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Later Medieval Kent 1220 - 1540

Review for *Archaeologia Cantiana* (KAS, vol. 311, 2011)

Rebecca Warren

This is the ninth publication in the impressive Kent History Project series and covers the period 1220 - 1540. The twelve essays cover a spectrum of aspects of Kentish history, and undoubtedly fulfil the editor's intention - to highlight "the distinctive nature of Kent." A disadvantage of essay collections is that the resulting volume may not provide an overall understanding of the period under discussion. In this case, however, the thoughtful selection of subject matter and skilful cross-referencing by the editor has avoided this trap and this volume, although intentionally not a narrative history of the county, gives an admirably clear sense of Kent's distinctive character before the Reformation.

The essays divide roughly into three general themes: the economy and land-use, religious life; and politics and society - all of which have been written by widely-respected academics, actively engaged in research in these areas. Mavis Mate's comprehensive overview of the county before and after the Black Death contains an astonishing amount of lively, personal detail, given the breadth of her topic, and is essential reading as context for the rest of the book. Gill Draper's examination of the impact of maritime activity on both coastal and inland settlements is a timely reminder of the importance of the sea and rivers in medieval Kent. In recognising this, she draws out the importance to its economy of the county's location between London and the continent, through merchant shipping, service industries and transport. Using an

interesting range of documentary, archaeological, place name and surname evidence, she assesses the timber requirements of shipbuilding on the hinterland, although the corresponding section on iron production and supply is unexpectedly short and perhaps rather peripheral to the rest of the essay.

Bruce Campbell's essay on agriculture, mainly during the fourteenth century, uses the rich archive of Inquisitions Post-Mortem and manorial records of major land-owners to conclude that Kentish farms were predominantly mixed-husbandry systems. He produces an large amount of 'hard-data,' including stocking and seeding rates, crop rotations and agricultural responses to climatic conditions and epidemics, but his analysis of the impact of farming practice on Kentish society help to make this otherwise fairly dense essay accessible to the general reader.

The religious life of the county receives a comprehensive examination, including an overview of the development of religious institutions and practice by Barry Dobson and Elizabeth Edwards. This contains an excellent survey of the different religious orders and foundations, in which the only shortfall is a tantalising glimpse of the Trinitarians, but no further analysis. Sheila Sweetinburgh provides an exemplary essay on the development of almshouses and hospitals, more prevalent in Kent than anywhere else in England. Mixing extensive primary source material with a detailed understanding of their function, she brings to life these once important foundations, of which there is no real modern equivalent.

Rob Lutton and Karen Jones look at the evidence of non-standard religious beliefs and practices. Concentrating on the rise of Lollardy in the fifteenth and early sixteenth century, Lutton uses, in particular, the Kent Heresy (Trial) Proceedings to allow the voices of individuals accused of heresy to be heard. He then follows these moving testimonies with a sensitive discussion of Kentish heterodoxy. Jones takes our understanding of 'unorthodox' beliefs a step further by using the notoriously difficult ecclesiastical court records to consider the prevalence of, and attitudes to, witchcraft and magic. She illustrates her discussion of the origins and variety of such beliefs with numerous fascinating and lively examples of court cases, and charts the gradual association in the fifteenth century between women and 'black magic.'

Sheila Sweetinburgh's second essay - on towns - provides a link between the essays on the religious world with those on society and politics. Drawing on an impressive range of civic documents, she considers not only the influence of the church on urban life through the parish and guilds, but also that of the secular government on its citizens. In particular, she examines the fascinating relationships between the built environment and such urban rituals as mayor-making and civic elections.

The final essays discuss the influence of the upper levels of Kentish society on county life and on national politics. Both David Grummit and Malcolm Mercer succeed in highlighting the way the county's proximity to London and the royal court, and the continent, especially Calais, lent its political allegiance a national importance. Grummit provides an authoritative study of the 'movers and shakers' in late medieval Kent, and their place within the government and management of the county. Despite some

inevitable overlap with Mercer's analysis of the county's role in the political turbulence of fifteenth century national politics, these two essays inform each other very usefully, and Mercer's careful analysis of the complexity of relationships and allegiances leave a clear picture of just how important this region was in the history of England.

Later Medieval Kent is a fascinating and accessible read, but there are a couple of minor disappointments. Firstly, there is a definite bias towards east and north Kent, although it must be said that this is almost certainly a reflection of the low survival rates of primary evidence for west Kent. Thus Maidstone, Tonbridge, Ashford, Cranbrook and the rest of the Weald are only passingly mentioned in many of the essays, although Lutton's chapter on Lollardy does help to redress this balance. It is perhaps also surprising that the cloth trade is not addressed in its own right - an industry which also might have helped to focus attention on western and southern parts of the county. Regrettably, however, historians can only work with the evidence that has survived, and these are minor quibbles in what is otherwise an excellent book.