

The Lower Orders

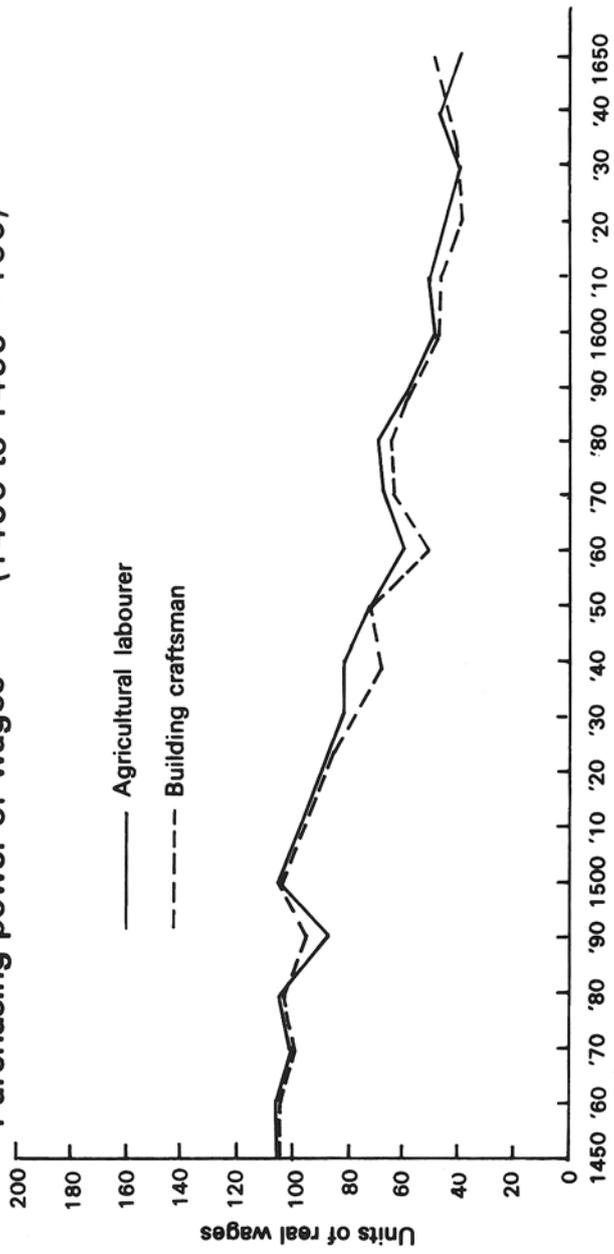
Brian Howells

It is generally agreed by historians that the most significant social division in Tudor society was that between the nobility and gentry on the one hand and, on the other, the 'non-gentle' elements in society, the lower orders, comprising at least 95 per cent of the population. Most people in the latter grouping were peasants, smallholders whose view of the world was moulded by the traditional cultures of their local communities and who relied upon farming as their principal means of subsistence. Their lives were hard and their economic difficulties increased markedly during the period in which the Tudors sat on the throne. When Henry Tudor became King, Wales, like England, had not yet recovered from the effect of the great population slump which had occurred in the late middle ages. *Villeinage* had virtually disappeared, labourers and small farmers were enjoying a relatively high standard of living, and so slack was the demand for land that rents were low and some holdings unoccupied for want of tenants. Within a couple of generations, however, the situation had changed drastically (B.1). There was a dramatic increase in population which resulted in severe inflation, the prices of some foodstuffs increasing sixfold during the course of the sixteenth century, land hunger, a substantial increase in the proportion of landless people in society, a labour glut, and relatively low wages. Many peasants also found that, because land was becoming a more valuable commodity, they were subjected to determined attempts to oust them from their farmlands or to increase their rents.

B.1

For them it was, as *George Owen* remarked, 'a new world', and one in which perhaps the most important single feature affecting the welfare of the peasant was the terms upon which he held his land, for these determined the length and security of his tenancy, the amount of profit which was creamed off by his landlord, and whether or not his widow and heir could retain the family farm after his death. Terminal conditions varied everywhere, their complexities and uncertainties providing a field day for the lawyers. Ensnared by intimidation and the expense of litigation, many peasant farmers failed to defend themselves adequately in the crown courts and in consequence lost some or all of their lands, but the courts were inclined to extend their protection to peasant tenants whenever it could be proved that the *custom of the manor* favoured their case. Manorial customary law was promulgated constantly in the manorial courts, passed on carefully from one generation of tenants to the next, and often written down in manorial surveys and *customals*. It was of critical importance to tenants insofar as it affected the holding and devolution of their lands. Most secure of all tenants were freeholders, who often paid only nominal rents, and those tenants, holding mostly old *villein and escheat lands*, whose rents and entry fines (the sums of money payable when they took up their tenancies) were fixed by manorial custom. Frequently, however, *manorial custom* did not give protection to peasant farmers. There were many whose rents and entry fines

Purchasing power of wages (1450 to 1499 = 100)



were not fixed by custom and who could never be sure that their dependants would be able to retain the land after their deaths, whilst most vulnerable of all were those who held land by one-year leases: from the mid-sixteenth century such unfortunates came under increasing pressure both from landlords seeking to increase their incomes and from the competition of other land-hungry peasants.

These and other major changes created serious tensions within Tudor society. What held it together, more than anything else, was general acceptance of the ancient view that people should accept unquestioningly the validity of the existing social hierarchy, discharge the responsibilities and exercise the privileges appropriate to the status to which they had been born, and obey their social superiors. According to this theory, the sacred right to rule had been conferred by God upon the monarch, who in turn devolved it upon those through whom the realm was governed: at the lowest levels of society this authority would be exercised by the father over his family, and by the master over his work-force (B.2). To challenge it was, as churchmen stressed, a form of sacrilege which merited condign punishment. At every level, social status was reflected in outward appearance, lifestyle and responsibilities, and even within the non-gentle sector of society there were generally-recognized social divisions. Thus the peasantry, comprising the great majority of Tudor Welshmen, was regarded by contemporaries as embracing a number of distinct socio-economic groupings — substantial farmers or *yeomen*, farmers of small and middling means known as *husbandmen*, the labouring classes and, at the bottom of the social scale, the paupers (B.3).

B.2

B.3

Social categorizing has its difficulties, not least those stemming from the fact that various groups tended to overlap. The Tudor gentry clearly regarded themselves as distinct from, and socially superior to, *yeomen*, but many Welsh *yeomen* were descended from *cadet* branches of gentry families, and it was not uncommon for them to be wealthier than the poorer gentry. Moreover, the *yeomen* and lesser gentry shared similar roles in public affairs, taking their turns on *hundredal juries* and on the petty and sometimes the grand juries of *quarter and great sessions*, attending county courts and participating in elections for knights of the shire, serving as high constables of *hundreds*, and working side by side in ordering the affairs of the localities in which they lived. There were parts of Wales in which, by the late sixteenth century, many *yeomen* were literate, but it is impossible without further research to know how widespread literacy was at this level. Like the *Kulaks* of pre-Revolutionary Russia, they formed a self-conscious status group set apart from the rest of the peasantry by virtue of wealth, their scale of living, and the sizes of their farms. Indeed, in many areas there were clearly-recognized 'yeomen farms' just as there were recognizable gentry estates. For the most part these were ancient freeholds, but there were *yeomen* who farmed mainly *leasehold* and customary lands. If there was no resident gentry family in the parish the *yeomen* would provide social leadership, holding the most important parochial offices and serving as overseers of the poor, surveyors of highways and churchwardens.

They constituted the most stable element in peasant society. In the Elizabethan period many seem to have rebuilt or modernized their farmhouses. Instead of living in a large, dimly-lit hall with a hearth in the middle of the floor and the smoke escaping eventually through a louvre in the roof, the new vogue with the go-ahead yeoman was for a two-storeyed house with a larger number of rooms, purpose-built chimneys, staircases giving easy access to the upper rooms, and small windows fitted usually with semi-opaque materials but occasionally with glass. It all made for a considerable advance in terms of comfort and privacy, and it is clear from the *probate* inventories of *yeomen* both that their houses were amply furnished and that many flaunted a number of prestige possessions such as silver spoons and salt cellars (B.4). Often they kept weapons in their houses, for, like able-bodied men of all other social groups, they were liable to serve in the militia (B.5).

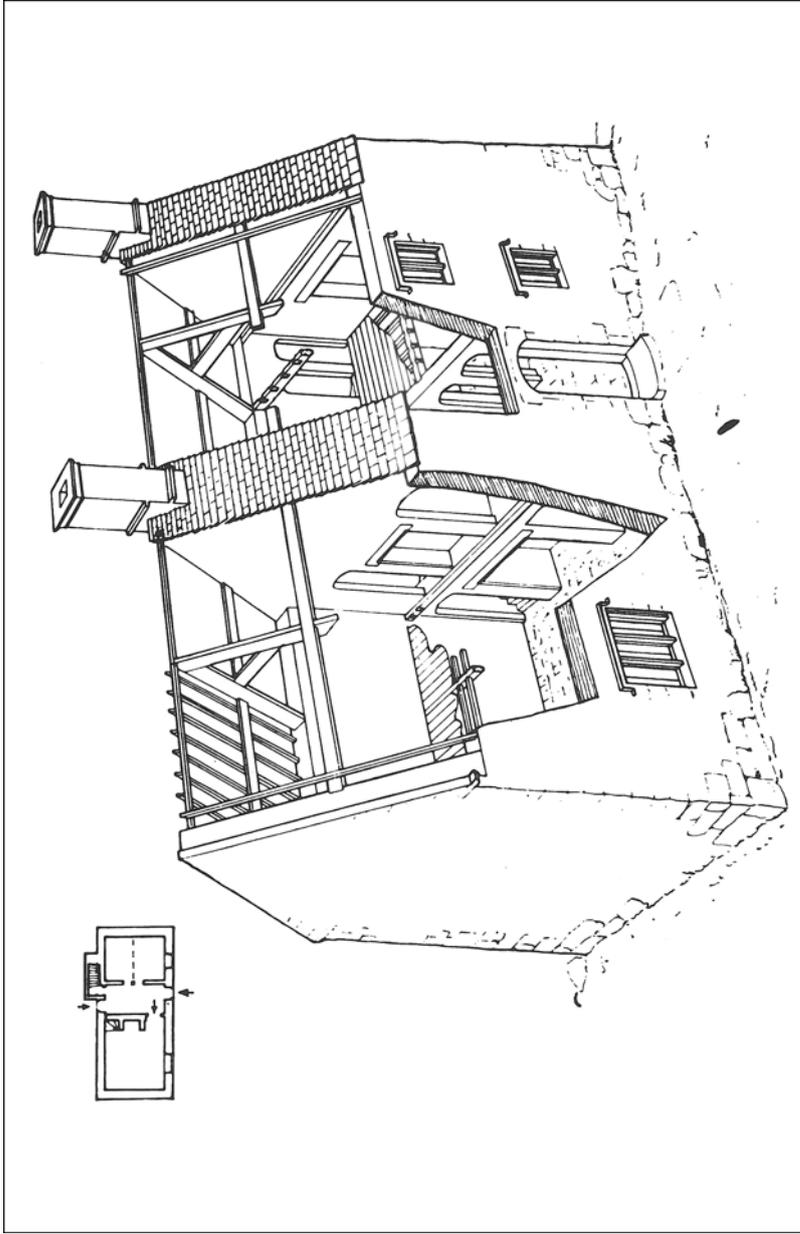
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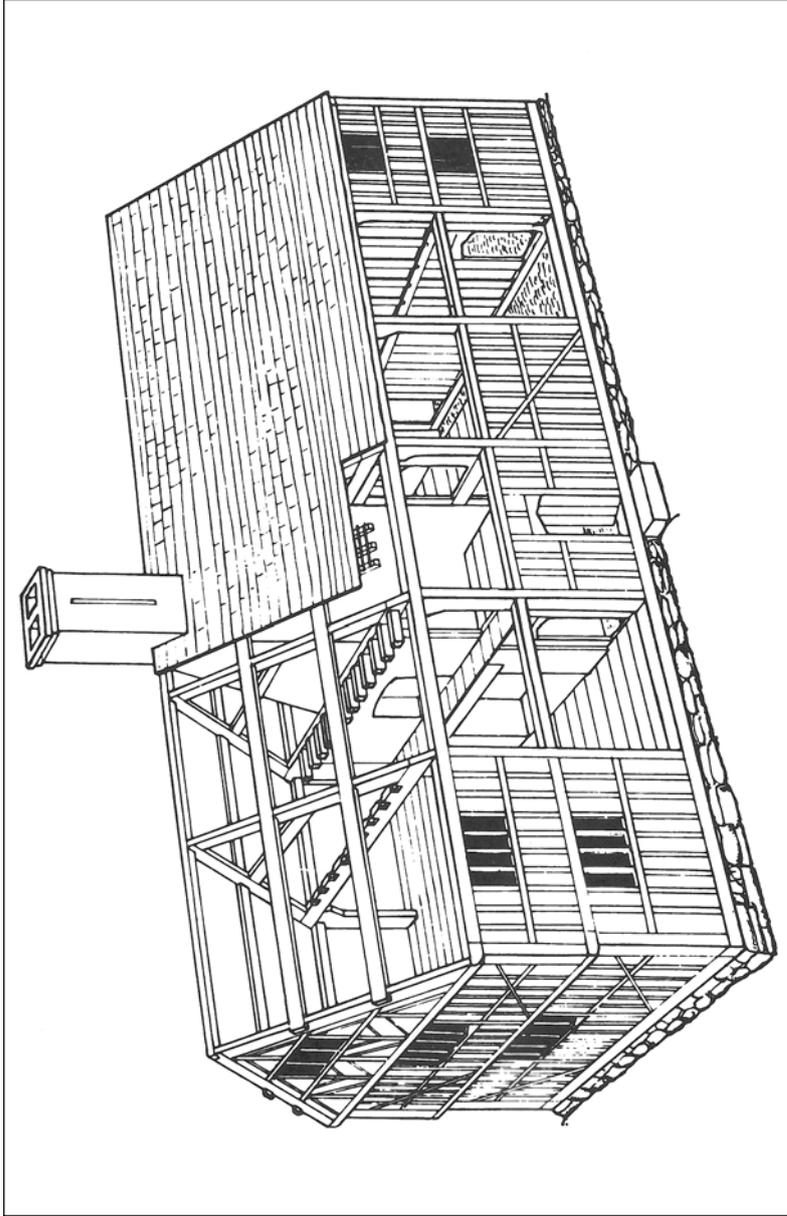
Only a small minority of Welsh peasants were *yeomen*: the great majority were *husbandmen*, farmers who occupied small to middling-sized holdings and who, even in good times, could hope to achieve only a modest level of prosperity (B.6). Many were materially little better off than labourers and forced to supplement their incomes by working on a part-time or seasonal basis for large farmers or in the woollen, fishing, mining and craft industries. Often it is very difficult to establish precisely how large their farms were, for most manorial rentals and surveys of the period list tenants without revealing the names of the sub-tenants who, in many instances, actually worked the land. It is evident that during Elizabeth's reign most of them farmed smallholdings which were either customary holdings with unfixed rents, unfixed fines, or both, or else lands leased from manorial tenants. This meant that they were at the mercy of their landlords, who could afford to pick and choose their tenants and exact food-gifts and labour services in addition to high cash rents. Furthermore, many lived on such a narrow margin between sufficiency and disaster that in years of cattle disease or crop failure they faced what French historians have termed 'crises of subsistence'.

B.6

In early modern England roughly one harvest in six was a failure, and whilst there is no certainty that this was the case in Wales, where patterns of corn production showed considerable local variations and defective documentation precludes the construction of grain price indices for most years, the general effects of harvest failure were similar. Even though harvest failure may not have caused widespread starvation in Wales, as was often the case in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century France, it did force many *husbandmen* to face various unpleasant options. Most Welsh farmers, even in upland areas, strove to be as self-reliant as possible in terms of corn production. Because they were not primarily concerned with production for the open market but with supplying their own households, they often grew small acreages of several different grains as part of their mixed farming programmes, thereby minimizing the chances of total crop failure. When harvests were particularly bad, though, they had to choose between borrowing corn or money, selling off some of their livestock, or eating into their seed-corn, thereby jeopardizing the harvest of the following year.



The type of house favoured by south Wales yeomen during the 'great rebuilding'.
(Source: Cambridge University Press.)



The type of house commonly favoured in the Severn valley during the 'great rebuilding'.
(Source: Cambridge University Press.)

Temporary indebtedness was widespread among the *husbandmen* of Tudor Wales, but debt increased radically following catastrophic harvests and outbreaks of disease among livestock, and sometimes led to the borrowing of large sums which could only be secured by mortgaging their lands. The number of unredeemed *mortgages* surviving amongst the estate records of the landed gentry tells its own story.

It would be wrong to represent the *husbandmen* of Tudor Wales as being fully self-subsistent (B.7). Normally they tried to produce as many of the necessaries of life as possible themselves, but they were inexorably caught up in a cash economy and one which functioned imperfectly because of periodic shortages of corn in the countryside. Cash had to be found to pay rents and fines, to meet taxes due to the Crown, county rates and parish dues, to make occasional payments to priests and lawyers, and for purchasing goods such as salt, pitch and iron which were normally acquired from the merchants of the market towns. Those who failed to meet their financial obligations simply slithered out of the ranks of the farming community and joined the swelling mass of landless labourers.

B.7

By the end of Elizabeth's reign, perhaps quarter of the population of Wales fell into the latter category, the great majority working on the land or in industries dependent upon agriculture. The general conditions affecting their employment were set out in the *Statute of Artificers* (1563), a measure which consolidated much earlier legislation and which was, according to its preamble, intended to 'banish idleness, advance husbandry, and yield unto the hired person both in time of scarcity and in the time of plenty a convenient proportion of wages' (B.8). Amongst other provisions the act stipulates that well-to-do farmers could force the children of the rural poor to serve as so-called 'apprentices in husbandry' from the age of ten until they were twenty-one, that unemployed men between the ages of twelve and sixty could be compelled to work as agricultural labourers, and that single women between the ages of twelve and forty could be committed to ward and forced to work. Wage rates for the lower orders were fixed annually by justices of the peace and tended to lag further and further behind the rate of inflation. The whole system ensured the existence of a large pool of cheap labour and subjected the labouring classes to tight social discipline.

B.8

Farm workers fell into two distinct categories. Unmarried farm servants lived with their employers and were hired by the year, frequently at autumnal 'hiring fairs' but also at 'hiring sessions' held under the supervision of local JPs and high constables. They received board and lodging, small cash wages, and often their clothing (B.9). Maidservants usually slept in the farmhouse and menservants in the outbuildings, an arrangement which lasted until the early part of this century. They were often kept in order by strict discipline and physical chastisement, but if they worked satisfactorily they enjoyed a reasonable degree of security. Such was not the case with married farm labourers, who were employed, often irregularly, at such low rates of pay that all but the very youngest members of their family were forced to work (B.10). They lived, for the most part, in squalid impermanent houses, had few material possessions, spent most of their lives out of doors, and were greatly dependent upon the goodwill of neighbouring farmers. When they proved insubordinate or unwilling to work they were liable to be despatched by the

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B.10

local JPs and high constables to the 'House of Correction' in the county town, where conditions were so harsh that they soon learned to be answerable to the demands of their betters.

Few documentary sources refer to the problem of poverty in Wales before the passing of the 1536 *Act of Union*, but from about that time public authorities became increasingly concerned about it, partly, no doubt, from compassion, but also out of concern lest widespread pauperism might lead to increased disorders and crime and out of a desire to keep poor rates as low as possible. The principal reason for the growth of pauperism in the sixteenth century was that the population was rising rapidly whereas the supply of peasant smallholdings was not, but bad harvests, trade depressions and purely local economic difficulties exacerbated the problem from time to time. Tudor governments had no means of tackling the basic causes of increased pauperism: instead they endeavoured to cope with its symptoms, and this they did in a series of statutes and royal proclamations culminating in the famous *Poor Law of 1598*. A policy evolved of dividing the poor into a number of broad categories, each of which received different treatment. The 'deserving poor', a group embracing orphans, abandoned children, cripples, aged people without any means of support and those able-bodied paupers who were willing to work but unable to find employment, were to be given relief either at home or in alms houses, whilst 'rogues and vagabonds' were to be harried and punished and, wherever possible, forced to settle down. In theory all the settled poor were to be under close control and supervision. Periodically they were rounded up and forced to attend 'sessions for labourers', where local JPs sought to enforce the provisions of the *Statute of Artificers*, notably by apprenticing older children, finding work for adults, and punishing the disobedient and work-shy (B.11). They also appointed guardians of the poor within each parish who were authorized to raise poor rates, house, feed and clothe the homeless poor, and dole out supplementary relief wherever necessary. The task of bringing the vagrant poor to heel was entrusted to the unpaid parish constables who were instructed to arrest them, whip them soundly, and send them back to their birthplaces or last known place of settlement (B.12). What is remarkable is that so many paupers continued to wander the countryside despite the harshness of the law and the rigour with which it was enforced. Undoubtedly, some vagrants were rogues who terrorized and preyed upon ordinary householders, especially those living in remote places, but others were simply seeking to escape starvation or the persecution of officials, or else in search of work. Whatever the reason, the official view was that the poor were not supposed to wander far from their homes unless instructed to do so by their masters and in possession of a chit or letter of authorization. There were timorous, lazy and merciful constables who turned a blind eye to their activities, but they themselves were liable to punishment for neglect of duty. Late in Elizabeth's reign provost marshals and posses were employed in hunting down vagrants and meting out arbitrary punishment, but despite this draconian approach to the problem a writer of James I's reign could note that there were still thousands of vagrants in the country who had never known a settled home in their lives.

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Many of the footloose poor made their way towards the towns of Wales and the borderland, and some went even further afield. During a purge of vagrant

rogues in London in 1582 it was noted that many were Welsh but that few had been in the capital for more than three or four months, and when the city fathers of Worcester discussed the influx of poor people into their city two years later it was alleged that most had come from Wales. Within Wales itself towns were small, and it is unlikely that more than ten per cent of the population were town-dwellers (it has been estimated that in Elizabethan Glamorgan about one person in seven lived in a town, but the proportion was almost certainly lower in most other Welsh shires). Each town had a clearly defined social hierarchy. Most were run by small groups of wealthy *burgesses* who claimed gentry status and were frequently descended from *cadet* branches of local gentry families. Even poorer members of town councils often termed themselves 'gentlemen' by virtue of their office, though it is doubtful whether the county gentry would have accepted their pretensions. For the rest, urban status was largely a matter of wealth, and all towns rested solidly on a substantial stratum of unprivileged residents.

In town and countryside alike, the prime concern of most Tudor Welshmen was with the survival of their families, which hinged primarily upon the quality of the harvest. Milk and milk products, together with bread and other farinaceous foodstuffs, formed the basis of their diet. The bread of the poor varied considerably in composition from district to district, and when corn was in short supply it was often made partly of peas and beans. They ate little butchers' meat but exploited all local sources of food, including small birds, rabbits, hares, eels and fish: indeed, no fewer than 163 days in the year were 'fish-days' when the eating of flesh was proscribed. In times of extremity the poor fell back on a whole range of substitute foods, including roots, berries and bark, a situation which led inevitably to malnutrition, vulnerability to illness, epidemic diseases and dramatic increases in death rates. When ill or injured the lower orders had recourse, not to qualified physicians, but to the elders, 'white witches' and 'wizards', and sometimes the priests, of their local communities, and in times of dire distress to the apothecaries and barber-surgeons of nearby towns. Physical drudgery was part of everyday life.

The main source of energy available to the peasantry was muscle-power, and the working day lasted from dawn to dusk in winter and from 5 am until after 7pm in summer. Until 1552 there were forty-three 'holy days' or holidays in the year, apart from Sundays, but a statute of that year reduced the number to twenty-three, though *George Owen* of Henllys observed in his commonplace book that an extra holiday, the feast of St Curig on 16 June, was also observed. What sustained men under these circumstances was stoicism, good humour, the appreciation of pleasures now rare — the beauty of an undesecrated landscape, the richness of their orally-transmitted cultures, close family ties, the gaiety of communal recreation (B.13) counted for much — and, as a counterpoise to the harshness of their everyday lives, a religious faith which offered the prospect of eternal joy to all who lived by the precepts and instructions of the priests, masters and local magnates who ruled their little worlds.

B.13

Sources

B.1 And first I will begin with the tenants of the country, wherein I speak in general, including therein the greatest number, which in times past were tenants at will, and few sought leases, for most commonly the landlord rather made suit for a good tenant to take his land than the tenant to the landlord. Such was the scarcity of good tenants in those days there to be found that glad was the lord to hit upon a good, thrifty and husbandly tenant and, as for fines (sums of money payable to landlords at the beginning of tenancies) to be paid, it was not a thing known among them a hundred years past, saving only an earnest penny at the bargain-making . . . In these sixty years the poor tenants were wont to say that the paying of fines was an ill custom raised among them of late . . . But this ancient good custom within these forty years past is sore shaken and almost banished the country, for now the poor tenant that lived well in that golden world is taught to sing unto his lord a new song . . . And standeth so in bodily fear of his greedy neighbour that two or three years ere his lease ends he must bow to his lord for a new lease, and must pinch it out many years to heap money together . . .

(George Owen, *The Description of Penbrockshire*, 1603, ed. Henry Owen, 1, 1892, pp.190–1).

B.2 Almighty God hath created and appointed all things in heaven, earth and waters, in a most excellent and perfect order. In heaven He hath appointed distinct and several orders and states of Archangels and Angels. In earth he hath assigned and appointed Kings, Princes, with other Governors under them, in all good and necessary order . . . Every degree of people in their vocation, calling and office hath appointed to them their duty and order: some are in high degree, some in low, some Kings and Princes, some inferiors and subjects, priests and laymen, masters and servants, fathers and children, husbands and wives, rich and poor: and everyone hath need of other . . . Take away Kings, Princes, rulers, magistrates, judges and such estates God's order . . . and there must needs follow all mischief and utter destruction both of souls, bodies, goods, and commonwealths.

(The homily of Obedience, 1547).

B.3 The fourth sort or class amongst us is . . . day labourers, poor *husbandmen*, yea merchants or retailers which have no free land, *copyholders* and all artificers . . . These have no voice or authority in our commonwealth, and no account is made of them, but only to be ruled.

(Sir Thomas Smith, *The Commonwealth of England*, 1583).

Household goods of a yeoman

B.4 2 feather beds 40s; 2 caddows [rough woollen coverings] 40s; 2 pairs sheets 10s; 2 blankets 4s; 2 bolsters, 2 pillows 4s; 1 standing bedstead 10s; 1 cupboard 10s; 1 old 'bord' [table] 12*d*; 1 chair 12*d*; 1 trunk 10s; 1 old chest 4*d*; 1 truckle bed 2s; 1 carpet for a round table 2s; 2

tablecloths for a round table and 1 for a long table 5s; 1 long table board with a frame 5s; 1 old skew [a high-backed wooden settle whose seat formed the lid of a coffer] 2s; 2 forms 12d; 6 brass pans, 1 cauldron 40s; 3 crocks of brass 12s; 3 hoopheads, 1 pipe, kive, 1 kinderkin 10s; 2 winnowing sheets, 2 sacks 4s; 26 pieces of pewter 12s; 4 brass candlesticks 4s; 1 pewter salt cellar 6d; 2 brandises [trivets] 12d; 1 brush, 1 frying pan 2s; 4 silver spoons 12s; 1 little bedstead 6d; 1 lantern, 4 stone troughs 4s; 1 iron grate 2s; 1 churn 12d; 1 bucket 3d; 1 cloak 40s; 1 pewter chamber pot 12 d.

Total value of all his goods and chattels — £93

(National Library of Wales: probate inventory of Peter Cheane of Walwyn's Castle, 1601).

- B.5** It is necessary that by your precept to the constables of the hundreds, and other like officers, all able men from 16 years of age upwards within the limits of your commission in parish, hamlet or village, be sworn to appear at a day and place fixed for musters . . . Therefore it shall be well done to command that the names and surnames of all such persons able to bear arms be immediately written down by the constables of the hundreds or other officers, naming every householder by himself with his sons, menservants, apprentices, journeymen or other sojourners or indwellers able to bear arms, and that the said householder be charged to bring all the said persons with their armour or weapons at such times as shall be limited.

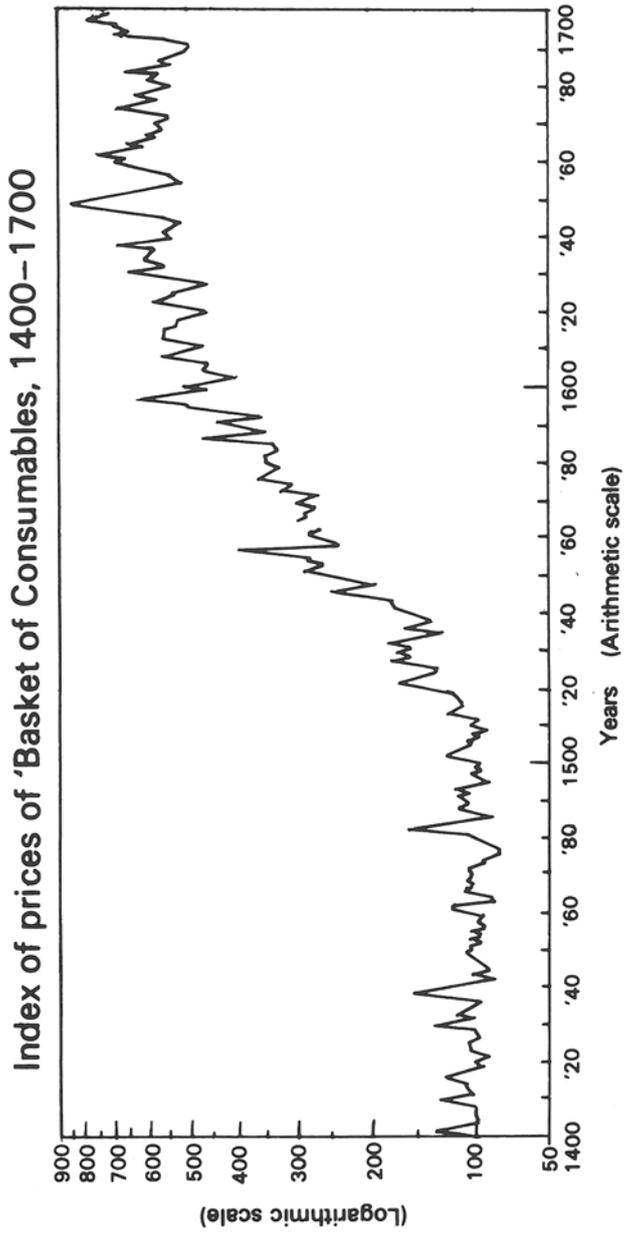
(Privy Council to the commissioner appointed for taking general musters in Denbighshire, 1580, in R. Flenley (ed.), *A. calendar of the register of the Council in the Marches of Wales*, pp. 200–1).

Household goods of a husbandman

- B.6** 1 cauldron 10s; 3 pans 10s; 1 crock, 1 posnet [small pan with a handle and three feet] 4s; frying pan 6d; pewter dishes 3s 4d; 1 pewter pot 6d; 2 candlesticks 12d; 1 cupboard 2s; 1 skew 3s 4d; 1 'turn' [spinning wheel] 6d; 1 pair of hand cards 4d; a table board with frame 6s 8d; 1 form 6d; 2 cofferes 2s; 1 brush 12d; 1 brandiron 6d; 2 bedsteads 2s; 2 pairs blankets, 1 coverlet 6s; 1 bolster 12d; a coal chimney 5s; 2 'brassages' [brass vessels?] 12d; 1 stand 12d; 1 bucket 3d; 1 hutch 12d.

Total value of all his goods and chattels — £16..14s..4d.

(National Library of Wales: probate inventory of Lewis Gibbon of Uzmaston, 1601).



Index of Prices of Basket of Consumables 1400-1700.

This graph demonstrates the dramatic inflation in prices in the Tudor period. Prices remain relatively stable between 1400 and 1500, hovering around the notional index figure of 100. Then, from 1500-1600, the increase in prices is dramatic, indicating a six-fold increase (600 on the index) around 1600. The rate of increase then levels off.

B.7 First, as touching the trade of life, the poorest *husbandman* liveth upon his own travail [labour], having corn, butter, cheese, beef, mutton, poultry and the like of his own sufficient to maintain his house. He maketh the apparel of him and his family of his own wool and seldom useth any money, but those that want such necessaries are driven to buy altogether in a manner at days [i.e. on credit, days being fixed for repayment], for seldom buyeth any of the poorer sort anything for ready money. Corn, butter, cheese, wool and such like the poor man buyeth of his rich neighbour at days and commonly their payments are from May to mid-November, for all that while is the country of Wales full of fairs. Then are their cattle, sheep, lambs, swine, wool and other matters in price so that he that hath any of these to sell all the summer shall be sure of money. But from November to May they have nothing wherewith to make money . . . so that whatsoever you sell they will have a day of payment till summer or else they will not deal with you. Likewise for their iron, salt, oil, lincloth, pitch, tar, spice and such things that are to be had out of towns, the townsman selleth the same at days also, and of all these things that he buyeth he seldom or never buyeth the value of 40s. of any one man . . . And thus much for the order and trade of living used by the poorer sort of people in Wales, whereby this multitude of small actions ariseth, for there are none but the poorer sort of people that are sued in these base courts.

(George Owen, *The Dialogue of the Government of Wales*, 1594, ed. Henry Owen, I, 1982).

B.8 Every person between the age of 12 years and the age of 60 years not being lawfully retained nor apprentice [apart from a number of listed exemptions] . . . nor having a father or mother then living or other ancestor whose heir apparent he is having lands [etc.] of the yearly value of £10 or above, or goods or chattels of the value of £40, nor being a necessary or convenient officer or servant lawfully retained as is aforesaid, nor having a convenient farm or holding . . . shall . . . by virtue of this statute be compelled to be retained to serve in husbandry by the year with any person that keepeth husbandry and will require any such person so to serve . . .

Two justices of peace, the mayor or other head officer of any city [etc.] and two aldermen or two other discreet *burgesses* . . . if there be no aldermen, may appoint any such woman as is of the age of 12 years and under the age of 40 years and unmarried and forth of service . . . to be retained or serve by the year or by the week or day for such wages and in such reasonable sort as they shall think meet . . .

And for the better advancement of husbandry and tillage and to the intent that such as are fit to be made apprentices to husbandry may be bounden thereunto . . . every person being a householder and having half a ploughland at the least in tillage may receive as an apprentice any person above the age of 10 years and under the age of 18 years to serve in husbandry until his age of 21 years at the least, or until the age of 24 years as the parties can agree . . .

(Statute of Artificers, 1563. A.E. Bland, P.A. Brown and R.H. Tawney (eds.), *English Economic History. Select Documents*, pp.326–30).

B.9 *The overall annual profit of a farm* Courthall [Cwrt, Eglwysrwrw, was a farm belonging to *George Owen* of Henllys]. 12 November 1593 . . . People in household and daily charge in the farm and labour aforesaid.

<i>Persons in house</i>	The ploughman or chief servant His wife	
	One other man servant	
	Two ploughboys	8 persons . . .
	One shepherd	
	Two labouring maids	

26 bushels of corn yearly allowed towards the maintaining of the said 8 persons in the year i.e. half a bushel weekly at 6s.8d. the bushel — £9 6s. 8d.

4 bushels of oaten malt allowed for their drink from Allhallowtide till May, during which time there is no store of milk to be had, 5s. the bushel — 20s . . .

Item, allowed them 13s.4d. for providing of flesh against certain feasts in the year — 13s.4d.

6 stones of cheese and 6 gallons of butter allowed them from November till May for their finding during that space, during which time there is no milk to be had. Valued at 5s. the stone and the gallon £3.

In candles allowed them in the winter time — 2s . . .Wages to the man and his wife for the year — 46s.8d.

To the second ploughman for the year — 166s.8d.

To two ploughboys 8s.4d. apiece — 16s.8d.

To the shepherd — 13s.4d.

To two labouring maids 12s apiece — 24s . . .

Bedclothes yearly about my said people which will be worn, in average years worth — 10s . . .Offerings in the Church for the said 8 persons at 3 1/2d. apiece in the year — 12d.[sic] . . .

The hire of 240 persons in harvest besides my own servants, reaping and binding, men at 3d. and women at 2d. the day — 47s.4d. [He is referring not to the employment of 240 people, but to payments for 240 working days].

(George Owen, *The Taylors Cussion*, Part 1, ff.33–4).

B.10 What I shall speak here touching the constitution of the bodies of the people of this country must be understood of the general and common sort of people in the country, being the greatest number, and not of the

gentlemen, serving-men or townsmen . . . This kind of people I find to be very mean [poor] and simple, short of growth, broad and shrubby [under-sized] . . . The cause of this disability of persons is easily to be discerned if a man looks into the state of the country and education of the meaner sort of people . . . for I have by good account numbered three thousand young people to be brought up continually in herding of cattle within this shire [Pembrokeshire], who are put to this idle education when they are first come to be ten or twelve years of age and turned to the open fields to follow their cattle, when they are forced to endure the heat of the sun in his greatest extremity to parch and burn their faces, hands, legs, feet and breasts in such sort as they seem more like tawny Moors than people of this land. And then with the cold, frost, snow, hail and wind they are so tormented, having the skin of their legs, hands, face and feet all in chinks and chaps . . . that, poor fools, they may well hold opinion with the papists that there is a purgatory . . .

And when they have redeemed their liberty out of this purgatory by attaining to twenty or twenty four years of age, then are they held in such continual labour in tilling of the land, burning of lime, digging of coals, and other slaveries and extreme toils, as while they live they never come in shape, favour or comeliness to be accounted among the number of personable men, and yet perchance, his deformity notwithstanding, as serviceable in proof as he that looketh with a fairer countenance . . . The gentlemen, serving men and the townsmen of this country are not so unserviceable, but are very personable, comely and tall men, which confirmeth my former assertion that the hard labour, parching of the sun and starving [suffering greatly] with cold is a chief cause of the unseemliness of the common people of this country, seeing the gentlemen, serving men and those brought up in towns, which are not tormented with these extremities of heat and cold, nor tired with toil, do prove more personable. And of the common people of this country the Welshmen, whom the rest call 'the mountain men', are found to be the more personable, as men not so cloyed with labour as those that live by tillage.

(George Owen, *The Description of Penbrockshire, 1603*, ed. Henry Owen, 1, 1892, pp.41–4).



Reaping scene from Holinshed's Chronicles, 1577. (Source: BBC Hulton Picture Library.)

B.11 [He is to summon a jury of 24 substantial freeholders and all the high and petty constables of Cemais and Cilgerran hundreds to appear before the local JPs at Newport, the latter] . . . having with them fair written the names and surnames of all day labourers, artificers and masterless servants being above the age of twelve years and under the age of threescore, and all cottagers such as have not sufficient land belonging to their houses, farms and tenements to employ their labour about tilling and working thereof . . . and all other[s] that are compellable to serve by the laws and statutes of this realm, and that you do give in charge that the said petty constables do warn . . . every of them to be likewise there . . . and that you cause the said high constables and petty constables to arrest and attach all persons brought up in any of the arts or sciences specified in the said statute made in the fifth year of the Queen's Majesty's reign [i.e. the *Statute of Artificers*, 1563], or that hath used any of the same arts for three years, and being under the age of 30 years or unmarried, and which refuse to serve in any of the said arts, and every other person from the age of 12 years to 60 that refuse to be retained by the year in husbandry; and also that they do attach all such persons that depart from one town, hundred or shire to another without a testimonial of his departure thence, and all persons that retain any such person into service so departing without licence, and all persons retained in building or other work and that departeth before the work finished; and also all artificers, craftsmen, labourers and other persons that giveth or receiveth excessive wages or hire . . . and also . . . all persons between the age of ten years and eighteen years which are compellable at yet refuse to be bound 'prentice in husbandry . . .

(Form of a warrant to the sheriff for summoning a sessions for labourers, in George Owen, *The Taylors Cussion*, Part 1, ff.87–87d.).

B.12 On the 20th August, strict watch is to be kept, as well throughout the shires as in places exempt, from 7 p.m. to 3 o'clock next afternoon by constables and two, three or more of the most substantial parishioners. All rogues, vagabonds and masterless men are to be arrested and punished by stocking and sharp and severe whipping according to the laws, afterwards sending them on, from constable to constable, until they reach their native place or last abode within three years . . . Similarly action shall be taken on the 12th September and October and then each 15 or 20 days, not omitting to punish any vagabond found between the specified times . . . Hampton Court, 30th July 1571.

(Letter from the Privy Council to the Council in the Marches of Wales, in R. Flenley (ed.), *A calendar of the register of the Council in the Marches of Wales*, p.96).

North Wales, circa 1600

B.13 Upon the Sundays and holiday (holy days) the multitude of all sorts of men, women and children of every parish to use to meet in sundry places, either on some hill or on the side of some mountain, where their harpers and crowthers (fiddlers) sing them songs of the doings of their ancestors, namely of their wars against the kings of this realm and

the English nation. And then do they rip up their pedigrees at length, how each of them is descended from those their old princes.

(British Library, Lansdowne MS 111, f.10).

Debating the Evidence

The documents which Brian Howells uses are similar in many respects to those used by Gwynfor Jones in his material on the gentry. They are mainly commentaries by contemporary writers, lists of possessions and estate records. Again, that doyen of Welsh Elizabethan historians, *George Owen* of Henllys, is an invaluable source of information. There is one crucial difference. In the previous section, gentlemen antiquaries were analysing and commenting on their own class. In this section they are observing their inferiors, socially and in terms of wealth and lifestyle. The controllers or arbiters of Tudor society in the local community across Wales were the gentry. Their evidence about the lower orders is invaluable but is bound to present us with a much less complete picture, and a less reliable picture, than when the gentry comment on their own attitudes. There are whole areas of the experience of the lower orders which are likely to remain closed to us because as a group they left no record.

Source B.1

Given that *George Owen* himself was the owner of a sizeable estate what evidence is there here to suggest that his comments on the fate of tenants are likely to be true? Why might he take such a sympathetic view towards *leaseholders*?

Source B.2

In what kind of society do you think a document such as this would be necessary? From what directions, if any, might a challenge to this hierarchic view of social relationships be mounted?

Source B.3

Should historians be wary of contemporary social categorization? Do you think Sir Thomas Smith means the same by 'class' as we would today? What do Documents B.2 and B.3 have in common? What do they tell us about Tudor society?

Source B.4

Compare this document with A.7. Purely on the basis of these documents, would you say it was easy to categorize Tudor gentry and Tudor *yeomen*?

Source B.5

What view of social responsibility (especially of the role of the householder) is presented by this order?

Source B.6

In what ways would you regard this as a reliable source for assessing the manner in which a Tudor *husbandman* lived?

Source B.7

What do *George Owen's* observations tell us about economic activity in Tudor Wales? According to this document what were the major items and channels of exchange in a rural society? This appears to be an objective account of the lifestyle of a Tudor *husbandman*. *George Owen* was a gentleman. Where would he have got his information about 'the poorer sort of people'?

Source B.8

The source is about the control of young labourers, but what does it tell us about Elizabethan government? And what does it tell us about contemporary perceptions of minimum income, labour mobility, attitude to work and the relationship between vagrancy and disorder?

Source B.9

What can this kind of document tell us about the diet and living standards of farm labourers and of the hierarchy of status within their ranks?

Source B.10

How do you explain the keen social observation and wide social sympathies of *George Owen* as revealed by this passage? There are many artistic representations of gentry and some of 'the common sort of people' — for example, the paintings of Brueghel. If you can find some of these see if the evidence of the paintings supports the evidence of B.10.

Source B.11

What specialist terms in this document need explanation before the historian could make full use of it? How far did Tudor governance in the localities, as revealed by this document, rely on local juries and the compilation of written evidence?

Source B.12

What does this source tell us about the attitude of government to the poor of Tudor Wales? There was an increase in population and dramatic inflation during the sixteenth century. What effect do you think this might have on the incidence of poverty?

Source B.13

The authorship of this document is not given here. How would this reflect on the use to which you put it? What is the only *certain* statement you could make on the basis of this one document? How far does this document reveal

the degree to which traditional customs and hatreds survived in Wales in spite of the 'joyful metamorphosis' referred to in Document A.17?

Discussion

It is very difficult to rescue the mass of people in Tudor Wales from the relative oblivion to which, for so long, historians consigned them. The mass of the population wrote nothing down for the simple reason that they could not write, nor could they read. We must here exercise the essential historical skill of empathy. Our immediate reaction is that this illiteracy must have been a terrible handicap to them and certainly a source of cultural impoverishment. In fact, in the Tudor period, it was neither. Medieval culture, for all but the very few, was an oral and visual culture. Education was largely for clerics and, through them, the administration of government and justice. Two things fundamentally altered this situation. First there was the invention of the printing press; second, the Reformation. The printing press produced a revolution in communications, and the potential for change which a literate population implies, a change as great as any in human history. The Reformation required, in time, a literate population so that people could read the Bible and save their souls. The replacement of the Roman Catholic church as the State church also implied the lingering death of major elements in medieval culture — the mystery and miracle plays, the saints days, the iconography of paintings and statues in churches, the pilgrimages. The Tudor period in England and in Wales saw the beginnings of a revolution in education, culture and religion. However, these changes affected the upper ranks of society to an immeasurably greater extent than the lower. According to Rosemary O'Day, *Education and Society 1500–1800*, (1982, pp. 17–21), it seems likely that even by the *seventeenth* century literacy rates for the population of England were no more than 30 per cent and in England we are dealing with a population whose language was that of the increasing numbers of printed books. In Wales, only the gentry and a proportion *yeomen*, of the lay population, spoke English and were literate, probably under 5 per cent of the population. The accounts we have of the social orders, therefore, are those of people of the status of the Englishman Sir Thomas Smith (B.3), and Welsh gentry such as *George Owen* (B.7), whose evidence on almost all aspects of life in Elizabethan Wales is so vital.

The view which is presented of vagrants, of landless labourers, and of poor tenants in these documents is, therefore, a view from above (B.1, B.10). The statutes quoted here are reliable evidence of some of the measures by which parliament controlled the labour of the poorer orders. Sir Thomas Smith is certainly to be trusted if what we are looking for is an insight into the attitude towards the governed by the governors (B.3). The Homily of Obedience (B.2) provides adequate supporting evidence for Smith's view. The inventories (B.4, B.6) which furnish lists of the possessions of a *yeoman* or a *husbandman* provide an invaluable glimpse into both the scale of their wealth and their lifestyle. We would still need to know whether these were representative lists, and why they were drawn up. If, for example, any kind of taxation depended on the scale of possessions it is likely that the family of a *yeoman* or *husbandman* would seek to minimize their number.

Perhaps the abiding impression, once more, is the richness of *George Owen's* evidence (B.1, B.7, B.9, B.10, B.11). He was one of a new breed in Tudor times, the learned local historian or antiquary who recorded in meticulous detail impressions of what he saw around him (see below, p.105). This was a different kind of history from that which was practised by the *bards* who recounted the glories and gifts of their patrons and the achievements of their patrons' ancestors. It makes possible the writing of a different scale of history by modern historians. Much of the evidence *seems* to be impressive in its neutrality. Document B.1 is an excellent example here. *George Owen* is drawing attention to the plight of tenants in Elizabethan times compared with their former situation when there was less land hunger, more farms for rent, and therefore a different relationship between landlord and tenant. Since *George Owen* was himself a landlord leasing farms to tenants, it seems likely that his generally sympathetic attitude to the plight of tenants accurately reflects the current situation. At the same time it highlights the deficiencies of the evidence relating to the lower classes. They do not speak for themselves.