

Several authorities¹ would agree that Europe in general experienced a humid peak in the fourteenth century, followed by a preponderance of unfavourable climatic conditions in the first half of the succeeding century. One might inquire whether this was the reason for the disappearance of vine-growing in England towards the end of the fourteenth century. Even today the farmers of southern Warwickshire require a good dry spell before they can tractor-plough their heavy clays. If they are able to do so in a dry autumn then the action of winter frost breaks down the heavy clods and sowing in a dry spring is easy. But if a wet autumn is succeeded by a wet spring the land may never be ploughed in time to crop that year. Medieval peasant farmers were clearly much more vulnerable to the harsh effects of inclement weather than the modern farmer whose bread corn may come from as far afield as Australia or Canada. Thus, if they missed a crop or saw a large proportion of their seed rot in sodden fields, they would be near to starvation the following year. A succession of only two wet autumns and springs would thus bring famine to peasants farming the heavy clays, unless they had a compensating pastoral land-use. At the very least, then, one must consider weather conditions as one of the factors, together with changing social and economic conditions, that might here upset the delicate balance between man and land at this time. A deterioration in each, operating simultaneously, could quickly change both the fortune and the appearance, of a Felton parish. Some settlements succumbed early, particularly if their lord took the line of least resistance and sold his manor; others struggled for a while and then gave in; yet a third group, worthy of more detailed study than has yet been accorded them, survived as open-field mixed farming units with land still in strips until as late as last century. It is to the second of these groups that Wormleighton belonged.

DEPOPULATION A.D. 1499

Manors held by absentee lords, including especially those estates that changed hands frequently in the fluid land-market conditions of the late fourteenth century onward, were likely targets for depopulation. Professor H. J. Habbakuk² has also emphasized the important part that 'good and bad demographic luck' might play in the fortunes of great families and so in that of their estates. Thus failure of male issue, as well as changes of fortune, might lead to the transfer of a manor from the hands of a family that had been associated with the place for generations to an 'outside' family that cared little for either the land or the folk. Such change may have occurred in Wormleighton on the death in May 1386 of Sir John Peche, who then held the principal manor there. Sir John left a widow and two daughters, and the manor passed successively to his widow for life and then to his daughter, Margaret.

¹ G. Utterström, 'Climatic Variations and Population Problems in Early Modern History', *Scandinavian Economic History Review*, iii (1955), 3-47; H. Flohn, 'Klimaschwankungen im Mittelalter und ihre Historisch-geographische Bedeutung', *Berichte zur Deutschen Landeskunde*, vii (1949-50); C. E. Britton, *A Meteorological Chronology to A.D. 1450*, Meteorological Office Geophysical Memoir No. 70 (H.M.S.O.

M.O. 409a), 1937; D. J. Schove, 'Climatic Fluctuations in Europe in the Late Historical Period (especially A.D. 800-1700)', University of London M.Sc. thesis, 1953.

² See the Preface to M. E. Finch, 'The Wealth of Five Northamptonshire Families, 1540-1640', *Northamptonshire Record Society*, vol. xix (1956), pp. xii-xiii.