

1. Aims of the Study

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1.1 Introduction

This is first and foremost a social study of the growth and evolution of a group of neighbouring communities during the period 1500-1700AD. The study embraces several distinct aspects:

- Population demographics
- The changing economy – growth of wealth, escalation, the widening gap between rich and poor
- The effects of nature – epidemics and harvest failure
- The impulses injected by religious change
- Social growth and evolution in the home and in the community, including advances in housing and building techniques, clothing, furniture and personal possessions, trades and occupations.

A group of neighbouring villages was deliberately chosen, for several reasons:

- To maximise the amount of source documentation for analysis
- To reduce the demographic problems of people ‘falling between the cracks’ when they move between communities
- To allow study of inter-community factors, such as land-holdings in several parishes, inter-community marriage and social mobility between villages
- To enable comparison between communities in the sample, identifying both similarities and differences.

The specific group of villages was chosen, again, for several reasons:

- West Northamptonshire has not been studied in any depth by other researchers, so this study will provide useful comparative material against existing studies over the same period
- The villages chosen were felt to exhibit some interesting aspects, in terms of what was already known or suspected of their religious history, and also in terms of their manorial histories.

1.2 The Chosen Group of Communities

Description of the villages – the factors that unite them and the factors that tend to divide and distinguish them:

Some uniting factors: geography, farming regime, mediaeval history
 Some dividing factors: strength and religious persuasion of lordship, transport and communications routes

Vill	Lordship	Religion	Woodland	Field pattern	Communications	DMVs
Ashby SL	Strong & single	Catholic tendency	Some	3	Near main mediaeval route	0
Barby	Strong & single	Puritan tendency	Large	3 + 2 (Onley)	(2 bronze age routes)	1
Braunston	Strong & multiple	Orthodox	Some	3	On main mediaeval route	3
Crick	Strong & multiple	Orthodox	None	3, later 4	On main mediaeval route	0
Kilsby	Weak & remote	Early puritan	Some	3	On main mediaeval route	0

All the villages lie upon the west Northamptonshire upland, on a belt of boulder clay (insert geological and topological descriptions, extracted and summarised from other Ph.D. theses).

The time-period is chosen because it encompasses, in religious terms, the mediaeval English catholic church, the Reformation and Dissolution, contrary heretical persecutions under successive Tudor monarchs, the Gunpowder Plot, the Civil War, the Protectorate, the Restoration, the Purge of Puritans in 1662, and finally the Toleration Act of 1689; and in social terms because it embraces a

period of rapid population growth and much consequent social change. Over the period studied, England's social structure altered from a land of feudal husbandry, mediaeval religion, illiteracy and magic, to a land where education and literacy had dispelled much mediaeval ignorance, the balance of power had shifted from crown to parliament, and the visionary foreign policies of the Protectorate had provided a solid practical foundation for the revolutions in commerce and industry that were to follow during the eighteenth century.

The area chosen seems interesting from the religious point of view – John Wycliffe was rector of Lutterworth some 7-8 miles to the north, his ideas giving rise to long-term Lollard beliefs in this region from the 1380s right up until the Reformation and into the 1540s; Robin Catesby fomented part of the (Catholic recusant) Gunpowder Plot at his mother's manor in Ashby St Ledger in 1604-5; Kilsby was noted for its long-term nonconformist beliefs – as an early Puritan village during the 1580s, as a hotbed of Puritanism in the early days of the Civil War in 1642, and later in 1663 when it set up the first Independent chapel in the area; while William Laud, the noted Anglican scourge of Puritans, was pluralist rector of Crick both during the 1620s and after he became Archbishop of Canterbury in 1633. Braunston and Barby provide a relatively neutral background and a basis for comparison. Finally, the deserted village of Onley lies within Barby parish, and its desertion occurred during this period.

1.3 Relevant Data Sets

The main data sources employed for the five villages in this study, listed roughly in order of their significance, are wills, inventories, parish registers, tax returns, and fragmentary maps and manorial records. Extracts from Calendar Rolls, royal statutes and parliamentary acts have also proved useful in filling in gaps and providing a general background to local events.

	Ashby SL	Barby + Onley	Braunston	Crick	Kilsby
Total available wills	137	255	390	337	238
Transcribed wills	65	108	158	166	116
Inventories	6	5	8	14	12
Parish Registers	1557-1700	1537-1572	1538-1700	1559-1644 and 1650-1700	No register extant pre-1706
Tax Surveys	Lay Subsidy rolls (1520s), Hearth Tax surveys (1662-1764) for all villages in the sample				
Other					

1.4 Comparisons with Other Studies

There is a substantial body of existing research based on wills and related source documents for other parts of England over the same time-period, providing material for some further analyses and comparisons. The following table does not claim to be an exhaustive list:

Period	County	Vill(s)	Researchers	Main data sets used	Type of capture	Main focus of analysis
1500-1533	Beds.	Whole county	Ford	780 probate wills	Full text	Legal & religious
1450-1500	Bristol	Bristol	Burgess		Full text	
1500-1700	Cambs.	Willingham, Orwell, Chippenham	Spufford	All available records	Full text	Social
1551-1800	Cambs.	Whole county	Evans			Status & occupation
1520-1580	Devon	Morebath	Duffy	Church records	Full text	Religious
1525-1700	Essex	Terling	Wrightson/Levine	All available records	Full text	Inheritance
1540-1580	Gloucs.		Litzenberger			Religious
1498-1659	Herts.	Kings Langley	Mumby			
1280-1700	Leics.	Kibw'th Harcourt	Howell			
1500-1800	Northants.	Whole county	Collins		Doc. ID only	None
1543-1700	Northants.	Blakesley	Biggs	83 wills + parish regs	Full text	Social
1462-1509	Northants.	Northampton	Edwards et al	145 wills	Full text	Social
1600-1699	N. Warks.	4 neighbour vills	Husbands	257 probate inventories	Full text	Wealth & housing

These studies have all been valuable, though they have made their contributions in a variety of different ways. For instance, whilst the studies by most of the researchers have quoted either full texts or substantial text extracts from wills, only the studies by Ford and Collins have made a serious attempt at the mammoth task of capturing all available wills for the period and locality considered – and hence, only these two studies have provided a real basis for analysing population demographics. Likewise, whilst the early trail-blazing studies by Wrightson/Levine and Spufford have provided masterly analyses of a wide range of social evolutions in their respective communities they inevitably had to select what to put in and what to leave out – and for example, they contain no assessment of the significant effects of legislation upon will-making (especially in the period 1520-1550) so that some of their will-analyses may perhaps run the risk of leading to distorted conclusions. The study by Ford (1991), though limited in the time-period that it considers, provides a good appreciation of the influence upon will-making of mediaeval formularies and of the effects of the Mortuary Act (1529), the Statute of Uses (1536) and the Statute of Wills (1540) – and any study which draws substantially upon the texts of wills must take account of such influential legal factors, at least when drawing conclusions relating to the pre-Elizabethan period, or the conclusions may be distorted at best and erroneous at worst.

The study by Collins provides an excellent resource for overall analysis of demographic statistics, though it does not attempt to capture the actual text of any individual document; likewise, the Northamptonshire studies by Biggs and by Edwards et al focus mainly upon the texts of a small group of wills, with little or no attempt to use other contemporary documentary sources to support the analysis; again, although most of the studies either ignore probate inventories or make relatively little use of them, the short study by Husbands (1980s) concentrated solely on inventories to the exclusion of all other data-sources; hence, for all of these last-mentioned studies the range of possible analysis and interpretation is somewhat restricted.

Nevertheless, all of these studies are of considerable use, and each one has provided helpful pointers and comparative statistics.

The present study does not claim to overcome the limitations of other studies, for it too has its own limitations. Amongst these, the lack of a full range of surviving parish documentation for the selected villages must count as the greatest handicap – for example, there are no early maps, very few surviving manorial records or field-books, no petty sessions records, and little church documentation apart from the parish registers, which are fortunately reasonably complete for at least three of the villages in the sample group. Manor court rolls, constables' records, churchwardens' accounts, vestry minute-books – most of these have vanished without trace. It is therefore very difficult to analyse many aspects of manorial change, such as land-ownership, changes in cultivation and so on. However, the wills are fairly complete – and comparison with the burial statistics from parish registers indicates that there is a very complete list of testators, and that remarkably few wills have failed to survive. Moreover, the fact that several neighbouring villages have been considered permits some analyses that were not possible in many of the earlier studies of this type, and this may compensate in part for the other limitations.