

is the nature of the events themselves and their likely impact on manorial life and on longer-term economic prospects at a time when famine, estate retrenchment and inflation were already biting hard on peasant communities. The precise impact of such turmoil on dozens of midland manors must remain conjectural until much more original source material has been sifted; though some midland contemporaries in a position to judge, like the prior of Worcester in 1322, were in no doubt that the effects of the late famine were made infinitely worse by the marauding followers of 'great men' stripping the country bare as they passed through.<sup>32</sup> Certainly, where further evidence is available for individual manors, the picture appears dramatic. The ancient royal manor of Brailes, for example, at the very heart of the region under discussion and a recent Despenser acquisition, was evidently comprehensively sacked. By far the most populous community in the district, it had enjoyed a thriving market for almost a century and presented a successful mixed economy reflected, perhaps unusually for the Warwickshire Feldon, in an almost equal division between arable and pasture. In particular, it appears already as a major wool-producing and stock-rearing manor, since it was one of only eight Warwickshire townships supplying Leicester merchants with wool in 1300. Enterprising husbandmen, like the upwardly-mobile West family of Chelmscote, were leasing distant pastures for their large flocks of sheep which Brailes alone, apparently, could not accommodate, and substantial numbers of horses and cattle were also pastured there and in its linked settlement of Tanworth-in-Arden, now also under Despenser control. Worth over £90 per annum – hardly less than Warwick, and twice any other ex-Beauchamp manor – Brailes was clearly a coveted prize for the king's elderly counsellor, Hugh Despenser, when he was granted its custody in 1317 in the circumstances already noted, as it would be also ten years later for Roger Mortimer.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> The pardons are listed in *PW*, ii, 2, p. 167. The king obtained the opinion of his clergy that the proceedings against the Despensers had been illegal and they were recalled early in February 1322 (*PW*, ii, 2, pp. 172, 177), becoming fabulously wealthy. *Liber Albus*, pp. 48, 73.

<sup>33</sup> J.B. Harley, 'Population and land utilization in the Warwickshire hundreds of Stoneleigh and Kineton, 1086-1300', Ph.D. thesis, Birmingham, 1960; J.B. Harley, 'The settlement geography of early medieval Warwickshire', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, xxxiv, 1964; *Records of Leicester*, I, p. 253. The almost equal division between arable and pasture is confirmed by the late Tudor estate map at Warwickshire County Record Office (illustrated in *Warwickshire History*, xi,