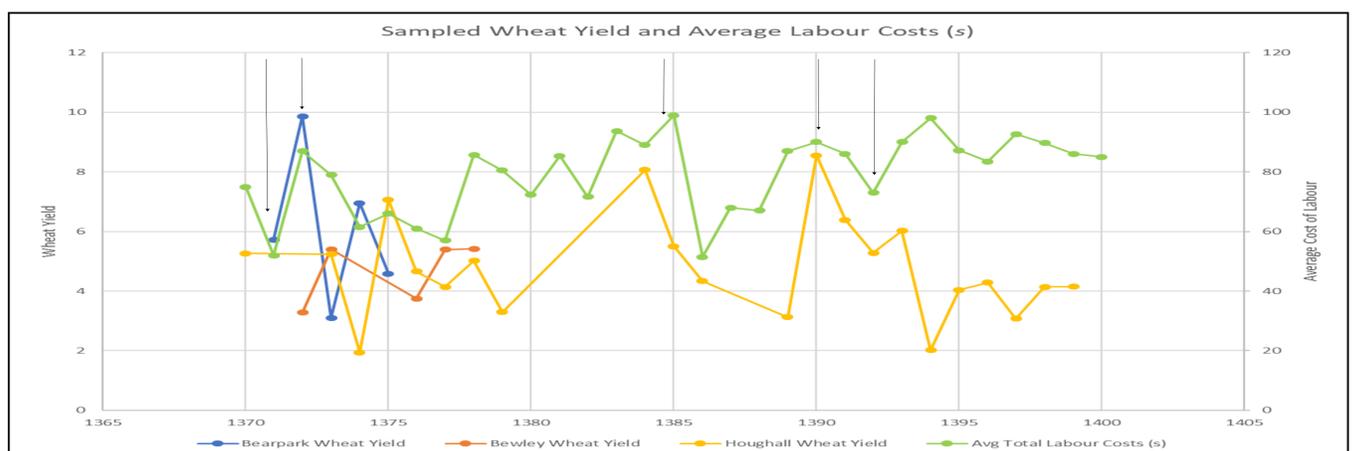
Graph II:

- * Houghall and Fulwell
- * Apparent (and perhaps an attempt at) adjustment of labour inputs corresponding with grain prices.



Graph III:

- * Bearpark, Houghall, & Bewley
- * Some correlation between Average Labour Costs and Wheat Yields.
- * Association stronger in long term trend.



A Few Conclusions:

- * While price-responsiveness may not be evident consistently throughout the period and case study, it certainly appears that some attempt was made, particularly in switches between intensive and extensive agriculture.
- * Such changes to cropping patterns were not made without awareness of associated risks.
- * If peasant managers of the Durham demesnes were willing to take such risks when managers could be fined for poor performance, perhaps they were likewise willing to take risks with their own land, where profit or surplus crops would be much more important.

References and Notes

1. Jean-Noël Biraben, *Les hommes et la peste en France et dans les pays européens et méditerranéens*, 1, *La peste dans l'histoire* (Paris, 1979), p. 16, and Rosemary Horrox, (ed) *The Black Death* (Manchester, 1994), p. 58 and see Stephen Broadberry et al., *British Economic Growth: 1270-1870* (Cambridge, 2015) for further.

2. Bruce Campbell, *The Great Transition: Climate, Disease, and Society in the Late-Medieval World* (Cambridge, 2016), p. 308.

3. *Ibid.*, pp 335-337. Reference for all climate information.

4. For method of averaging previous two years' grain prices, see Bend Dodds, *Peasants and Production in the Medieval North-East: the Evidence from Tithes, 1270-1536* (Woodbridge, 2007), p. 161. For the Durham price series used, see Elizabeth Gemmill, et al., "Durham grain prices, 1278-1515," *Archaeologia Aeliana* 5 (39) (2011), pp. 307-327.