

Agriculture and Trade: the Economy of Thame, 1600-1680

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Historians have recently made increasing use of wills and inventories, amongst other primary sources such as parish registers, to reconstruct the lives of individuals within a local community or area. Some 250 of the wills and inventories for the parish of Thame for the period c-1600-1680, now in the Oxfordshire Record Office, provide the insights into the lives of local inhabitants described in this article.

As in other parts of Britain, local trading and agriculture had a vital role in the well-being of Thame. They provided the population of the town and the surrounding areas with foodstuffs, employment and a means of generating income and wealth. Industrial activities such as brewing, building and retailing took place alongside agriculture and many of these trades were dependent on the prosperity and development of agriculture for their own levels of business activity.

All local historical sources have their strength and weaknesses and before discussing the agriculture and trade of Thame it is necessary to consider the pitfalls encountered in drawing our conclusions. Wills stated the wishes of individuals usually near to death, while inventories were produced by appraisers within two to three months of the testators' death. As a result the information they contain is in some instances partial. The location of Thame near the Buckinghamshire border is a case in point. It is very likely that some farmers lived across the Buckinghamshire border but owned land in the parish of Thame. Therefore, by looking only at the wills and inventories for the parish of Thame, a complete picture of agricultural production cannot be acquired. Other testators may have passed on land or goods during their lifetimes. In such cases their wills and inventories will not reflect the whole of the family business. In order to acquire a more complete picture, it would be necessary to look at a wider range of documents. It has not yet been possible to do so. Therefore, this paper only concerns itself with discussing the information acquired from the wills and inventories.

Wills and inventories generally provide us with a picture of relatively wealthy members of the community. The picture is also skewed by the fact that a majority of the wills and inventories were made by men, whose ages have not been determined yet, though several wills were made by widow. We do not know how many farmers or tradesmen died during the Civil War or one of the many epidemic outbreaks which affected Thame in 1616, 1630, 1641-4, 1652, 1653, 1658 and 1663 without making wills. We do, however, know that poor people dependent on poor relief existed in Thame since many of the wills made some financial provision for them.

It is also difficult to make positive conclusions on changing prosperity over time because of the inadequate number of continuous documents. We know, for example, that many tradesmen in Britain became more prosperous in the seventeenth century as demand for non-agricultural goods increased relative to agricultural goods. But without a run of wills and inventories for tradesmen in Thame, we cannot confirm whether they became more prosperous as the century progressed.

Nor is it possible to assess the true impact of the Civil War. As John Bell's article elsewhere in this issue makes very clear Thame was directly affected by campaigning in the Civil War. The heavy taxation demanded by Parliament and the Crown, plus the disruption and highly

fluctuating demand and supply of foodstuffs and materials must have significantly affected the local economy. These probate documents do not provide us with any detailed information on how the Civil War affected the local economy,

For a parish which depended on agriculture for its well-being, you would expect to find numerous references to ploughs. Out of 250 inventories, ploughs were mentioned three times. T. Stribblehill (3) (1598), had 2 ploughs and J. Symons (4) (1641), and Richard Calcott (5) (1676), both had one. How can we explain the lack of reference to ploughs? It is very likely that items which should have appeared on the inventory failed to do so because they were either regarded as being too common to be separately itemised or because they had been borrowed or endowed before death.

The absence of food items from a majority of inventories also indicates that some items were omitted. There are only two major references to foodstuffs. Thomas Ball's (6) inventory valued two calves, cheese and bacon at 30s, while John Burte (7) had 62 cheeses valued at £16. Clearly such a high valuation suggests that these items were produced for the market rather than personal consumption.

The time when an inventory was made may also have affected its completeness. Inventories made immediately after death tended to be more accurate since they included items which had not yet been borrowed, taken or sold off by the family members or neighbours, while those made two to three months after death tended to be less accurate since in the interim period some of the items owned by the deceased would have been taken by relatives and friends. Inventories made during the winter months tend to have fewer references to 'corn in the field' than those made in the summer or just after harvest time. John Wittney (8) for example, who died in February 1603, had no grain in the field or barn. His inventory was valued at just £8. If he had died in summer, his total inventory value would have been significantly greater due to the harvest and our conclusions about him may have been different.

The values given to items in inventories also need to be viewed carefully (9). To what extent were the appraisers qualified to value the items contained in the inventories? The appraisers had a tendency to bundle items together and give a single value to these items. Henry Cope 10 (1659) had corn in the barn, wheat, beans and barley valued at £16, while Richard Cotton's 11 'tools in the shoppe' were valued at 3s.4d. Given information like this, it became very difficult to identify the value of individual items such as barley or beans since no weights were given or the type of tools kept in shops.

Where items are given individually with values, comparisons are possible. The evidence suggests that grain prices, at least, were relatively accurate. The case of Thomas Stribblehill 12 (1674) who left one quarter of barley valued at 24s. compares very closely with the Oxford market value of 24.8d. 13 a quarter. Alternatively, Edmund Tomlinson 14 (1607) left 12 bushells of beans valued at 16s. (8 bushells = 1 quarter). The Oxford market price for beans at the time was 12s.4d. to 16s.11d. 15 per quarter. Other items, such as furniture, clothing, kitchen utensils and workshop tools were valued at their correct valuation. However inflation in the period 1600-1680 needs to be borne in mind when assessing relative values over time.

Having highlighted some of the potential problems in interpreting these documents, we can now move on to discuss some of the conclusions which may be made.

The main type of crops grown during the early seventeenth century in the parish were wheat, barley, beans and to a lesser extent, rye, hay and oats. The variety and value of the grain cultivated indicates that many were commercial farmers rather than subsistence ones. William Baker 16 (1660) had £34 of winter corn and nearly £40 of barley stored in the barn, while Edmund Tomlinson 17 (1670) had corn in the ground valued at £35. At the other end of

the scale, however, John Wittney 18, yeoman, only had one acre of corn valued at 20s. These contrasting values suggest that the community was fragmented between commercial farmers and small farmers, whose primary efforts were directed towards self-consumption rather than profit.

The existence of commercial farming in the parish is not surprising. Thame had a market, held every Tuesday since 1254 19. Here traders and farmers supplied consumers with goods which they could not produce. The existence of commercial farmers also fits in well with the economic developments taking place in the regional and national economy at the time. The rise in population in England in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, from 3.9m in 1591 to 4.9m in 1681 20, plus the growth of urban centres like Oxford and London, increased the market demand for agricultural commodities. Even though the parish register for Thame for the period in question is incomplete, it has been estimated that Thame's population increased from 912 in 1601 to 1100 by c.1660, a rise of 21%. The move towards agricultural production for profit may well be highlighted by the lack of reference, amongst many of the wills to common rights. Only Nicholas Powell's 21 will (1627) referred to grazing rights on the common. He bequeathed to his son, Thomas, the right to graze one beast on the common and the wintering of one cow. Other wills, when referring to land, stated that it had been leased. The process of leasing land had been around for many decades, but it acquired a stronger foothold during the early seventeenth century as inflation began to erode the value of fixed fee tenancies. The dominance of short term leases rather than fixed rent leases in Thame indicates that the parish was being influenced by the general changes taking place in agriculture.

Land use also changed during the period, partly due to changes in relative agricultural commodity prices. In 1651, 23 tenants in Priestend agreed to convert strips of arable land to enclosed pastoral use. 22 The move towards pastoral farming from c.1640 onwards was influenced by two major factors, the slowing down of population growth and increases in yields, brought about by the extension of area under cultivation and improved methods, meant that it became less profitable to continue expanding the area for arable farming. Movements between grain and livestock farming prices made it more profitable to move into pastoral farming,

The move towards pastoral farming around 1640 may have been assisted by Thame's proximity to Oxford and London. We already know that from c.1630 Oxford supplied London with agricultural commodities, via the River Thames. 23 As the seventeenth century progressed London became more dependent on the provinces for its supplies of foodstuffs and manufactured goods. Nearly 10% (575,000 24 of England's population lived in London and a further 5,000 lived in Oxford by 1700. As Oxford and London continued to grow in size demand for farming produce and other products increased powerfully. Thame, Witney, Princes Risborough and Henley were ideally located to supply Oxford and London. The relatively high prices generated encouraged many farmers around Oxford to respond by increasing their production and supply of grain, meat and dairy produce. There were profits to be made by doing so and the relatively high values in some inventories suggest that this might have been the case. The various kinds of produce also gives us an idea of the types of items consumed.

A further sign of Thame's development is the emergence of specific locations where particular agricultural commodities were sold. Street names like Buttermarket, Cornmarket and Cattlemarket suggest that retailers were beginning to specialize though the quality of these items may not have been very high at times. It is also important to note that not all the trading was done in the market place. The existence of shops 25 in the town indicate that some of the trading was done at retailing outlets. As the number of retailing shops increased, the carpenter and builder would have played an important part in refurbishing the work area.

The speed of progress in Thame, as elsewhere, was still restrained by the slow pace of information diffusion and the unwillingness of many commercial farmers to take risks by trying new techniques of cultivation. None of the inventories mention any of the new crops which were starting to be grown by the larger commercial farmers of England, for example turnips, sainfoin, clover and rye-grass which enriched the soil with nitrates. This, in turn, enabled farmers to increase yields per acre, the root crops provided feed to keep livestock alive during the winter months, and brought more manure into the system.

Clearly, the smaller farmers of Thame, whose primary objective was self- consumption could not afford to take risks by trying out new methods of cultivation since their profit margins were very narrow. The larger commercial farmers could however have taken such risks, but do not seem to have done so during the period in question. Havinden 26 found that farmers in Oxfordshire were growing sainfoin in open fields during the 1670's. Perhaps name's farmers were less enterprising than others?

A further restraint to the pace of agricultural development may have been social. In 1596, increases in agricultural commodity prices due to a bad harvest and the process of enclosure during the past two to three decades, led to unrest in Thame. Agricultural labourers and others opposed to enclosure and high food prices protested against local landowners. 27 Over the next few decades, however, arable land was enclosed for pastoral farming.

In a few instances, agricultural land was left to widows. In such cases, their inventories show virtually no direct involvement in agriculture. No mention is made of grain, livestock or agricultural tools and this is not surprising since it was usual for husbands to leave their land to the eldest son or divided amongst several sons. If however, there were no sons or daughters, the land was inherited by the widow but it might have been sold upon inheritance. Alternatively, a neighbour may have acquired the lease in exchange for providing food and housing for the widow or the widow could have re-married, which meant that the land passed to the new husband.

Table 1 - Trades represented in Thame wills and inventories 1600-1700		
Baker	4	1643,1667,1682,1698
Barber	6	1608, 1672,1674,1686,1687,1691
Blacksmith	4	1605,1629,1643,1681
Butcher	9	1617,1627,1667,1674,1675,1679,1681,1685,1695
Bricklayer	1	1607
Brazier	1	1664
Beerbrewer	1	1639
Bookseller	1	1684
Carpenter	7	1626,1627,1635,1637,1638, 1643,1697
Cordwainer	10	1605,1615,1624,1629,1644.1659,1667,1674,1683,1684
Currier	2	1603,1666
Collarmaker	2	1606,1674
Chandler	4	1641,1670,1677,1679
Cooper	1	1661
Dyer	1	1683
Distiller	1	1687
Draper	1	1643
Gunsmith	2	1647,1690
Glazier	3	1664,1683,1699
Glover	2	1622,1625
Grocer	1	1683
Hempdress	1	1677
Ironmonger	1	1686
Inn Holder	6	1635,1643,1676, 1678,1685,1688
Joiner	1	1628
Locksmith	1	1618
Mercer	1	1660
Miller	6	1603,1617,1636,1647,1680,1681
Maltster	2	1623,1688
Mason	2	1662,1695
Milliner	1	1695
Plowright	1	1636
Salter	1	1607
Shoemaker	6	1604,1607,1614,1634.1693,1694
Tailor	9	1617(2),1630,1631,1634,1675,1678,1682,1684
Tanner	1	1601
Weaver	3	1607,1625,1661
Wheelwright	1	1683

The occupational structure of Thame as revealed by wills and inventories shown that only 20% of the population was directly involved in cultivating the land. The others were processing agricultural produce or servicing the agricultural sector (see Table 1) The butcher, tanner, miller, baker, brewer and shoemaker depended on the agricultural sector for many of its processing materials and its level of business activity.

Farmers, large and small, needed a variety of trades to help maintain and develop the farm. Farmers used masons, carpenters, joiners, wheelwrights and ploughwrights to provide farm equipment or repair farm buildings. Plough-shares, harrow teeth and wheel rims had to be acquired from the wheelwright, ironmonger and blacksmith. The building and repairing of barns, stables, and cow sheds required not only nails, bolts and hinges but also the skills of the mason, carpenter and joiner. Part of the income earned by these skilled craftsmen while working for the farmer would have been used to purchase agricultural and non-agricultural items, thus providing the farmer with income and profit.

The increase in the population of Thame would also have generated additional house construction work for the mason and carpenter and generated more demand for consumer goods such as bread, ale, shoes and meat.

The butcher would have purchased some of his meat from local farmers. The extent of demand within the community is difficult to determine since we do not have any documentary evidence, but Richard Striblehill 28 (1607) had supplies of beef and lamb valued at £4. He also owned 57 cheeses which were probably sold through his shop. The butcher's shop would also have had a variety of tools. Oliver Calcott 29(1674) left 'weightes and scales arid other Butcher's tooles'.

The by-product of hides and skins would have been sold by butchers to tanners, shoemakers/cordwainers, curriers or glovers who would have produced shoes, gloves and other wearing apparel for consumers from Thame and its catchment area. The animal fats would also have been used in the preparation of leather and some of the fat would have been used by the chandler to make candles. The butcher, however, did not supply all the meat consumed in Thame. In many of the wills, pigs and hogs were kept in the backyard for domestic consumption since market prices fluctuated widely due to demand and supply factors. Hog prices at Oxford market, for example, fluctuated from 5s. to 16s.8d. between 1622 and 1661.
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Due to the perishable nature of meat, Simon Minchard, a salter, would have supplied salt to local consumers for making brine to store pork and bacon. He may also have supplied salted meat and fish to Thame's consumers since he left 'a powdring trough', and 'Wares in the shoppe Fish salt pitch Tarr' 26 The tar was used to prevent blowflies laying their eggs on pickled hams. The tar would have been obtained from wood.

Other important trades within the local community were milling, brewing and baking which depended on processing wheat and corn to produce flour, bread and beer. Given the inter-dependence of farming and production it is not surprising that some brewers owned land and produced their own wheat and corn. This would explain why John Lowch 31 (1643) was described as a victualler and yeoman while William Ayres 32(1680) was regarded as being a gardener and yeoman.

Malting was another trade dependent on grain. Malting was a skilled trade and since most households would have brewed their own beer, malsters' produced would have been in great demand. We know that Thame had at least 13 innkeepers/victuallers between c.1600-c.1680 and probably more. This helps explain the scale of the operation carried out by William Haselgrove 33 (1623), who owned £30 of malt barley and wheat. Thomas Baker 34, another

maister, had £96.18s. of 'dire mault and £54.15s. of barley and 'green rnault". The structure of his house seems to have been determined by his trade. It consisted of a hall, shop, parlour, cellar, brewhouse, maltman's room, best chamber and a quartermaster's room amongst other rooms. The brewhouse contained a furnace, meash fatt (mash vat), cooier and 18 other vessels.

Grain not used for brewing or animal feed would have been used for baking. Milling was an essential trade to make flour for baking bread and we know that Henry Ayres" (1617), owned Notley Mill. Once ground, it would have been sent for bolting. Richard Striblehill 36 owned a bolting area where the flour was sieved to remove the bran and thus produce white flour. The mill in Thame probably produced much of the flour used by the bakers.

The demand for ale would have been determined by the spending power of many locals who did not leave wills. Alehouses were not only places for drinking but gambling, singing, dancing and eating and temporary accommodation. They were also a meeting or stop-over place for farmers, agricultural labourers and traders, especially on the Tuesday market day. The diversion of the Aylesbury road from Priestend through New Thame during the thirteenth century, to increase through traffic and assist the growth of Thame, continued to bring additional trade to alehouses and other businesses in Thame.

Road links also enabled goods not manufactured in Thame to be brought in. The grocer's 37, or draper's 38 shops kept a variety of fabrics, probably cheap English textiles. The shops also sold other small items such as cutlery and cooking utensils. We know from other evidence that pedlars and chapmen went from door to door selling light-weight consumer goods which would have affected the grocers' trading turn-over, but it is impossible to determine whether this happened in Thame from the wills and inventories,.

Weavers and tailors also depended on local and regional farmers to provide them with wool. The wool had to be spun, woven and dyed before being sold to the tailor as cloths, though there may have been instances where all three processes were carried out by the tailor and his family. The existence of a dyer in Thame suggests that cloth was dyed in the area. Some of the woollen cloth may also have been sold at the grocers' or drapers shop.

Many trades would have additional business from the Rycote estate of the Earls of Abingdon or Thame Park estate owned by the Wenmans. The Grammar School would also have made demands on the day market or tradesmen to provide the school with consumables and building repairs. The school records show that masons, carpenters and glaziers were paid to make repairs to the old Grammar School 39. The level of demand for consumer items here would have varied as the number of pupils in the school fluctuated although preliminary work on the school's accounts indicates long-term, fixed-price contracts for supplies despite early seventeenth-century inflation.

The existence of six barbers, a locksmith, gunsmith and bookseller between c.1600-c.1680 highlights the variety of relatively specialist services provided for Thame and its catchment area. The demand generated by consumers within the locality was sufficient to keep these trades in business. Items not available in name, however, would have been purchased from larger urban centres like Oxford,

In conclusion, even though the wills and inventories contain a social class, age and gender bias, we can draw some understanding of life in Thame. The work done to date is limited in scope since it mainly concentrates on two particular types of documents. Further research, using other primary documents needs to be done for a more complete picture of Thame's inhabitants in the seventeenth century. However some of the ways in which the local economy was influenced by political and economic developments taking place at regional or

national level and over time can be seen. Some modern trends in farming were slow to develop, as in the case of crops, others, like leasing are present. The close local, inter-relationship between farmers, tradesmen and consumers is apparent. Each depended on the other to produce, manufacture and consume items which they could not produce for themselves. By implication, the local, regional and national economy was inter-dependent and this suggests that Thame was part of a sophisticated and, in many ways, modern economy,

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