

Report on the
Later Medieval Kent Conference

Saturday 10th December, 2011,
University of Kent, Canterbury
By Diane Heath

Introduction

The Later Medieval Kent Conference was a suitable ornament for the eponymous book, edited by Sheila Sweetinburgh, for its audience numbered over a hundred, a telling indication of the subject's (and organiser's) popularity. The Conference was divided into four panels covering: Aristocracy; Economy; Church and; Town. It was in Mary Berg's introduction of the first session's speakers, David Grummitt and Richard Eales, that the theme of chess was first mentioned, it being Richard's particular interest. So it was as a looking-glass or *speculum*, a medieval mirror for self-improvement, that the game stayed Alice-like in my mind during this stimulating conference.

Panel 1: Aristocracy – chaired by Mary Berg

Dr David Grummitt

The Kentish Aristocracy in the Later Middle Ages: a County Community?



We began not with knights and castles. David Grummitt discussed whether there was a sense of 'county community' among the Kent gentry during this late medieval period, despite the wide disparity their income; the sheer size of the county and its varied topography?

Few nobles held substantial lands in Kent. In the fifteenth century Crown lands and noble holdings both added up to only 10.2% of the total, compared to 30% held by the Church. This meant that only 40 or so families held political influence as the majority (around 230 families) were on less than £20 each year. Did these wealthy Kent gentry families hold political influence through parliamentary peerage, as has been shown to have occurred in Nottinghamshire?

David Grummitt then outlined four reasons for supporting the premise of county community; profits from the Rochester Bridge bridge tolls; military service by Kent knights and the strategic importance of Kent ports during French wars; the relative stability of Kent office-holding and finally; royal service. At the beginning of the fifteenth century new families had come from outside Kent due to Lancastrian preferment. This resulted in posts being held by new people, with legal rather than military backgrounds. Sir James Fiennes was made Warden of the Cinque Ports in 1447 and his corruption was a factor in Cade's rebellion of 1450, for it seems as if the Kent gentry had disengaged from politics in the 1440s. However, membership of the king's household and the king's affinity played a role in re-fostering the sense of county community. For example, Richard III's usurpation sent

'shockwaves' through the county and following the failed rebellion, some Kent knights joined Henry Tudor on the continent. Therefore, early sixteenth century Kent gentry were very tied to the Tudor royal affinity.

In conclusion, Dr Grummitt maintained that, although less hierarchical and elite by the beginning of the sixteenth century, ties of kinship were still important in engendering a sense of county community. When those ties were broken in 1440s, culminating in Cade's rebellion, they were rebuilt by royal service which drew upon an ethos of loyalty to the king.

Richard Eales

Castles and Politics in Late Medieval Kent



From knights we moved to rooks, or rather, castles. Debate has raged in the new discipline of castle studies over the meaning of castles, for they are intimately bound up with changing political power. Historians now contextualise castles and explore their usage as multi-functional places. Previously, they were seen as primarily military in purpose with the gradual change to later medieval fortified residences forming a narrative of 'decline'.

Royal castles were high maintenance structures and their numbers in general fell during the later medieval period. However, in Kent all the royal castles standing in 1300 were still there in 1500, plus newly-built Queenborough. Dover was the most important castle in the area; Rochester had dereliction reports in 1340 and 1360 but repairs were made; while Leeds Castle was kept up as a residence for Queens. Canterbury Castle however was merely in receipt of £5 repair money per annum and eventually this money was spent on the town walls instead. Even from this swift appraisal it is clear that royal castles had a wide range of functions.

It used to be thought that private castles needed a licence to crenellate from 1200 onwards. However, very many castles, such as Scotney, were built without such licences being granted. So they might have been the 'icing on the cake' for upwardly mobile gentry keen to display their wealth and landholding. Clearly these documents have little to do with actual warfare but some requests do mention defence. This was possibly merely rhetoric, but even badly defended castles or fortified residences had value in unsettled times.

This was a valuable if swift tour of the castles of Kent accompanied by a thoughtful bibliography and a list of twenty-two licences to crenellate taken from C. Coulson's article in *The Castle Studies Group Journal*, 21 (2007-8).

Panel 2: Economy – chaired by Diane Heath

Following coffee and a browse of the excellent and far too tempting bookstall, we returned to the Grimond Lecture Theatre, looking forward to papers by Gillian Draper and Sheila Sweetinburgh on later medieval Kent tradesmen and peasants, respectively, and collectively perhaps the pawns of my chess conceit.

Dr Gillian Draper

Tinker, Tailor, Merchant, Sailor: Trades and Occupations in a Maritime County



Dr Draper's paper was more far-reaching than her chapter in *Later Medieval Kent* which focused on just two trades. This was an examination of the evidence for the geographical spread of trades based on local records. For example, carpenters in the New Romney area could be land-based or ship-based. The wide variety of sources also reveals the use of by-names which, before thirteenth century, generally accurately related to occupations, for example Mason or Shipper, mainly because the necessary property, skills and equipment were handed down. Where by-names no longer reflected the person's occupation, the Lay Subsidy records reveal this. Beyond the thirteenth century by-names are not so reliable but Henry Glazier was still working as his name suggests in the post-Reformation period in Rye. Other useful information may be gleaned from tax records such as the local import taxes levied at Fordwich, called Maltotes, and paid to St Augustine's Abbey, on goods (including cat skins) traded between French ports and Battle in Sussex.

Of the 821 Canterbury freemen noted in the Rolls from 1298-1328, 240 had by-names of trades, and we have records of market traders such as Margaret Garlick. Tonbridge has sparser records in late fourteenth century but we have archaeological evidence of metalworking and smithies near the castle, this is useful evidence as, Dr Draper informed us, metalworking is poorly recorded in Kent but was probably an important industry.

To sum up, sources for evidence of trades and by-names are plentiful in Kent where towns were incorporated early and a large number of records survive but we also need to look beyond Kent for comparative analyses.

Dr Sheila Sweetinburgh

Agricultural Practices in the Medieval Kentish Marshlands



Dr Sweetinburgh began with Kent's geography and patterns of seigneurial ownership. Kent manorial boundaries are not contiguous with parishes, and lands were often parcellated. By 1300 divisions of land due to gavelkind, partible inheritance and sub-letting led to small plots, while both servile and free peasantry paid money rents fixed by custom not by market value. This led to a relatively high population density, plentiful labour for demesne lands and to a richer peasantry and more intensive farming regimes. These forms of landholding made Kent ahead of the game in terms of agricultural practices.

Sources such as aerial photography, excavations, charters and manorial records reveal that by 1300 and especially in the east of the county, a horticultural system was in place, which used manuring, marling and liming and both wheeled and swing ploughs. These advanced practices led to continuous fodder cropping and hay production so animals could be fed during winter. An integrated mixed farming system developed, with 60% grain and 40% legumes (peas, beans and vetch).

Dr Sweetinburgh then turned to two case studies; the Marshlands from 1250 and fifteenth century Monkton. Systematic enclosure of the marshlands led to a rapid expansion of the population and the need for intensive farming, including wild-fowling. Livestock were raised for milk and wool, rather than meat. In contrast, court Rolls from Monkton, near Thanet, show livestock was raised principally for meat, an indication of a more prosperous peasantry. Nearby towns, as well as French livestock markets, required both carcasses and live beasts, which needed grazing lands near the ports, so this later period sees an acceleration towards a more pastoral economy.

In conclusion, Sheila Sweetinburgh pointed out that much information may be gleaned from documentary and archaeological evidence to form a clearer picture of Kent peasantry and agricultural practices.

Thanks to vicious time-keeping practices employed by the chair person, there was time for questions, so we learnt from Gill that catskins were used as trimmings on collars, and from Sheila that orchards do feature, but not prominently, in Kent records of this period; and there was a great deal of interest in the use of horses for carting and ploughing. This excellent session was then drawn to a close for well-earned brunch at Rutherford College dining hall.

Panel 3: Church – chaired by Rebecca Warren



Back refreshed, the audience was disappointed to learn that Dr Edwards had had to leave the conference early and so was not able to read her paper but happy that the task had fallen to Mary Berg. As it would have been unfair to question Mary on Elizabeth's work, this left Rob Lutton with time to squeeze in extra case studies. The church theme naturally brought to my mind that powerful piece, the bishop of the chessboard, as we had already learnt that some 30% of Kent lands were held by the Church. But both these papers concentrated on very different aspects of the Church and faith in Kent.

Dr Elizabeth Edwards

The Smaller Monastic Houses of Late Medieval Kent

The religious houses of Kent in the period 1220 to 1540 were varied not only in terms of a dozen different orders but in terms of the size of their establishments. Thus they ranged from the grandest Benedictine monastic foundations of Christ Church and St. Augustine's Abbey (both founded in 598 and often numbering well over one hundred monks) and St. Andrew's of Rochester founded two years later.

There followed a gap of over five hundred years, until the foundation of Benedictine nunneries such as St. Mary's Abbey Malling, plus monasteries of the Cistercian and Cluniac orders, the Augustinian and Praemonstratensian Canons in the twelfth century and the explosion of mendicant orders from 1224 onwards, when Franciscans first arrived in Canterbury. Nearly all these religious houses survived until the Reformation: out of 31 religious houses founded by these orders in Kent, only three dissolved or decayed before the second quarter of the sixteenth century. The five alien houses fared less well, not thriving on foreign soil, for example, the Ghent house of Saints Peter and Paul in Lewisham began in 1081 but was dissolved in 1415 and only one (in Folkestone) lasted until 1535.

These religious establishments were spread fairly evenly throughout Kent. However, there was some natural concentration in and around Canterbury, and it must be noted that elsewhere too, the foundations of smaller houses were possibly due to the influence of larger ones nearby, as cells were granted independence, such as the Cluniac establishment at Monks Horton. This paper served as an excellent foil and background to its partner, for Rob Lutton concentrated not on the monastic but on parish faith.

Dr Rob Lutton

The Dissemination of the Jesus Mass in Kent, c.1460-c.1540

Devotion to the Holy Name of Christ became an important cult from the fifteenth century onwards in England. Its intense focus on Christ is clearly a comment upon Lollardy. It involved contemplation, repetition of Jesus's name and votive masses, and grew via the foundation of fraternities for lights, altars and masses in parish churches. Was it the result of more popular access to Reformist ideas or, as Eamon Duffy would suggest, a development of traditional religious piety?

In England this votive mass was recorded as early as 1403 in Yorkshire. The cult (and this word was used) spread slowly southwards so that by 1450 there was fairly widespread national coverage. Margaret Beaufort endowed a feast in 1489 at Christ Church Cathedral, indicating Kent was in the forefront of the development of these fraternities. Dr Lutton has discovered that 31 Kent parishes had celebrated this mass before 1480. From 1480 to 1500 its use spread to several more Canterbury parishes (St Andrews in 1485) and other Kent parishes including Herne and Whitstable, so the cult's urban nature was still a feature, although it was also spreading to the villages of the urban hinterland. The patchy nature of Jesus mass was revealed in the many case studies presented. For example, in Cranbrook in 1499 two wills give lights for the Jesus mass and in the following year 20d was left for lights with five shillings to say the mass.

Dr Lutton concluded that what began as a popular cult, due partly to its traditional but revivalist nature as a private intercessionary, became institutionalized at the parish level which is when its devotees among the laity began to fall away.

Panel 4: Town – chaired by Ian Coulson

The diagonal trajectories of popular piety in late medieval Kent took us to tea and an appropriately eager band of questioners quickly gathered around Dr Lutton as there had been no time for a formal Q&A session. It seemed impossible that we had come to the final part of the conference as *tempus always fugit* when one is enjoying such events. While chess-like one might compare walled medieval towns and cities to castles, here I had the whole checkerboard of place, position and procession laid out in my mind, formed upon the higgledy-piggledy (note that fine architectural term) medieval tiled roofs of Sandwich.

Ian Coulson introduced our two final speakers with aplomb, while not forgetting to mention that everyone would benefit from joining the Kent Archaeological Society. It must be said that these papers worked together very well, the first being Sheila Sweetinburgh's micro-history of an event in Sandwich in 1532, focussing on the use of urban space and the second being Sarah Pearson's masterly examination of late medieval townhouse layout and usage, including standing architecture in Sandwich.

Dr Sheila Sweetinburgh

The Use and Abuse of Urban Spaces in Late Medieval Kent



On 24th August, 1532 the curate of a chantry and three churchwardens were arrested, according to the Old Red Book of Sandwich. This ‘small nugget’ of a report allows an examination of the use and abuse of urban space and a reflection on the repercussions of transgression.

Why were the arrests made? The town mayor and jurats were very concerned that the annual procession to St Bartholomew’s Hospital would be disrupted by the argument between the chantry priests and the clergy of St. Peter’s over who should take the High Mass at the hospital.

So the leading town officers sought to regain control by replacing the clergy with more amenable people. This ritual formed part of the town’s collective memory and records of its antiquity provided the town’s officers with authenticity and authority. So civic sense and responsibilities focused on St Bartholomew’s Hospital for this was where the relics of the town saint were housed. The lack of a procession to honour the town saint did not merely affect civic pride; it could clearly affect the goodwill bestowed on the town by its saint. Moreover, Henry VIII was due to visit the town in September. The mayor and jurats would have been keen to ensure that not a breath of insurrection should blemish the town on their watch, for one of their citizens had already been involved in a case against the Crown.

The actions of the town’s authorities should not be seen as ‘anti-clericalism’ but rather as actions against particular persons. This opens up areas of discussion as to why, how and who valued civic ritual; the negotiations of their roles; and how conflicts were resolved. This abuse of space in an urban setting and its repercussions tells us much about the mentalités of this late medieval period.

Sarah Pearson

Townhouses: Layout and Usage in Late Medieval Kent



This paper discussed the physical ambience of life in late medieval Kent towns, such as Canterbury, Sandwich and Faversham when English buildings were fairly standard. However, houses differed according to size, the status of the town and the nature of work undertaken by townspeople.

In Canterbury there was a fair sprinkling of gentry, professionals and pilgrims – hence the huge inns, such as the Chequer of Hope built in 1392-5. In this period people lived above shops, some may have been sub-let, but the evidence for this has gone. At Whitefriars, Canterbury in 1497, we know four small houses were built, each with a shop and buttery and a open hall behind, with a first floor chamber above the shop. However, Canterbury’s multi-storey tenements of tradespeople are unique in Kent.

In Sandwich town centre several large houses had open halls to the roof but some had inserted floors. Smaller dwellings away from the centre of town enjoyed a fairly wide frontage for the hall, however, in Faversham, halls in residential areas were pushed to the back and there is evidence of this design also by the end of fifteenth century in New Romney, Charing, Hythe and Tenterden.

Thirteenth century people in London and Canterbury were used to dwelling upstairs, without open halls, and generally by 1530s open halls had ceased to be built. However, there is evidence from Sandwich that prominent citizens kept their halls open to the roof as a display of space, wealth and status, with a narrow hall on the first floor. Probate records reveal suits of armour and other valuable items were displayed here. So we have evidence of a change in living conditions over time and place, with increasing use of multiple chambers, tying into probate records which record increasing amounts of personal goods.

Conclusion



Location, location, location; politically, Kent was clearly one of the places to be in later middle ages due its strategic proximity to both continent and capital. But there was so much more; the learning and sanctity of Canterbury; the ancient Cinque Ports; agricultural advances and abundance, profitable trade routes and the spread of new religious ideas all made Kent connected, vigorous, vibrant and its history engrossing.

So the final happy part of this report, its endgame, is to offer many thanks to all the contributors, speakers, audience and especially to Dr Sweetinburgh, to whom Ian Coulson presented a small token of our collective esteem. It is also my pleasant task to urge everyone to buy the book, for as Caxton said of his work, *The Game and Playe of the Chesse*, 'thys sayd book is ful of holsom wysedom and requysyte unto every astate and degree'.

Chess images taken from The Project Gutenberg EBook of *The Game and Playe of the Chesse*, by W. Caxton, A Verbatim Reprint Of The First Edition, 1474 < <http://www.worldchesslinks.net/ezi02b.html#|PREFACE%20TO%20THE%20SECOND>> [accessed 30th December, 2011]