

Specialization of work in England, 1100–1300

By R. H. BRITNELL

Because the twelfth and thirteenth centuries experienced growing population and commercial development, they were also to some extent a period of increasing occupational specialization.¹ As towns grew, and money circulated more freely, some groups of workers became more specialized, and as they did so their productivity is likely to have risen for the reasons expounded by Adam Smith—they wasted less time, they became more skilled, and they became more adept at saving labour. This analysis has contributed to an optimistic view of these centuries, to be set against the interpretation of the latter part of the period as one of deteriorating standards of living for a broad section of the population. Persson, for example, has argued that the rising productivity derived from occupational specialization allowed per caput incomes in England to grow by between 0.1 and 0.24 per cent per year between 1100 and 1300.² This article queries the extent of productivity gains attributable to occupational specialization between 1100 and 1300, first by proposing that increasing specialization characterized only a small proportion of the workforce and secondly by arguing that there were offsetting trends elsewhere in the economy.

I

One sign of increasing specialization was the development of new occupations requiring high levels of acquired skill.³ The institutional apparatus of overseas trade, with its growing distinctions between shipowners, merchants, and merchant's agents is a case in point.⁴ Another is the proliferation of clerical and legal activities in conveyancing, legal representation, estate administration, and royal service.⁵ Even in rural areas there were new opportunities for the literate; Robert Clerk of Cuxham (Oxon.) was the non-inheriting, younger son of a miller, who found employment as a freelance clerk, 'making a living from what work he could get in the area'.⁶

Another, second, sign of increasing specialization was the perceptible

¹ e.g. Britnell, *Commercialisation of English society*, pp. 79–81; *idem*, 'Commercialisation and economic development', p. 16.

² Persson, *Pre-industrial economic growth*, p. 139.

³ Miller and Hatcher, *Medieval England: towns, commerce and crafts*, pp. 128–34.

⁴ Britnell, 'Sedentary long-distance trade'.

⁵ Clanchy, *From memory to written record*, pp. 44–62.

⁶ *Manorial records of Cuxham*, p. 38.

growth of levels of both skill and employment in some older occupations whose products survive to be examined. Outstanding among these was the expanding, sometimes technically adventurous, construction industry, which created a skilled and semi-skilled labour force able to transfer from site to site over long distances. The evidence of buildings is backed up by that of written records. For example, an account of building works at Westminster Abbey from late July to mid-October 1265 lists 72 skilled employees (white-cutters, marblers, layers, carpenters, painters, smiths, plumbers, glaziers, polishers, and sawyers) not one of whom had an inappropriate occupational surname.⁷ Even rural masons, carpenters, and thatchers are known to have worked over wide territorial areas in order to take advantage of an extensive market.⁸

A third line of argument for increasing specialization, and undoubtedly the strongest, springs from the growth of towns, which suggests a specialized force of craftsmen emerging from a rural society where everybody made everything. In one interpretation, non-inheriting children left the countryside for the town, seeking a niche currently unoccupied or inadequately served.⁹ This model, like the Schumpeterian theory of innovation, postulates the creation of new streams of income through entrepreneurial ingenuity. A new town created income for its founder, and each new resident aspired to take advantage of the improved commercial environment. Even the smallest town showed a fair proportion of occupational surnames.¹⁰ An encouraging feature of the evidence for specialized urban employment is its coherence—the bigger the town, the greater the number of different specializations. Bristol's tallage list of 1312 and a subsidy list of 1327 record between them 92 different occupational surnames. In Winchester 72 different crafts may be listed from the period 1300–29. Further down the scale, in Durham we know of 53 occupations from thirteenth-century deeds. In each of the small boroughs of Halesowen (Warks.) and Thornbury (Gloucs.) 35 different occupations are recorded.¹¹ This pattern implies that the range of skills widened as towns grew. Individuals sometimes recur in urban court rolls for the same trading offences, implying continuity in the same occupation. Eight Colchester bakers were fined for trade offences on 20 November 1311, and six of these recur in a comparable list seven months later, on 17 June 1312; these six included Peter the baker and Goldyng the baker.¹²

As this last example suggests, a further line of argument, at least for prevalence of specialization by 1300, derives from occupational second names, on the understanding that in the thirteenth century these were most likely to be bynames, describing the individual to whom they were attached, rather than hereditary surnames. Studies of such names offer

⁷ *Building accounts*, pp. 388–95.

⁸ Harvey, *Medieval Oxfordshire village*, p. 81.

⁹ The attractiveness of this model is accounted for by Homans, *English villagers*, pp. 133–43.

¹⁰ e.g. Britnell, 'Making of Witham', p. 18; Carus-Wilson, 'First half-century', pp. 55–6; Smith, 'Periodic market', pp. 468–9.

¹¹ Hilton, *Class conflict*, p. 201; *idem*, 'Low-level urbanization', p. 496.

¹² Essex RO, Colchester Borough Muniments, CR2/4r, 12r.

numerous examples of minute specialization—John the canvas-merchant, Stephen the chiseller, Alice the gypsum-worker, Christian the pan-caster, and so on.¹³ In the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries occupational bynames constituted about one-fifth of the total in Leicestershire and Rutland, though the proportion was on average slightly lower in the countryside than in towns.¹⁴ In the smaller borough of Stratford-upon-Avon 64 of the property-holding burgesses (27 per cent) had an occupational name in 1251-2.¹⁵ This proportion, which is quite high for such lists, must nevertheless understate the proportion of townsmen who were associated with particular skills. Sometimes their number can be augmented by adding people recorded with a specified occupation, in the form 'John of Bergholt, tailor'. Of 390 taxpayers in Colchester and its liberty listed in 1301, 82 (21 per cent) had occupational names and a further 41 (11 per cent) had stated occupations. If villagers of Greenstead, Lexden, and West Donyland are excluded from this list, the proportion of Colchester townsmen with occupational names or descriptors, and so presumably strongly associated with some particular occupation, rises to about 35 per cent.¹⁶ The number of borough freemen who could be associated with some particular skill was higher still, at least in the larger towns; of the 767 men admitted to the freedom of York during Edward I's reign there are occupational designations for 452 (59 per cent).¹⁷

A fifth argument, partly complementing the previous one, is the evidence that some town streets were identified with particular crafts and specialist shops. In Winchester the association between Tanner Street and tanners seems from archaeological evidence to go back to the late Anglo-Saxon period.¹⁸ But accumulating evidence from the twelfth century suggests a continuing transformation of town centres as their commerce expanded. In 1200, five mercers, Solomon, Denis, Goldwin, Luke, and Charles, all held tenements and shops in Mercery Lane, Canterbury.¹⁹ By the end of the thirteenth century, demarcation of the use of central urban space to separate different occupations was a very widespread indicator of urban craft specialization. The most advanced examples were in London, where goldsmiths, spicers, mercers and other retailers of imported goods were taking over shop after shop in Cheapside.²⁰ There were similar developments in provincial towns. Norwich had a Pottersgate,

¹³ Fransson, *Middle English surnames of occupation*; Thuresson, *Middle English occupational terms*; Mills, 'Some Middle English occupational terms'.

¹⁴ Postles, *Surnames*, pp. 177, 182, 204.

¹⁵ Carus-Wilson, 'First half-century', p. 55.

¹⁶ *Rotuli Parliamentorum*, I, pp. 243-65. From Bartholomew le Porter to John de Grensted (p. 245) belong to Greenstead; from Agnes atte Hathe (p. 249) to Matilda Thomas (p. 250) and again from Walter Elys (p. 251) to Gilbert Aubre (p. 252) belong to West Donyland; and from Robert fitz Walter (p. 259) to Simon filius Prepositi (p. 261) belong to Lexden. For these identifications, see the assessment of 1295 on pp. 236-8. The taxpayers from Mile End may be those at the very end of the list of 1301 on pp. 264-5, but their identification is problematic and no allowance for them has been made.

¹⁷ Miller, 'Medieval York', p. 86.

¹⁸ Keene, *Survey*, I, p. 287.

¹⁹ Urry, *Canterbury*, pp. 72, 266 n.

²⁰ Keene, 'Shops and shopping', p. 31.

a Soutergate, a Hosiergate, a Fishergate, a Hatters' Row, and a Cook Row by 1300.²¹ In Lincoln Pottergate occurs from the late twelfth century, and by 1300 Baxtergate, Walkergate, and Saltergate are all recorded.²² Cambridge by 1300 had a *Cordewanaria*, a *Bucheria*, and Petty Cury (*Parva Cokeria*).²³ The significance of this pattern of development is not wholly unambiguous—it may sometimes relate to the location of common markets—but where it relates to specialized private shops and stalls it implies investment by craftsmen who had some continuing commitment to a particular craft.

A final argument bears chiefly on rural society. The growth of larger farming units from the later twelfth century perhaps increased specialized employment in agriculture. Some servants, notably manorial *famuli*, contracted for specific duties for a whole year. Names are rarely given in this context, but it is possible to find some examples of long-term stability. Henry was a ploughman at Cuxham from 1327 onwards for 20 years.²⁴ A particularly high level of commitment was expected from those responsible for livestock; they were sometimes required to reside near their animals in designated buildings at the manor,²⁵ or in shepherds' huts in the sheep pastures.²⁶ Increasing specialization among such farm servants during the course of the thirteenth century may have contributed directly to rising productivity in demesne pastoral farming.²⁷

These six propositions, which constitute the sum of the available argument in favour of increasing occupational specialization, are not outlined here as fallacies to be overthrown, since there is no need to reject any of them. They are not all of equal weight, but they support each other and deserve respect. Together they imply that a core of the population in the countryside, but more obviously in towns, was associated c. 1300 with some particular trade or skill and that that core was probably proportionately larger than in 1100. This constitutes at least a *prima facie* argument for enhanced occupational specialization in some social groups. Even Postan supposed that increasing regional and occupational specialization was sufficiently pronounced to affect the development of the aggregate economy.²⁸

II

The limitations of this evidence as a basis for generalization across the whole economy are nevertheless easily defined, especially when necessary qualifications to the evidence are taken into consideration. The argument

²¹ Lobel, ed., *Atlas*, Norwich, map 6.

²² Hill, *Medieval Lincoln*, pp. 359–66.

²³ Lobel, ed., *Atlas*, II, Cambridge, map 3.

²⁴ Harvey, *Medieval Oxfordshire village*, p. 77.

²⁵ Ibid.; Kershaw, *Bolton Priory*, p. 53; cf. Postan, *Famulus*, pp. 15, 39–41.

²⁶ e.g. 'Liberatum iiii bercariis in maresco extra manerium hospitantibus per annum pro farina ad potagium eorundem per annum, j quart' [auenarum] (Bourchier Hall, Essex, 1341: Essex RO, D/DK/M.86, m. 3d.).

²⁷ Thornton, 'Efficiency', pp. 40–1.

²⁸ Postan, *Medieval economy and society*, p. 201.

from the growth of towns, which is the best, can only be relevant to a minority of the population. Perhaps the urban proportion, generously defined, increased from about one-tenth to about one-fifth of the whole between 1086 and 1300,²⁹ but much of this increase involved servants and labourers no more specialized than their rural relations. To the extent that towns grew by the migration of people in search of a livelihood that the countryside had denied them, their expansion was likely to be accompanied by an increasing proportion of casual workers and occasional beggars.³⁰

Personal names, too, imply increasing specialization for only a small proportion of the population. The percentages already quoted for the later thirteenth century do not represent net increases in specialization in recent centuries, since such names were already commonly used *c.* 1100. A rental of the small new town of Battle (Sussex) from *c.* 1102-5 lists 111 tenants of the abbey there of whom 31 (28 per cent) are given occupational surnames. This is a higher percentage of occupational names than was normal in the later thirteenth century, and the range of names, too, is as wide as might be expected in such a rental two centuries later. There are ox-herds and pig-keepers, a priest and a clerk, some lay household officers, presumably attached to the abbey, a gardener, and a range of 11 different crafts—three shoemakers, three bakers, three cooks, two smiths, two carpenters, a cordwainer, a brewer, a weaver, a goldsmith, a basket-maker, and a reed-cutter.³¹ A survey of 1114-15 of the embryonic town of Burton on Trent is more difficult to interpret because of the large number of repeated single names, but if the two Gilberts are assumed to be the same, and so on, and if Lepsi is assumed to be Lepsi the baker, and so on—assuming, that is, that the clerk systematically distinguished between tenants with the same name by giving them additional identifiers—then the eight occupational names constitute 18 per cent of the total. The village had two bakers, two cooks, a shoemaker, a carpenter, a mason, and a dyer or ploughman.³² These were exceptional cases, but they sufficiently demonstrate the need for caution, especially since during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries it was only gradually becoming normal to assign surnames of any kind. The proportion of occupational surnames *c.* 1300 does not readily convert into evidence for large increases in specialization.

A further qualification to the evidence from personal names arises from the inadequacy of occupational names as evidence for occupational specialization. The primary object of surnames was not to describe but to identify, and the occupational identifiers used by administrators did not necessarily indicate a full-time occupation. Large numbers of men were defined not by their own perception of their livelihood but by the office or skill that most precisely identified them to others. This is most

²⁹ Dyer, 'How urbanised was medieval England?', pp. 173, 177.

³⁰ Britnell, 'Commercialisation and economic development', pp. 9-12.

³¹ *Chronicle of Battle Abbey*, pp. 52-9. For additional comment, see Clark, 'Battle *c.* 1100', p. 227.

³² 'Burton Abbey surveys', pp. 212-15, using the tenants listed in Survey B: 'dyer or ploughman' because *tintor* could be *tintor* or *tenitor*.

clearly apparent in names that relate individuals to duties towards the lord or the village community—the beadle, the falconer, the tithingman, the hayward, the reeve. The same qualification is needed for some manorial servants; a ‘Richard the herd’ was not necessarily a specialist even for a single year, let alone for a lifetime. A temporary, part-time or honorary status could be fully effective as a form of identification for administrative purposes. Similar caution is again needed outside clearly defined organizational contexts, since continuity was impossible in many sorts of work, either because of their seasonal nature or because of the shallowness of market demand. Many branches of the provisioning industry were part-time, especially in rural areas. It is improbable that the village butchers who recur together in the records of Holywell-cum-Needingworth c. 1300 were all able to maintain themselves as specialists, especially since they had to compete with interloping outsiders. There were only about 250 adults in the two villages.³³ Like spinning and weaving,³⁴ village crafts might be sources of supplementary income rather than a full-time employment for those engaged in them.³⁵

Even though the number of manorial *famuli* probably grew between 1100 and 1300, this increase was not wholly an addition to the specialized workforce. Since manorial officers in a supervisory role were often chosen from the leading tenants of the manor, their principal activity was likely to be managing a family tenement and other assets.³⁶ Robert Oldman of Cuxham, for example, is described in the manor accounts as Robert the reeve because that is what he was for nearly 40 years before the Black Death, but he also had a customary holding of land, half a virgate, on which he was able to keep cart-horses. He operated a mill for many years from 1295, and may have acted as a smith for a time.³⁷ Some employees on manorial demesnes must have devoted most of their working time to a specific duty, especially if they were responsible for livestock, but even for such men the level of specialization can be exaggerated. Some were attached to smallholdings which they were expected to cultivate to maintain themselves.³⁸ Because manors varied very greatly in size and complexity, the non-supervisory offices of shepherd, cowman, ploughman, carter, and dairy maid implied different levels of specialization in different contexts. Evidence from manorial records is skewed by the fact that most of it comes from large estates and exaggerates the specialization possible within the demesne sector as a whole. The many less well-documented small manors offered less scope for full-time specialization; on the manor of Pontes in Bulmer (Essex) in 1342 and 1343 Thomas Weynild was cowman and shepherd and serjeant of the manor as well as reap-reeve at harvest-time.³⁹ Besides their regular responsibilities, even on large

³³ DeWindt, *Land and people*, pp. 169, 235.

³⁴ Postan, ‘Medieval agrarian society’, p. 623.

³⁵ Bennett, *Women*, pp. 56–7, and citations there.

³⁶ Bennett, *Life on the English manor*, pp. 169–78.

³⁷ Harvey, *Medieval Oxfordshire village*, pp. 64, 71–2, 132, 141, 143–4.

³⁸ Postan, *Famulus*, pp. 15–18.

³⁹ Britnell, ‘Minor landlords’, p. 7.

manors *famuli* might be called on to assist with seasonal tasks on the demesne, such as threshing.⁴⁰

The arguments for some increasing specialization survive such criticism intact, but with little demonstrable relevance to more than a small proportion of the population, mostly with manufacturing, commercial or professional skills. They offer little foundation for generalizing about the characteristics of the labour force as a whole. Though urbanization implies some increase in agricultural output per head of the rural population, it is far from obvious that this was brought about by specialization of labour, given the small size of most units of production. Increasing output on family farms was more likely to arise from increasing total and per caput labour inputs than from increasing specialization. About 60 per cent of the rural population had enough land to live on, and was engaged predominantly in farming family tenements, and the members of these households needed to perform so many tasks during the course of the year, many of them seasonal, that in their case the concept of rising specialization is inappropriate. The principal demarcation of duties within the family was along gender lines, since women with children often assumed responsibility for tasks around the home, such as gardening, poultry-keeping, pig-keeping, milking, butter-churning, cheese-making, bacon-salting, rather than work in the fields. But since women's work was interspersed with multifarious daily housekeeping duties, it was not specialized at any time of the year, and the normal round of women's tasks was often augmented by the expectation that they should share in seasonal work in the fields at hoeing, weeding, haymaking, harvesting, and gleanings.⁴¹ Surviving lists of the labour services that customary tenants owed on the demesnes to which they were attached include a string of different skills, and it was one of the defining characteristics of villein week work that the tenant had no fixed set of tasks to perform in the course of the year.⁴² The remaining 40 per cent of the rural population, the cottagers and smallholders who needed to find employment outside their own lands, necessarily, if they worked in agriculture, changed the nature of their work repeatedly during the course of the year. Manorial accounts record the employment of workers for tasks which could only have been seasonal. For example, in 1256/7 or 1257/8 Crowland Abbey's officer at Dowdike (Lincs.) paid out £2 2s. 2½d. for threshing, 3s. 10d. for winnowing, 4s. for weeding, 3s. 7d. for mowing, 10s. for turf cutting, and £2 16s. 11d. for harvesting.⁴³ This point does not need to be stressed, because it is intrinsic to numerous descriptions of the peasant's annual round of tasks at almost any period,⁴⁴ and could be confirmed from any one of the hundreds of manorial accounts that survive from the late thirteenth century. The chief source of productivity growth from

⁴⁰ e.g. *Wellingborough manorial accounts*, pp. 6-7, 13-14, 23, 32-3, 38, 44, 49.

⁴¹ Hanawalt, *Ties that bound*, pp. 146-7.

⁴² Pollock and Maitland, *History*, I, pp. 370-2; Vinogradoff, *Villainage*, pp. 278-88, 298-300.

⁴³ Page, *Estates of Crowland Abbey*, pp. 182-3. For the date, see *Wellingborough manorial accounts*, pp. xxxix-xli.

⁴⁴ e.g. Bennett, *Life on the English manor*, pp. 75-96; Homans, *English villagers*, pp. 353-81.

such workers was perhaps the substitution of their wage labour for customary labour services.⁴⁵

III

It is now appropriate to turn more pointedly to consider whether there were counter trends that offset the increased specialization that can be proposed for a minority. A great deal here hinges upon the characteristics of the thirteenth-century labour market. Though the range of different recorded occupations broadened between 1100 and 1300, particularly in the larger towns, this does not imply that each new occupation created a secure livelihood. The ability to earn a living through specialized work depends, as Adam Smith recognized, upon a reliable level of employment in the specialization in question. The evidence of real wages even for skilled workers around 1300 makes it unlikely that the work available increased sufficiently to maintain reliable levels of employment in the various trades in question.⁴⁶ Seasonal variation and violent harvest fluctuations alone played havoc with the level and composition of demand for labour from month to month and year to year, and the evidence of widespread destitution in years of high prices is only the high point of the evidence that labour markets were frequently oversupplied, and the poor left destitute.⁴⁷ Such a volatile labour market, especially in the countryside, selects for adaptability rather than for specialized skill. In such circumstances skilled workers are still better off than unskilled ones, especially if they have several skills, since they are more likely to be able to pick up work and more likely to earn skilled wages. But at any level of skill, men and women looking for work would characteristically find not a specialized niche, but a variety of niches to occupy either simultaneously, or at different times of the year, or according to the unpredictable vagaries of the market.⁴⁸

The need to seek alternative work in times of unemployment was enhanced by the very meagre resources that most workers had to support them in idleness. No assumptions can be made from a thirteenth-century man's skill, as defined by his name or occupational description, concerning the magnitude of his assets. The possession of a workshop could not guarantee a livelihood, and since many craftsmen and tradesmen had little capital of any other kind, failure of demand for their services could leave them destitute unless they could find alternative work or alms.⁴⁹ Of the goldsmiths of Newcastle upon Tyne in 1296, Walter was assessed on movables worth £1 1s. 0d., but Robert and Robert junior at only 7s. With goods valued at only 7s., Michael the goldsmith was similarly one

⁴⁵ Stone, 'Productivity'.

⁴⁶ Bailey, 'Peasant welfare', pp. 229, 232.

⁴⁷ Campbell, 'Population pressure', pp. 111-13, 117-18; Postan and Titow, 'Heriots and prices'; Razi, *Life, marriage and death*, pp. 36-8, 97; Schofield, 'Dearth, debt and the local land market'.

⁴⁸ Postan, *Medieval economy and society*, p. 134; *idem*, 'Medieval agrarian society', p. 624.

⁴⁹ Razi, *Life, marriage and death*, p. 88.

of the poorest of the taxpayers in Corbridge that year.⁵⁰ Among the 40 people described as poor in the court rolls of St Ives (Hunts.) between 1275 and 1318 there were 17 men with specialized skills—William Wygar and Nicholas Sturdy the tanners, Simon Bateman the carpenter, Roger Barman and Agnes Atwell the bakers, and so on.⁵¹ At Warboys (Hunts.) petty tradesmen may be equated with the poor, the transient, and the semi-criminal.⁵²

To offset the model of the specialized worker who raised national income through higher productivity, an alternative that emerges from this characterization of the thirteenth-century economy is that of the opportunist worker, with little to fall back on in times of unemployment, whose primary art was to stay in employment as jack of many trades, or at least as a trusted labourer. An account of works at Westminster Abbey during 20 days of the spring of 1253 lists—besides the skilled men already discussed—60 labourers, whose number included Simon the scaffolder, Walter the merchant, John the sawyer, Stephen the gardener and William the gardener, Henry the carter, and Simon the cook.⁵³ A list of 31 labourers employed at Westminster Palace for three weeks in 1259 includes Simon the scaffolder, John the porter, Stephen the gardener, Walter of the brewhouse, John the cook, and Elias the brevier.⁵⁴ The list of building workers from late July to mid-October 1265 mentioned earlier lists 35 building labourers, who included John the porter, Stephen the gardener, William the barber, Thomas the baker, Peter of the garden, and Geoffrey of the brewhouse.⁵⁵ Between 10 and 20 per cent of building labourers in Westminster had surnames implying some superior degree of specialization. This may be interpreted to mean that the labouring class at any given moment included men who had temporarily failed to maintain themselves in a specialized craft or trade. Some people are described explicitly as having more than one occupation, though this is not common for the thirteenth century, presumably because it was unnecessary as a mode of identification.⁵⁶

Destitute artisans had a predictable propensity to turn to crime. Flax beating must be thought of as a highly specialized activity in early thirteenth-century England, but when Crispin the flaxbeater was appealed for homicide before the justices in Yorkshire in 1218-19 he was recorded as having no chattels.⁵⁷ John the whittawer, brought before the justices in eyre for Berkshire in 1248 and hanged for larceny at Wallingford, had no chattels, and neither did William the soaper of Oxford, who abjured the realm after having turned vagrant and stolen hens. William the locksmith of Reading had no chattels and took to counterfeiting.⁵⁸ William

⁵⁰ *Northumberland lay subsidy roll*, pp. 39-40, 48.

⁵¹ Moore, 'Aspects of poverty', p. 138.

⁵² Raftis, *Warboys*, p. 261.

⁵³ *Building accounts*, pp. 240-7.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 300-4.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 388-95.

⁵⁶ Cf. Penn and Dyer, 'Wages', pp. 361-2.

⁵⁷ *Rolls of the justices in eyre*, no. 485, p. 199. I owe this and the following references to Dave Postles.

⁵⁸ *Roll and writ file*, pp. 333, 352, 394.

the piper, suspected of murder at the Bedfordshire eyre of 1247, was a vagrant without chattels.⁵⁹ William de Kynardeby, tailor, had seemingly moved into Coventry from the countryside, but in 1262 when he confessed to numerous thefts he had no chattels and was regarded as a vagrant.⁶⁰ When William the goldsmith was reported to have abjured the realm as a felon at Shrewsbury in 1203, his chattels were valued at 7s. 0d.⁶¹ Though in detail the evidence concerning the destitution of some of these apparently highly specialized workers may be viewed with suspicion,⁶² it nevertheless implies that they came from the ranks of the poor.

IV

The argument so far would be compatible with a modified concept of specialization in which individuals had a single occupation at any given moment even though they might switch from employment to employment, or from employment to crime, with changing seasons or trading conditions. This might yet work as a mode of increasing specialization if it could be contrasted with the even less specialized characteristics of work on the land, since even slight net increments of specialization from decade to decade could generate increases in productivity over the course of a couple of centuries. However, a striking feature of the thirteenth-century economy was the extent to which employment in trade or manufacturing was added to farmwork rather than substituted for it. This is intelligible as a response to the uncertainties of hired employment already described. Rural historians have long been impressed with the large proportion of countrymen, at least 40 per cent, with too little land to maintain a family, and have argued that such households must have had some other means of support.⁶³ This evidence equally implies reluctance by artisans, traders, and labourers to abandon even the smallest toehold on the land, and numerous individual cases on record demonstrate the desire to acquire more. The extent to which the addition of by-employments to an annual round of agricultural work could constitute an incremental increase in occupational specialization is, to say the least, problematic.

Any large estate survey will supply numerous examples, but the point will be illustrated here from people in Cambridgeshire villages called chapman (*mercator*), as recorded in the Hundred Rolls of 1279. Roger the chapman held five different tenures from four different superiors in Babraham, but the total area was no more than 6 acres. In Chesterton, Walter the chapman held a messuage with a close and 2 acres of land in three separate tenures from three separate fees; even if he accumulated land, he was close to the ranks of the cottars. Hugh the chapman of Caldecote similarly held land of two separate fees, but amounting in all to only 2½ acres. Among the tenants of Linton were Silvester the chapman

⁵⁹ *Calendar of the roll of justices on eyre*, pp. 147-8.

⁶⁰ *Early records of Coventry*, no. 37.13, p. 55.

⁶¹ *Pleas before the king*, III, no. 753, p. 86.

⁶² Hanawalt, *Crime and conflict*, pp. 129-30.

⁶³ e.g. Kosminsky, *Studies*, pp. 206-42.

with a messuage and 8 acres, and Matilda the chapman with 3 roods. Gilbert the chapman of Waterbeach held a toft and croft with 2 acres from the Templars. In the bishop of Ely's manor of Ditton, Roger the chapman was the sub-tenant of a toft and croft, and of $1\frac{1}{2}$ acres of land. Michael the chapman had a messuage with 4 acres in Snailwell, and Simon the chapman at Lolworth was a joint tenant of $2\frac{1}{2}$ acres.⁶⁴ It is impossible to be sure that such men and women had no accumulated wealth in assets other than land, but the odds against it are high given the attractions of land as security in a period of rising and volatile prices. Henry the chapman of Brancaster (Norfolk), a villein, was found in 1239 to have sold half an acre of customary land without proper authority, but he was pardoned on account of his poverty.⁶⁵ The livelihood of such men was presumably a precarious mix of agricultural work and itinerant trading.⁶⁶ Since the likeliest source of increasing productivity in the medieval countryside was the intensification of labour on peasant lands, it would be a mistake to belittle the amount of labour that would be required to cultivate even a few acres by someone determined to make the most of them.⁶⁷

The large numbers of urban families who had land or common rights significantly qualify the hypothesis that expanding towns implied a growing force of specialist craft workers. In Colchester in 1301, if both manorial lords and the identifiable taxpayers from West Donyland, Lexden, and Greenstead are excluded, 130 out of the total of 269 male taxpayers were taxed only on grain and livestock besides household goods. This does not preclude the possibility of some specialization in the family. Nor does it invariably mean that such families themselves produced the food or raw materials on which they were taxed; in some cases burgesses with properties in the town fields leased them or paid to have them cultivated by others.⁶⁸ However, the number of taxpayers who were taxed on agricultural produce suggests that the land was of more than peripheral interest to heads of families.⁶⁹ They included some of the poorest men with occupational descriptions. Adam le Schepherde, sailor (with movables assessed at 12s. 6d.) had a cow, Saher Tuttoy, fisher (11s. 5d.) had a heifer, a calf, a ewe, and a lamb, John of Bergholt, tailor (11s. 10d.) had a pig, John of Witham, tanner (9s. 0d.) had two piglets, and John son of Ellis, weaver (2s. 6d.) had a lamb. These assessments represent disposable beasts rather than their total livestock, since produce assessed for taxation was deemed surplus to household needs and was probably intended for sale.⁷⁰ Higher up the scale of wealth, craftsmen were more likely to be taxed on grain as well. John of Colne, smith (with

⁶⁴ *Rotuli hundredorum*, II, pp. 402 (Chesterton), 413-14 (Babraham), 416-17 (Linton), 441-2 (Ditton), 455 (Waterbeach), 457 (Lolworth), 518, 520 (Caldecote).

⁶⁵ *Cartularium monasterii de Rameseia*, I, p. 425.

⁶⁶ Postles, *Surnames*, p. 178.

⁶⁷ Campbell, 'Agricultural progress', pp. 39-41.

⁶⁸ Maitland, *Township*, p. 142.

⁶⁹ *Rotuli Parliamentorum*, I, pp. 243-65, usefully analysed in Rickword, 'Taxations of Colchester'. See too Masschaele, *Peasants*, pp. 18-29.

⁷⁰ Willard, *Parliamentary taxes*, p. 85; Jenks, 'Lay subsidies', pp. 24-9.

movables assessed at £3 0s. 4d.), was taxed on 1½ q of rye, 1 q of oats, and 1½ q of beans as well as on a heifer, eight sheep, four lambs, and two pigs.⁷¹ The importance of agriculture in town life is suggested by riots against local landlords accused of robbing townsmen of pasture rights. In Colchester more conflict of this kind is on record from the early fourteenth century than from any other period of the middle ages.⁷²

A mixed collection of employments was no second best, a resort to which the poor would be driven but which wealthier men might escape. Even at the wealthier end of society, where increased specialization was surely paying off in high productivity and high earnings, occupational specialization was limited. The ranks of those who were unspecialized through poverty and lack of skill blended by imperceptible distinctions into the ranks of those who prudently limited their degree of specialization by choice. Farming, in particular, brought both cultural and practical advantages, and even wealthy craftsmen, tradesmen, and village professionals acquired and retained what land they could.⁷³ At the time of his death in 1320, Adam the baker of Botesdale (Suffolk) had two stalls and a shop in the market together with 39 acres of land, a substantial family farm by the standards of the early fourteenth century.⁷⁴ John Walter, a tanner of Oldbury (Worcs.), had several employees in his workshop but he also held a large amount of land and is classified by Razi as a rich villager.⁷⁵ John the clerk of Oldbury, who died of plague in 1349, was indeed a clerk; he wrote one of the surviving Halesowen court rolls. But this was only part-time employment, since he was also a prosperous farmer with crops and livestock in his charge; someone in his household brewed commercially as well.⁷⁶ On the Ramsey Abbey Huntingdonshire estates in 1252 Richard the forester and Reginald the clerk had virgates at Holywell and Needingworth, Andrew the carpenter had a virgate at Ripton Abbots; at Wistow Thomas the cook had two virgates and a former brewer called Thomas had a virgate.⁷⁷ Occupational names were less common among virgaters than among lesser tenants, maybe because they were less commonly engaged in wage-earning and craft activities, but perhaps because they were more likely to be identified by their land and their parentage than by any particular occupation.

In the towns, where it might be supposed that wealthy craftsmen with land would be satisfied to be rentiers, taxation assessments suggest that this was not so. In such records we do not wholly depend upon occupational surnames, since some features of household economy are apparent from the goods listed under each name. The fact that taxable goods relate to whole households rather than to individuals is problematic because it precludes the identification of specialization by gender. With

⁷¹ *Rotuli Parliamentorum*, I, p. 248.

⁷² Britnell, 'Fields', pp. 162-4.

⁷³ *Carte nativorum*, p. xxxvi.

⁷⁴ Smith, 'Periodic market', p. 473.

⁷⁵ Razi, *Life, marriage and death*, p. 83.

⁷⁶ Razi and Smith, 'Origins', p. 64.

⁷⁷ *Cartularium monasterii de Rameseia*, I, pp. 298, 301, 355.

Table 1. *The wealthiest 18 Colchester taxpayers with identified occupational specializations in 1301, showing their grain and livestock assessed for taxation*

Name	Assessment s. d.	Occupation	Grain	Livestock
Henry Pakeman	197 10	tanner	2q rye, 6q barley ^a	2 cows
Gilbert Agote	173 8	fuller	4q rye, 4q barley, 6q oats ^a	1 horse (<i>affer</i>), 2 cows, 4 bullocks, 1 piglet, 60 sheep
William Proveale	155 2	butcher	$\frac{1}{2}$ q wheat, 3q barley, 10q oats	2 cows, 4 pigs
John Menny	116 10	tanner	3q barley, 5q oats, 2q beans ^b	1 horse (<i>affer</i>), 2 pigs
John of Tendring	106 10	tanner	1q rye, 2q barley, 2q oats ^a	1 horse (<i>affer</i>), 1 cow, 2 pigs
Henry Person	103 1 $\frac{1}{2}$	butcher	2q barley, 3q oats	2 horses (<i>equi</i>), 2 pigs
Thomas le Herde	84 4	herd	2q rye, 4q oats	1 mare, 2 bullocks, 3 cows, 2 heifers, 12 sheep, 3 pigs
Richard of Dyerham	82 2	ironmonger	$\frac{1}{2}$ q wheat	2 pigs
Richard of Wyseton	81 10	mercier	1q oats	1 hackney (<i>hakeney</i>), 1 pig
Adam of Coggeshall	80 9	shoemaker	—	4 piglets
William Gray	80 4	mercier	1q barley, 1q oats	1 hackney (<i>hakeney</i>), 1 cow, 2 pigs
Robert le Verrer	79 7	glazier	$\frac{1}{2}$ q rye, 3q barley	1 hackney (<i>hakeney</i>), 1 cow, 1 pig, 4 sheep, 10 lambs
Richard Noreys	76 6	tanner	—	1 horse (<i>equus</i>), 3 sheep
John Colyn	73 0	tailor	—	4 lambs, 1 pig
Edmund Pelliparius	72 8 $\frac{1}{2}$	skinner	1 $\frac{1}{2}$ q wheat, 6b barley, 1q oats	1 horse (<i>equus</i>), 3 pigs
Roger Tinctor	71 5	dyer	1q oats	1 cow, 1 bullock, 1 sow, 2 piglets

Notes: a 'in grangia'

b 'in granario'

John Colyn is identified as a tailor from a charter of 1298 in Mercers' Company, London, Colet Cartulary, fos. 202v-203r. The other occupational descriptions are derived from the tax assessment.

Source: *Rotuli Parliamentorum*, I, pp. 243-65.

this caveat, however, tax records demonstrate the importance of agricultural activity even in the households of the leading urban artisans. Among the best such lists is that for Colchester in 1301. Three of the wealthiest townsmen there had a grange, one had a granary in which grain was stored, and most had some livestock (table 1). The figures are likely to under-represent their farming activity to the extent that these men supplied their own households, since such produce for use was not taxable; it is likely that greater self-sufficiency was one of the advantages of land

ownership. Most of these assessments also include brewing equipment. Since brewing was women's work these details are not considered here, though they would obviously be relevant if the focus was on the mixed composition of household income.⁷⁸ The most optimistic interpretation of such urban specialists is that a tanner with a substantial family holding subsisted on little more than tanning and farming, and to that extent was more specialized than a man with less land as security.

These various arguments, each dependent on a different category of evidence, question the supposition that increasing specialization was the main direction of the development of labour between 1100 and 1300, especially in rural areas. The expectation that commercial growth should lead directly to specialization overlooks the fluctuating availability of employment, the high base-level of unemployment, the insecurity of any particular personal attribute or skill as a foundation for a livelihood, the consequent advantages of maintaining some stake in land ownership wherever possible, and the demonstrable resistance of thirteenth-century artisans and tradesmen to putting all their eggs in one basket when they could avoid doing so. If we are looking for a label to describe the effects of commercial development on the occupational structure, differentiation would be better than specialization. Like the concept of specialization, differentiation implies a movement away from work routines on the land in the course of commercial development, and is compatible with some measure of successful specialization. Unlike the concept of specialization, it does not suggest the creation of any secure and all-embracing new institutional structure. It is a wider concept than specialization, and includes both specialization and casualization as its two extremes.

University of Durham

⁷⁸ Bennett, *Ale, beer and brewers*, pp. 16-33.

Footnote references

- Bailey, M., 'Peasant welfare in England, 1290-1348', *Econ. Hist. Rev.*, LI (1998), pp. 223-51.
 Bennett, H. S., *Life on the English manor: a study of peasant conditions, 1150-1400* (Cambridge, 1937).
 Bennett, J. M., *Women in the medieval English countryside: gender and household in Brigstock before the plague* (Oxford, 1987).
 Bennett, J. M., *Ale, beer and brewers in England: women's work in a changing world* (Cambridge, 1996).
 Britnell, R. H., 'The making of Witham', *Hist. Stud.*, 1 (1968), pp. 13-21.
 Britnell, R. H., 'Minor landlords in England and medieval agrarian capitalism', *P.&P.*, 89 (1980), pp. 227-46.
 Britnell, R. H., 'The fields and pastures of Colchester', *Essex Arch. & Hist.*, 19 (1988), pp. 159-65.
 Britnell, R. H., 'Sedentary long-distance trade and the English merchant class', in P. R. Coss and S. D. Lloyd, eds., *Thirteenth century England*, V (Woodbridge, 1995), pp. 129-39.
 Britnell, R. H., 'Commercialisation and economic development in England, 1000-1300', in R. H. Britnell and B. M. S. Campbell, eds., *A commercialising economy: England, 1086 to c. 1300* (Manchester, 1995), pp. 7-26.
 Britnell, R. H., *The commercialisation of English society, 1100-1500*, 2nd edn. (Manchester, 1996).
Building accounts of King Henry III, ed. H. M. Colvin (Oxford, 1971).
 'The Burton Abbey twelfth century surveys', ed. C. G. O. Bridgeman, in *Collections for a history of Staffordshire*, William Salt Arch. Soc., vol. for 1916 (1918), pp. 209-300.
Calendar of the roll of justices on eyre, 1247, ed. G. H. Fowler, Beds. Rec. Soc., 21 (Bedford, 1939).
 Campbell, B. M. S., 'Agricultural progress in medieval England: some evidence from eastern Norfolk', *Econ. Hist. Rev.*, 2nd ser., XXXVI (1983), pp. 26-46.
 Campbell, B. M. S., 'Population pressure, inheritance and the landmarket in a fourteenth-century

- peasant community', in R. M. Smith, ed., *Land, kinship and life-cycle* (Cambridge, 1984), pp. 87-134.
- Carte nativorum*, ed. C. N. L. Brooke and M. M. Postan, Northants Rec. Soc., 20 (Northampton, 1960).
- Cartularium monasterii de Rameseia*, ed. W. H. Hart and P. A. Lyons, 3 vols., Rolls ser. (1884-93).
- Carus-Wilson, E. M., 'The first half-century of the borough of Stratford-upon-Avon', *Econ. Hist. Rev.*, 2nd ser., XVIII (1965), pp. 46-63.
- The chronicle of Battle Abbey*, ed. and trans. E. Searle (Oxford, 1980).
- Clanchy, M. T., *From memory to written record: England 1066-1307*, 2nd edn. (Oxford, 1993).
- Clark, C., 'Battle c. 1100: an anthroponomyst looks at an Anglo-Norman new town', in *eadem*, *Words, names and history: selected writings* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 221-40.
- DeWindt, E. B., *Land and people in Holywell-cum-Needingworth*, Pontifical Institute of Med. Stud., Stud. & Texts, 22 (Toronto, 1971).
- Dyer, C., 'How urbanised was medieval England?', in J. M. Duvosquel and E. Thoen, eds., *Peasants and townsmen in medieval Europe* (Ghent, 1995), pp. 169-83.
- The early records of Coventry*, ed. P. Coss (British Academy Rec. of Soc. & Econ. Hist., new ser., 11, 1986).
- Fransson, G., *Middle English surnames of occupation, 1100-1350*, Lund Stud. in English, III (Lund, 1935).
- Hanawalt, B. A., *Crime and conflict in English communities, 1300-1348* (Cambridge, Mass., 1979).
- Hanawalt, B. A., *The ties that bound: peasant families in medieval England* (Oxford, 1986).
- Harvey, P. D. A., *A medieval Oxfordshire village: Cuxham, 1240 to 1400*, Hist. MSS. Comm., JP23 (Oxford, 1965).
- Hill, F., *Medieval Lincoln* (Cambridge, 1965).
- Hilton, R. H., *Class conflict and the crisis of feudalism: essays in medieval social history* (1985).
- Hilton, R. H., 'Low-level urbanization: the seigneurial borough of Thornbury in the middle ages', in Z. Razi and R. M. Smith, eds., *Medieval society and the manor court* (Oxford, 1996), pp. 482-517.
- Homans, G. C., *English villagers of the thirteenth century* (New York, 1960).
- Jenks, S., 'The lay subsidies and the state of the English economy (1275-1334)', *Vierteljahrschrift für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte*, 85 (1998), pp. 1-39.
- Keene, D., *Survey of medieval Winchester*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1985).
- Keene, D., 'Shops and shopping in medieval London', in *Medieval art, architecture and archaeology in London*, British Arch. Ass. (1990), pp. 29-46.
- Kershaw, I., *Bolton Priory: the economy of a northern monastery, 1286-1325* (Oxford, 1973).
- Kosminsky, E. A., *Studies in the agrarian history of England in the thirteenth century*, ed. R. H. Hilton, trans. R. Kisch (Oxford, 1956).
- Lobel, M. D., ed., *The atlas of medieval towns*, II (1975).
- Maitland, F. W., *Township and borough* (Cambridge, 1898).
- Manorial records of Cuxham, Oxfordshire, circa 1200-1359*, ed. P. D. A. Harvey (1976).
- Masschaele, J., *Peasants, merchants and markets: inland trade in medieval England, 1150-1350* (New York, 1997).
- Miller, E., 'Medieval York', in P. M. Tillott, ed., *A history of Yorkshire: the city of York*, Victoria Hist. of the Counties of England (Oxford, 1961), pp. 25-116.
- Miller, E. and Hatcher, J., *Medieval England: towns, commerce and crafts, 1086-1348* (1995).
- Mills, A. D., 'Some Middle English occupational terms', *Notes & Queries*, 208 (1963), pp. 249-57.
- Moore, E. W., 'Aspects of poverty in a small medieval town', in E. B. DeWindt, ed., *The salt of common life: individuality and choice in the medieval town, countryside and church. Essays presented to J. Ambrose Raftis* (Kalamazoo, Mich., 1995), pp. 117-56.
- The Northumberland lay subsidy roll of 1296*, ed. C. M. Fraser, Newcastle upon Tyne Soc. of Antiquaries, rec. ser., 1 (Newcastle upon Tyne, 1968).
- Page, F. M., *The estates of Crowland Abbey: a study in manorial organisation* (Cambridge, 1934).
- Penn, A. C. and Dyer, C., 'Wages and earnings in late medieval England: evidence from the enforcement of the labour laws', *Econ. Hist. Rev.*, 2nd ser., XLIII (1990), pp. 356-76.
- Persson, K. G., *Pre-industrial economic growth: social organization and technological progress in Europe* (Oxford, 1988).
- Pleas before the king or his justices, 1198-1212*, ed. D. M. Stenton, 4 vols, Selden Soc., 67, 68, 83, 84 (1953-67).
- Pollock, F. and Maitland, F. W., *The history of English law before the time of Edward I*, 2nd edn., 2 vols. (Cambridge, 1898).
- Postan, M. M., *The famulus*, *Econ. Hist. Rev.* supplement 2 (Cambridge, 1954).
- Postan, M. M., 'Medieval agrarian society in its prime: England', in *idem*, ed., *The Cambridge economic history of Europe, I: the agrarian life of the middle ages* (Cambridge, 1966), pp. 548-632.
- Postan, M. M., *The medieval economy and society: an economic history of Britain, 1100-1500* (1972).

- Postan, M. M. and Titow, J. Z., 'Heriots and prices on Winchester manors', *Econ. Hist. Rev.*, 2nd ser., XI (1959), pp. 383-411.
- Postles, D., *The surnames of Leicestershire and Rutland*, English Surnames Ser., VII (Oxford, 1998).
- Raftis, J. A., *Warboys: two hundred years in the life of an English medieval village*, Pontifical Institute of Med. Stud., Stud. & Texts, 29 (Toronto, 1974).
- Razi, Z., *Life, marriage and death in a medieval parish: economy, society and demography in Halesowen, 1270-1400* (Cambridge, 1980).
- Razi, Z. and Smith, R. M., 'The origins of the English manorial court rolls as a written record: a puzzle', in Z. Razi and R. M. Smith, eds, *Medieval society and the manor court* (Oxford, 1996), pp. 36-68.
- Rickword, G., 'Taxations of Colchester, A.D. 1296 and 1301', *Trans. Essex Arch. Soc.*, new ser., IX (1906), pp. 126-55.
- The roll and writ file of the Berkshire eyre of 1248*, ed. M. T. Clanchy, Selden Soc., 90 (1973).
- Rolls of the justices in eyre being the rolls of pleas and assizes for Yorkshire in 3 Henry III (1218-19)*, Selden Soc., 56 (1937).
- Rotuli hundredorum*, ed. W. Illingworth, 2 vols., Rec. Comm. (1812-18).
- Rotuli parliamentorum*, 6 vols., Rec. Comm. (1783).
- Schofield, P. R., 'Dearth, debt and the local land market in a late thirteenth-century village community', *Agric. Hist. Rev.*, 45 (1997), pp. 1-17.
- Smith, R. M., 'A periodic market and its impact on a manorial community: Botesdale, Suffolk, and the manor of Redgrave, 1280-1300', in Z. Razi and R. M. Smith, eds., *Medieval society and the manor court* (Oxford, 1996), pp. 450-81.
- Stone, D., 'The productivity of hired and customary labour: evidence from Wisbech Barton in the fourteenth century', *Econ. Hist. Rev.*, L (1997), pp. 640-56.
- Thornton, C., 'Efficiency in medieval livestock farming: the fertility and mortality of herds and flocks at Rimpton, Somerset, 1208-1349', in P. R. Coss and S. D. Lloyd, eds., *Thirteenth century England*, IV (Woodbridge, 1992), pp. 25-46.
- Thureson, B., *Middle English occupational terms* (Lund, 1950).
- Urry, W., *Canterbury under the Angevin kings* (1967).
- Vinogradoff, P., *Villainage in England: essays in English medieval history* (1892).
- Wellingborough manorial accounts, A. D. 1258-1323*, ed. F. M. Page, 2nd edn., Northants. Rec. Soc., 8 (Northampton, 1965).
- Willard, J. F., *Parliamentary taxes on personal property 1290 to 1334: a study in medieval financial administration* (Cambridge, Mass., 1934).