

An Intro to Peasant Village Life

by Brad Benson

The study of 16th-Century social life is a complex, hotly-debated and ever-evolving topic. What follows is a simplified thumbnail sketch of the life of Elizabethan villagers in the English Midlands (the rich farming region where the village of Willington, and most Renaissance Faires, are imagined to take place). If you wish for citations or have any questions or critiques, my email is bradbensonmassage@yahoo.com. I will also give a short recommended reading list for those who are interested.

Think of the world of the late 16th Century, the Elizabethan Era. What images pop into your head? Most of us, myself included, bring up scenes from the upper classes: the Queen and her court in their finery, splendid halls decked with tapestries, scholars debating knowledge from ancient texts (and occasionally risking an original thought of their own), artists discovering revolutionary new ways to portray their visions.

Most people in Elizabethan England were peasants, I've seen this reckoned at about nine-tenths of the population, and most of these peasants lived in small rural communities. So, were you the average Elizabethan you would rarely, if ever, see any of the above-mentioned scenes. Possibly the only nobles or gentry you might see would be the local rich landlord's family. That is if your village was attached to a manor; many weren't. You might have served in the manor house in your youth, made deliveries there, or (if the Gentleman is particularly hospitable to his tenants) been invited into the front hall along with the rest of the villagers for a drink at Christmas time or for a Harvest Supper. If the landlord happened to own a painting made with modern considerations of perspective and he had it hanging in the room in which he entertained the Holiday revelers, you would have seen one. Other than that, you wouldn't know they existed. As for the Queen, you've heard of her, probably won't ever see her and it's anyone's guess as to how little or much thought you give her Majesties' existence. You have your own life to live in your own world and those things that we tend to think of as the Renaissance haven't affected it much.

Indeed today most of your hipper social historians have stopped using the term Renaissance (except when discussing art, philosophy etc.). Often they lump the whole period from the end of the Middle Ages to the dawn of the Industrial Revolution together under the title of the Early Modern Period. They would argue that there were social changes going on much more important than getting translations straight from the ancient Greek or being able to paint good pictures (for a good yet reasonably concise definition/discussion of the 'Early Modern Period' type the phrase into Wikipedia).

In our modern world most of us have a job; some have two. At this job we might make something (as in a tangible object), often not; what we do "make" is money. We use that money to supply our needs, often buying products made on the other side of the

world. **In the Medieval/pre-modern world, most families grew and made most of what they used.** They grew their own food, textiles, dyes, medicines, made their furniture, spun, wove and sewed clothes, made their household cleaning products (soap, ammonia and lye), built the houses they lived in, roofing them with straw left over from the grain they had grown for food and drink, etc. Certainly, even the most independent peasant family usually couldn't mine, smelt or forge the iron for sewing needles, cook pots and tools. Nor would they have access to salt and certain other necessities without trading outside their village. Still, most of their consumption would be from products of their own village, when not from their own household. One can easily imagine they had very intimate relationships with the physical world around them, their possessions, and the food they ate. Every object around them would have a story: either it was made by someone they knew, a family heirloom, or it was bought with hard-earned money from a peddler from outside the village (a memorably rare event).

Now the transition from the Medieval/pre-modern world to the modern world was not consistent. The extent to which an Elizabethan person lived in either world depended on who you were and where you lived. A journeyman shoemaker in Elizabethan London worked a job, for one boss (the master shoemaker), did mostly one thing (made shoes) and used the money he "made" to provide for himself and his family. He was essentially living a modern life without the benefit of flush toilets. Most villagers would have lived a life not much different from their medieval ancestors. The extent to which they were still "subsistence" farmers, that is growing what they ate and eating what they grew with little real buying and selling going on, is debated. Current scholarly opinion holds that a significant portion of the food an Elizabethan peasant grew would have been sold at market. Technical hairsplitting aside, the crops they grew, the ways they grew them and processed them hadn't changed much, so their daily work would have been much the same as their medieval ancestors. Elizabethan peasants were still generalist farmer/herdsmen (We'll talk more of this in the next essay; 'WORKING THE LAND').

Another thing that would be changing is the amount of trade that would have been done in coin. Their great grandfathers would have rarely seen cash, doing most of their business by bartering goods and services for other goods and services. Thanks in part to the Spanish conquistadors looting the New World for silver and gold, the amount of coin floating around in society is on the rise. Elizabethan villagers would trade in both cash and in kind. In addition to formal, negotiated trade an important aspect of the village economy was the custom of reciprocal gift giving. Suppose your family slaughtered a hog. You'll smoke or salt much of it. But can you eat all of it before it goes bad? To be safe you give the probable surplus to some of your neighbors. No explicit deal has been made or value placed on the pork. Still those neighbors who accepted the gift know that they are now required (not legally but socially) to make you a gift of similar worth within a reasonable amount of time. When your neighbors next brew a big cauldron of ale, or harvest a surplus of radishes from the garden, they'll feel obliged to give you some (of course I don't mean to deny other moral, spiritual and just plain joyously human motivations for sharing). Disregard such obligations and Sunday when you go to church you will get a look. Continued negligence could lead to your family being the focus of talk, and nobody wants that. If left untreated, subtle snubbing could lead to full-blown

shunning. Not only will your family be lonely, but also you would have a hard time making a living. Neighborliness was a very important quality to the Elizabethan villager. There actually are cases from this period where villagers dragged a community member before the manor court on a charge of being unneighborly.

In the Modern World we are individualists living in an increasingly homogeneous world. We may express ourselves by buying unusual shoes unlike any our friends and families have, but they are the same mass-produced shoes that millions of people around the world wear. Around our Elizabethan village, our landlord and his family probably wear clothes made copying the current Spanish style. If they went on a trip to most places in Western Europe their clothes would (more or less) blend in with the local gentry. The Europeans (being cool) might notice details; like that the Gentleman wore his short cloak over both shoulders instead of debonairly draping it off one (English nerd!). Within the village most of us would tend to dress alike, some of our houses would be a little bigger than our less well-off neighbors, but they would all be made with the same materials using the same techniques, decorated in local traditional styles. The same would go for tools, furniture and other possessions. If a peasant from a couple of counties over drove his cart through the village we might know it immediately by his clothes, the style of cart or the breed of the beasts that pulled it. We would certainly know the moment he spoke that he isn't from around here. **In a traditional Medieval community, fitting in is the virtue.** Too much individual expression smacks of sinful pride and unsocial behavior (i.e. unneighborliness).

VILLAGES and TOWNS

Let's pause to define our terms. A **village**, as we'll use the word here, was a settlement of less than 500 people. Most Elizabethans lived in villages of less than 300 (Laslett, p. 54). A **town** usually had 500 to 5000 residents and was an oasis of commerce on a vast agricultural landscape (this is a modern historian's distinction; in the Elizabethan period they called just about any grouping of homes a town from the smallest village to London). A town would typically house merchants, tradesmen and a variety of craftsmen. It would also have a substantial number of peasant families who worked the lands surrounding it (Reed, pps.137-138). The village population would consist almost entirely of peasants with only a few specialized crafts families. There might be one blacksmith for three small villages, and the residents there may have to go elsewhere to find a cooper (barrel maker). Probably neither of these craftsmen could find enough work to keep busy. Most of the time they worked in the fields with the peasants, the better-off craftsmen like the smith having land of their own (Hoskins, p.167). Some goods and services would be brought to the villages by traveling peddlers and wandering craftsmen. Busted cooking pots would be saved until the tinker arrived. He would heat his rivets in your fireplace and do the mending on the spot. If you need an amputation and you can't travel to town, you'd better hope a traveling surgeon happens by soon or one of us will have to give it a try.

THOSE OTHER PEASANTS IN THAT OTHER VILLAGE ARE LYING, THIEVING SQUINTY-EYED DEVILS!

Most people from outside our village would be viewed with mistrust. We know all our neighbors. Many, though far from all, were born here (Laslett, p.75). We go to the same church, work the same fields, and get drunk at the same alehouses. If our neighbor steals something from us we would recognize our own unique, handcrafted item. If you saved up a few coins and they went missing everyone in the village would soon know. Then if, all of a sudden, a neighbor seemed to have more money than they should, there'd be trouble. I don't want to overstate this trust, crimes did occur between villagers. Still there is only so much one can hope to get away with in a small close-knit community where everyone minds everyone else's business.

“ There was the occasion when John Garolde 'took by night the sheaves of corne (i.e. wheat or other grain) of his neighbors from the common fields at harvest time'. Now that, it may surprise you to learn, was not a common thing; it was very rare. The offending John left the village soon afterwards, encouraged no doubt by the open hostility of all the inhabitants, and never returned.” (Parker, p.106)

People who wandered about without good reason were called **rouges**. Rouges didn't just scare our humble villagers. Crown and Parliament passed numerous laws, the effect of which was that it was illegal for commoners to leave their area of residence without a license. This didn't stop the criminal underclass; forged documents were obtainable at markets and fairs. There were also, by the way, Parliamentary attempts to stop landlords from pushing honest hard-working families off their land whenever it suited them and thus creating more vagrants, but ... All in all, Tudor government was great at making laws. Enforcing them, not so much.

Many villages had unpleasant relations with a particular neighboring village or town. Often this would go on for centuries, probably long after anybody remembered how the fight started. One inter-village tiff has been traced through twelve hundred years. This particular squabble seems to have started way back in Anglo-Saxon times when one village built its water mill on land the other village called its own. By our period the mill no longer stands, never the less villagers show up many times in court documents accused of grazing beasts on the other village's land (Parker, pps. 42 and 103-104).

Sometimes as peasants we might wish the outside world would go away, but we really do need it. Our village would be part of a network of communities, our trading partners. Without this, we could only live the most bare-bones existence, perhaps not even that during a local crop failure. The local hub of this network would be a nearby village or town with a weekly market where we would go from time to time to buy and sell. Once in a while we might even choose to cart our produce to a bigger town further

on in hopes of fetching better prices. Occasionally we might bring home tales of being cheated by the "foreigners" in that town, reinforcing our impression of outsiders.

PEASANTS

Now a peasant is a man (or person depending on context) who works in agriculture. He could be a rural laborer working other people's land or a farmer working his own. In town there are laborers, such as porters and water carriers, just as poor and hard working as any peasant. But they don't work the fields so we won't call them peasants. Even with this narrow definition, a clear majority of Elizabethans would have been peasants.

When the plague came to England in the mid-to-late-14th Century, it wiped out a substantial portion of the population (possibly 1/3). This created a labor vacuum that peasants took advantage of to legally and economically improve their lives. If there was ever a good time to be an English peasant this was it, unless you got caught up in a landlord's backlash and kicked off your land (see the bit on enclosure, in 'WORKING THE LAND', p.2). At the same time our ancestors and we Elizabethans have been reproducing. The land and the economy are once again reaching carrying capacity. By the end of Elizabeth's reign, it is apparent that the good times are ending.

In the late-14th-to-early-16th century, that post-plague vacuum created a land-rental market very favorable to the renter. The luckiest 16th C. peasant farmers, called **freeholders**, had ancestors who took advantage of this market to secure leases in perpetuity. Next were those holding leases for life or, better yet, their ancestors made multi-generational leases (2, 3 or 4 generations). Their rents are fixed in an era when intense inflation is raising their income from sales. Not so lucky were those families who had short-term leases or held land at will. The landlord might not be "rack renting" to make up for the profit he's losing on their freeholder neighbor's right now, but next year? Those families with little or no land, who lived primarily off their labor and must purchase much of their food, really felt inflation's pinch. Wages increased during the period, yet never kept up with rising prices (Pound, p.12).

One relationship that would have changed considerably since the middle ages is that between us, and the local Gentleman. He is our landlord; we rent our cots and land from him. He is judge in the manor court. For many of us he is at least a part-time employer. He is a powerful man in regards to our lives, but he does not own us. Sometime in the last 200 years, most of our ancestors would have been bondsmen, also called villeins (what your Western Civ. teacher called "serfs"), owned by someone like the Gentleman. Virtually slaves. Beginning in the late middle ages, family after family were able to save enough in good years to buy themselves and their descendant's freedom. This trend was given a boost during the height of the bubonic plague when the landlords were desperate to get any labor, would pay top wages, charged cheap rent and didn't ask too many questions about where a runaway bondsman may have come from. By Elizabeth's reign, there were very few bondsmen left in England. Most of those were out in the poorer regions of the Northern and Western counties. Here in the midlands, such a thing would have been unheard of since Gaffer's day (Bondage was

actually on the increase in Scotland - but that's another story). We would be free English Men and Women and damn proud of it. We do not bow our heads nor grovel to any man! We would feel that behavior appropriate for French slaves and Spanish beggars. That is not to say we do not *revere* the Gentleman (it's a lot like a bow, but without lowering one's eyes), doff our hats and maybe tug a forelock, and we do subtly *show deference* to our betters within the peasant community, just as we might subtly snub them below us if they don't show us respect!

As peasants we would be low on the social ladder, but we're not viewed as scum. We are functioning members of society. At least we are until the day we can't make rent and get kicked off the land. Nor do I believe, if we were average peasants, would we think of ourselves as particularly poor. Wouldn't we think of ourselves as average? Just about everybody we regularly see are peasants. Besides, there are plenty of people we can feel superior to. We could start with the family next door, who have a strip or 2 less land in the fields than we do. Below all of us villagers are transient laborers, peddlers, tinkers, soldiers, sailors, actors, musicians, beggars, thieves and other full time criminals, gypsies and other foreigners.

At the top of the peasant hierarchy were **Yeomen**, with land giving them an income of 40 shillings a year or more. I've sometimes seen this reckoned as requiring 30 acres or more (please take all my statements of acreages as approximate). This would be enough to support a family without working for other people. Forty-shilling-a-year freeholders had the right to vote in Parliamentary elections. A few Yeomen were very well off, bordering on being gentlemen. Most of them, though, we would probably think of as comfortably working class. They are fairly secure in the knowledge that they will make rent and eat decently for the foreseeable future. They even enjoy a few small luxuries: eating off brass and pewter plates when company comes instead of wooden trenchers, perhaps wearing starched ruffs to church on Sunday. Still, they are peasants working the fields with their hands and backs like the rest of us.

Middling farmers were called **Husbandmen**. Husbandmen typically held between 10 and 20 acres of land (Parker, p.114). That's not quite enough to support a family well, so a husbandman would also spend some of his time working for others, perhaps for other husbandmen who he may hire in turn when he needs help. This *seems* to be the social standing of the average Elizabethan peasant, though that varied from village to village.

Below them were **Cottagers** (also called cotters) or simple laborers, so called because they had a cot (house) but little else; at least not enough land to take notice of, under 10 acres. Cottagers earned most of their living doing day labor for the husbandmen, yeomen and gentlemen. Their wives would also have to work the fields or take in work, such as spinning wool. Mind you, just as there were few specialized craftspeople in the village, cottagers wouldn't be specialized laborers. That is to say you wouldn't be a reaper *or* a ditch digger, you'd be all that *and* a clod breaker, swineherd, hedge pruner, etc., as the opportunity arose. Sadly there was also a small, but growing, underclass of landless

peasants, not part of a village community, who wandered the countryside in search of seasonal work.

In the 16th Century, all these terms were vague and have varied local usage. In practice a man was called a yeoman, husbandman or cotter, if his neighbors considered him such. For the most part, our Ren Faire audience won't know what a "cottager" is. What I'm hoping you'll come away with is a sense of the tangled web of social hierarchies a village must have been. We would all know which families had a furlong more or less of land than ours. Your family might need a loan sometime, and in a world without banks your neighbors are about the only place you could turn (Laslett 79). We could also expect that we might be employed by or employing many of our neighbors at some point. This would effect all of our interactions, sometimes overtly, often subtly.

Most of the time, peasants would simply be addressed by their first names. When speaking formally a yeoman may be addressed as "Goodman" and his wife or widow as "Goodwife", with or without their name following it. In sloppy daily use, these titles seemed to get applied loosely to any commoner who is the head of a household. Likewise, any peasant, crafts person or other reasonably respectable commoner may be addressed as "Worthy" or "the Worthy" (if you really wish to kiss up) (Laslett 38).

THE FAMILY

The basic social and economic unit of society was the family, what we today would call a household (that's everyone living under a roof, whether related by blood or not). The entire household worked for the family's economy, the very young and invalid old excepted. The English tradition of the nuclear family (where extended relations do not live together) goes clear back to the Middle Ages. Some of us peasants would have an elderly mom or dad living with us, but usually they would keep their own cottage if at all possible. Rarely do we find two married couples living under one roof.

The average household size was about 5 people, including servants. Cottager households averaged 3-4 residents at any given time (Laslett 64). That may not tell us how many kids the cottagers had during their life times; older children may have left home before the young ones were born.

The family was ruled by the male head of the household. In theory at least, the family received its economic and social standing through him. He was responsible for the family's physical and moral well-being. If the wife or young folks were getting into trouble in the community he was expected to do something about it. In essence, heads of households were the only people in Elizabethan society who had what we would think of as the full rights and privileges of adulthood; they alone were not living under someone else's authority.

The relationship between man and wife must have been tricky. Officially he was in charge, but in practice she would have to be something like a cooperative junior partner in an entrepreneurial enterprise. He would need her help not just running the house and feeding everyone (important and challenging as that must have been) but also supervising both the servants or journeymen and the children, who would after the age of 6 or so be like extra servants you don't have to pay. Clearly some of these partnerships ran smoother than others- a rich source for period comedy writers. If it became obvious a man could not control his wife he was called a "cuckold" and held in contempt by his neighbors.

If the husband died early his widow took over running the family. She could run the family business (whether it was farming, craft, or general labor), ruling the children and servants, retaining ownership of any land her husband had until she remarried or a son came of age to inherit. Craftsman's widows often kept the family trade going by either doing the craft themselves (its not like she hadn't helped the old guy make hundreds of shoes, or whatever, before he kicked it) or hiring and supervising journeymen to do the work. Farmer's widows would probably have a manservant to do the heavier work in the fields if they could. Widowhood would be the only time in a woman's life when she would not be under the rule of some man; father, master or husband, and often it was short lived as widows in the prime of life tended to remarry.

YOUTH

England was going through a population boom. Children under 15 years of age made up about a third of the population (Singman, p 10). Because they were integrated with the community of adults, not isolated in schools and day care, they must have been constantly around and underfoot. Children of both genders would begin their lives hanging around the house with the women folk and would slowly be initiated into the family work by helping Mom. Carding and spinning wool were among the early tasks children of both genders would learn. As the boys grew a little older they would follow their fathers out to the fields to do light work such as weeding and chasing birds off the newly sown fields. Girls would *mostly* be kept around the cot learning and helping with the womanly arts vital to a household's well being (like their mothers they would help in the fields as needed).

By 12 or 14 years of age both genders were expected to be working full time. Around this age most youths (2/3 of boys and 3/4 girls [Singman 16]) left home to be servants in another household, usually another peasant cot. Often this might be the home of some family connection such as an uncle, who may in turn place one of his children with that youth's family when they reach that age. There the boys would be "servants in husbandry", i.e. field hands. The girls would help the Goodwife with all the varied tasks she had to do. This would broaden the child's life experience and training, re-cement kinship ties and give them a small income to put away towards marriage (perhaps the only dowry a laborer's daughter would get). It was also done to get the kid under someone else's discipline at the age when most clever children have learned how to

manipulate their parents. These youths would usually remain in service until they were ready to marry. In some cases they would stay working for and living with one master the whole time, but more often switched households a few times. At any given time about a quarter or a third of the families would house servants while about the same number would have children placed out in service. Over time which families these were would rotate about the community (Laslett, pps. 15-16). Note that service in another family's house was so common for young unmarried women that the Elizabethan term for an unmarried woman, "maid", had, by the 20th century, come to mean domestic servant.

Again I should make our terms clear. **Servant** is the general term for employee in Elizabethan England, usually it denotes an employee who sleeps in the **master's** (i.e. employer's) house, eats at his table and is generally considered a part of his family. If the youth was placed in a master craftsman's house with a contract (typically for 7 years) promising said youth that the master will teach him (occasionally her) the "mystery" of the craft in exchange for labor, this was called **apprenticeship**. Someone who passed their apprenticeship and was permitted to work in the craft by its guild as a full-paid employee was a **journeyman**. In this context a **master** was someone the guild had licensed to open his own shop and take on apprentices and journeymen (guilds, by the way, were an aspect of town and city life usually not found in the villages). When we peasants "placed out" or "bound out" our children, we wouldn't call it apprenticeship, but the effect would be similar.

Some of you may be scratching your unbelieving heads at the notion of peasants having other peasants as servants. It was common, sometimes even in cottager's houses (2.2% of households surveyed), though more so in husbandman's (46.8%) and yeoman's (71.9% [Laslett 96]). To some extent this can be explained by the life cyclical nature of service. Young people tended to work for and live with older, more financially established people of whatever class. Beyond that we come to yet another basic difference between the traditional world and the modern world. **In our modern world labor is expensive and stuff is cheap. Back in the day it was the other way around.** In Gammer Gurton's Needle, (the only period play I know of with peasants as the main characters) an old peasant widow has 3 servants: a maid and a small boy who helped around the house, and a young man to do the fieldwork. Still, she is poor enough that the loss of her one sewing needle throws the household into a panic. This seems to be an accurate depiction of every-day village life. As a modern person you probably don't have any servants living under your roof, but can you tell me exactly how many sewing needles you own?

The legal age of adulthood was 21 years. At that point one could enter into contracts, including marriage, without a guardian's consent. *Functionally* a person became a full adult upon getting married and setting up a household. Because these two actions were entered into at the same time a young couple could not afford to marry until they could get a house and had the means to support a self-sufficient household. For a husbandman's eldest son this could mean waiting for Dad to die or retire and leave him the land. A craftsman's apprentice would wait to be promoted to a journeyman and get a little bit ahead. At very least a couple would save up their wages and tips to afford a

laborer's cottage and small plot of land if they could aspire no higher. Some people never married, spending their whole lives living under someone else's roof and thus never fully became independent adults. **The vast majority did marry, with first marriages for women averaging between 23-24 years of age and men around 26-27** (Laslett, p. 83).

Then, as now, the first decade of independence would often be the hardest while the new household struggled to find its economic footing. For the poorest cottagers the years probably never got much easier. For families starting with a workable economic foundation, some luck, a lot of hard work and a few wise investment strategies could lead to a modest prosperity (Shall we keep as much seed from the Harvest as possible and sow for a bigger yield next year? or do we sell as much as we dare and buy more sheep?). Still, security and peace of mind are luxuries of the rich. A few bad harvests in a row could ruin the most prudent among us. All my earlier talk of a widow's independence should not gloss over the fact that the untimely death of the husband could be a disaster, depriving the family of its principle breadwinner.

DEATH STALKS THEE

Without modern medicine, and perhaps more significantly modern plumbing and sanitation, death was a familiar aspect of life in early modern Europe. This era has been described as the "golden age of bacteria" with an amazing array of illnesses, both epidemic and endemic. Many diseases, such as "sweating sickness" (a.k.a. "the sweats") and the "new ague" are unidentifiable by modern science. Smallpox was possibly the biggest single killer. Bubonic plague, usually called the pestilence, arrived in Europe in the 14th Century at which time it killed perhaps 1/3 of the population.

"During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, outbreaks of plague in Europe were largely confined to the towns. Repeated waves of plague started every decade or two in London and spread out to the smaller towns over the succeeding two or three years. Sometimes isolated villages, like Eyam in Derbyshire, were devastated as well, but in general simply fleeing into the countryside to avoid the disease, something that had not worked in earlier centuries, began to make a great deal of sense." (Wills, p.69).

Sadly these diseases hit the young much harder than adults. Many infants died in their first year. This would be followed by high rates of death in childhood. It has been a goal of this essay to intellectually place ourselves in the life of the average Elizabethan. To be perfectly honest, if you or I were average Elizabethans odds are about even we might be children with a good chance of not surviving to adulthood. Conversely though, were you the average Elizabethan adult you would have a reasonable chance of living to a ripe old age. The average life expectancy at birth was about 41.7 years. But the older you got the higher your life expectancy went. A woman of 20 in early modern England might expect to live another 35 years. Should she reach 60 she would have on average 12 more years above ground (Laslett, p. 109). At the risk of belaboring the point, Elizabethans did not age appreciably faster than modern people, nor did they die of old

age much sooner. A 40-something would have been considered in the prime of his or her life (because peasants work outdoors we might look a little older, probably not too much). A person would have been thought old around 60 (Singman, p. 51). Along the way, accidents, violence, complications in childbirth, and illness would have taken many of us, often with little warning; especially in childhood. This lowered our average group life expectancy and must have had a profound effect on our mental outlook.

SO, YOU SURVIVED TO OLD AGE

The Statute of Artificers, a sweeping attempt at regulating just about every aspect of a man's working life (and possibly as little heeded as many Elizabethan Acts of Parliament), allowed a man to retire at 60. What it didn't do was provide funding for his golden years. Then, as now, many people must have worked until they dropped. If you were lucky, thrifty, and wise and had a bit of land to pass on, arrangements could be made. Typically a peasant landholder would deed his or her land over to a successor with a written contract specifying that the successor must house and feed the retiree. The contract might state where in the cottage the oldster would sleep, what his/her bedding would be and what and how much he/she should be given to eat, and perhaps pay an additional stipend in cash or kind.

Just before death a household head would usually make a will, even if it was by then a household of one (if you aren't the householder you don't legally own much). After death the parish would often assign two or more responsible witnesses to take an inventory of his or her possessions. These documents, where they survive, provide us with much of what we think we know about Elizabethan peasants. For the very poorest peasants (with property under five pounds) wills and inventories weren't usually made, leaving a hole in our info and perhaps skewing our take on village life. If you're interested in seeing some of the stats from these documents for one Midland village, check out my short article "*Wigston Digested*".

This is meant to be the first in a series of essays on Elizabethan peasant life. The next piece, entitled "WORKING THE LAND", describes farming in the late 16th C. Midlands, and touches on other ways the peasant family made an income.

Thanks for reading my essay- Brad

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