

The Occupational Structure of Thame c.1600 - c.1700

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The following study examines the occupational structure of Thame¹ between c.1600 and c.1700, using 496 probate records which have not been analysed previously. The paper aims to make a contribution to the growing stock of information emerging on this issue at regional and national level.

Under ideal circumstances, other primary sources such as the parish register for Thame, surviving muster records and apprenticeship indentures should have been used to verify the occupational information emerging from the probate records, and to provide a more complete picture of the structure itself. However, due to the patchy nature of some of these sources² and the limited amount of time available, the study focuses on probate records alone.

The methodology used to categorise occupational status is discussed later but it is important to state from the outset that widows, spinsters, and those whose occupational status could not be safely identified from the probate records have been excluded from this analysis.

Before discussing the results it is important to examine the integrity of probate records when carrying out this type of analysis, and to point to some of the salient weaknesses these sources contain.

All primary sources used to construct the past are products of a complicated society and the information within them is structured by ideas, assumptions³ and, in this case, images of work. From the mid 16th century an increasing number of legal documents such as probate records specified the occupational status of individuals. The term occupational status conveyed a solid image,⁴ but in reality the concept of work was a fluid notion, and varied according to class, gender and age. The types of occupations practised were significantly influenced by geographical aspects such as proximity to the coast or natural resources such as tin and coal, and seasonal factors.⁵

Probate records which named the testator's occupation were usually made by those whose wealth exceeded £5 near to death. ⁶ There are not precise figures as to how many people fell into this category since regional development and economic activity influenced the proportion, but it is suggested that between 5-7% of the population left probate records.

Even though not all probate records survive and the parish register for Thame is unreliable ⁷ it is possible, using Wrigley and Schofield's calculations, to estimate Thame's population. The projected figures suggest that Thame's population increased from 800 in c.1600 to 1,100 by c.1700, representing a 40% increase. The number of probate records for the same period increased from 41 during the 1600s, representing 5% of the population, to an average of 51 between 1610-1659. For the next 40 years, the average number increased to 55, which also represented 5% of the population by 1700 ⁸ as estimated by the projection. So, the first limitation of this study is that it focused on a small group of people who were also the richest members of the community. It excludes a large section of men, women and children who did not

leave wills but resided in the town and worked in the agricultural and manufacturing sectors. It also excludes those who worked in the parish without residing in the town, and those who lived and worked in Thame for part of their lives and then moved on to work in other parishes.

During the 17th century contemporary ideas on status were confused, since they failed to differentiate between social status and occupational activity. Status seems to have been a mixed concept which described either employment activity or titled status, which reflected social ranking. To describe oneself as a baker, blacksmith or husbandman, for example, conveyed a distinct image which could be translated into employment activity. But social titles such as knight, esquire and dame failed to convey any impression of employment activity. However, in most cases, those with social titles did not need to have occupations in the same manner as those below since their ownership of land and crown patronage provided income which excluded them from the need for physical employment.

The concept of work was inextricably linked to contemporary ideas on gender, age, skill and notions of social order and status. Taking the issue of status first, the seasonal nature of agricultural employment and fluctuations in the demand for manufactured goods during the year meant that most men and women were involved in at least two or more occupations. Upon making or writing a will, the testator made a judgement about the social image he wanted to convey to the rest of the community. Given that male status also reflected the status of the family within the community, some testators in Thame attempted to 'write up' their occupational status.⁹ This is revealed where both the will and inventory survive since the status specified in the will by the testator slightly differs to that written by the appraisers in the inventory.¹⁰

The occupation specified by the testator was also susceptible to seasonal variation. As stated earlier, a majority of individuals, when possible, were involved in more than one form of economic activity¹¹ to acquire a regular income throughout the year. In many instances agricultural employment was practised alongside manufacturing activity. The probate record of William Cowley, Emanuel Shepherd and William Ayres¹² show how two distinct and different forms of employment activity were practised simultaneously. The occupational status given in probate records during the autumn and winter months would have tended to favour manufacturing activities. During the spring and summer months, however, more references to agricultural occupations are likely. This is a general rule but it is true to say that the notion of work was time-bound and the results which appear later are influenced by the timing of probate records.

The notion of occupation was also linked to that of skill, gender and age. The assumption that occupations such as carpentry, weaving and shoemaking were skilled activities would be misleading. Some historians have concluded from the constant use of marital status when describing women in probate records that women were engaged in unskilled domestic work or in unspecified agricultural activity.¹³ However, the evidence from Thame suggests that this assumption needs to be reassessed since there were at least 4 widows who had over 50% of their wealth tied up in crops and livestock upon death.¹⁴ Their probate records stated their status in terms of marital rather than occupational status. The assumptions behind this thinking related to the inheritance laws which favoured the male line. The customs of inheritance made it more difficult for women, both before and after marriage, to become established in the occupations of their husbands, fathers and brothers.¹⁵

The characteristics of women's employment before and after marriage were to a great extent determined by the skills, capital and occupation of their partner or father. 16 'In many cases, the husband's occupational identity served the whole family', his wife and children. 17 In the case of weaving, for example, much of the preparatory work of carding and spinning was done not by the male, but by his wife, daughter and children. This work was not accorded skilled status because it was done by women and children. Other manufacturing activities such as brewing and baking were also done by women without attributed status; instead they were viewed as domestic tasks. When this type of work was done by the male head of the household, however, it was given status and witnesses and appraisers of probate records recognised this. The process also reinforced male attitudes towards the division of labour between the sexes, authority within the home, and concepts of womanhood. 18

Alongside the issue of skill, little is known about the precise meaning of some occupations. Yeoman, for example, were strictly defined by their ownership of 40 shillings of freehold land. 19 By the 1600s, however, the term incorporated leaseholders, copyholders and those who were not predominantly involved in agriculture. Some yeomen in Thame had more of their wealth tied up in non-agricultural occupations such as inn-keeping. 20 On the manufacturing side little is known about the precise nature of some tasks. From some inventories of cordwainers, for example, it is difficult to assess whether the individual manufactured shoes directly for sale to consumers, in which case he would have been a skilled artisan/retailer. Alternatively, he may have been a craftsman working for money and employed by a master craftsman, in which case he would have been a journeyman. 21 Several other occupations are also ambiguous in nature. These include the work done by the barber, the scrivener, the grocers and the mercers. 22

This lack of clear demarcations between the manufacturers of commodities, the sellers and those who practised both activities makes the process of interpretation difficult. The problem is compounded by the blurring of urban and rural occupations. It would be wrong to draw a clear line between occupations practised in urban and rural areas. Many practising yeomen and husbandmen were also involved in manufacturing or retailing activities. Alternatively, craftsmen and traders may have worked in the field at harvest time or held parcels of land which they cultivated throughout the year. 23

One approach available to deal with many of these problems is to categorise the numerous occupations (see Figure S) into bands using the criteria of sectoral activity. The construction of these artificial categories will hide the underlying changes of skill and status taking place within and between different occupations over time. This aspect can be demonstrated by using the example of two yeomen. Laurence Belson's inventory, for example, was valued at £9.70 in 1621 while John Woodbridge's was valued at £1,739 in 1647. 24 Even though both these men were yeomen, the respect bestowed upon them by their peers would have been of a different magnitude. Equally the grouping process will hide contemporary distinction of skill and status between the shoemaker, cordwainer and tanner since all these occupations will be classified in the same category.

Given the complexity of using occupational labels and the blurring of skill and status, it would seem of limited value to create a map of the occupational structure. However, there is some validity in constructing an artificial model since it will provide a basis upon which interpretation and analysis can take place.

The rest of this paper will focus on the main trends emerging from the analysis of probate records for Thame using four main occupational bands (see Figure 5). The trends which emerge may be particular to Thame, but they may reinforce developments taking place elsewhere in the region. On the other hand, the results may go against the trends of the region and may be due to specific factors which affected Thame and the surrounding catchment area.

Throughout Britain agricultural production and manufacturing for local and regional consumption played a vital role in the well-being of the population and Thame was no exception to this. The general level of economic activity, influenced by trade cycles and the civil war, affected the level of prosperity in Thame and the surrounding area. Activities such as brewing, tailoring and inn-keeping were practised alongside small and large scale fanning, and many of these activities, as we shall see later, were inter-dependent

An examination of the occupational map (see Figure 1) shows that it was dominated by those who worked in the agricultural sector (group 2). Their dominance increased from 32% during the 1600s to a peak of 52% in the 1650s. From then it declined steadily to just below its 1600 level by the 1690s (see Figure 2). In terms of wealth it was the richest group in Thame until the 1670s, after which it gave way temporarily to those in group 4 (see Figure 3).

Group 4 members, which included bakers, butchers and innkeepers, accounted for 20% of the occupational map during the 1600s. For the next 60 years the group increased in number and moved upwards to form 48% of the map by the 1680s. During the next 20 years its hold decreased slightly to 30% (see Figure 2). In terms of wealth the group probably kept pace with the rate of inflation up to the 1630s and then fell into recession during the civil war and the 1660s. During the 1670s the group experienced a sharp rise in wealth which increased from £1,000 to £3,500, representing a 350% rise in just 10 years, far above the rate of inflation. By the 1690s, however, the wealth of the group had decreased to a point where it became the second wealthiest group in Thame (see Figure 4).

Those involved in semi-skilled and skilled trades, such as blacksmiths, glaziers, gunsmiths and tanners (group 3) were the second most dominant group during the 1600s. During the next 50 years they declined in numbers and accounted for 10% of the map at their lowest point during the 1650s. For the next 40 years they increased in number to form 30% of the map but still remained 10% short of their strength at the turn of the 17th century (see Figure 2). Between 1600 and 1640 the group's wealth closely followed the pattern of group 4, both upwards and downwards. During the next 60 years their wealth increased and peaked in the 1670s at £1,000. After this it fell back and by the 1690s the group was the third richest (see Figure 4).

The final group, consisting of professional occupations and those with titled social status (group 1), formed between 5% and 15% of the occupational map. They showed a steady increase from 5% during the 1600s to 15% by the 1630s. After this period they declined in numbers to form 10% of the occupational map by the 1690s (see Figure 2). In terms of wealth, the group did not show any significant signs of prosperity until the 1650s and 1660s when it increased from £28 to £735 (see Figure 3). However, this sharp increase is accounted for by Richard Somers, a gentleman, and Thomas Hennant, the vicar, whose combined wealth was £560 (see Figure 3, table).

When assessing these statistics, it is important to bear in mind two points. Firstly, the occupation stated in probate records reflects the probable activity performed near to death. The occupation in itself may have been practised for some years prior to death. Any increases in the types of occupations practised during the period may not necessarily reflect the emergence of new occupations and greater social stratification. The emergence of probate records produced by and for butchers, gunsmiths and millers after 1650 indicates their rising wealth and status. It does not exclude the possibility that these occupations were practiced in Thame between 1600 and 1650. Secondly, the inventory values used to construct the wealth trends for each of the groups have not been adjusted for inflation.

The dominance of the agricultural group between c.1600 and c.1660 shows that Thame was dependent on the land for employment, foodstuffs and some raw materials used in the manufacturing trades. The level of activity on the land up to 1650 acted as barometer to reflect prosperity within the area.

The increasing number of yeomen and husbandmen involved in agricultural activity during the first 40 years may be a reflection of relatively high grain and meat prices. 25 Rising population figures in the area, through the interaction of demand and supply, would have forced prices upwards. Bad harvests, such as those experienced in the area during the 1590s 26 and the 1630s 27, coupled with the shortages in supplies during the civil war, would have kept prices high. Any extension of land under cultivation in the parish to raise agricultural output would have generated additional seasonal employment for farm labourers. In turn, part of their income would have been spent within the town, generating additional business and perhaps additional employment.

The feeling of prosperity amongst farmers would also have been encouraged by the demand for Thame's agricultural produce in other parts of the south-east of England. The town was ideally located to supply the consumers of London and other large urban centres in the south. The relatively high prices there, leading to higher profit margins, would have encouraged many arable and pastoral farmers in the area to send their surplus grain, meat and dairy produce to the London markets. In 1691, G. Miede stated in his book *The New State of England* that the Tuesday market in Thame was 'eminent chiefly for the buying of cattle, which makes it much frequented by graziers and butchers from London and other parts'.²⁸

The growing prosperity of group 2 members would have impacted on the level of business activity amongst manufacturers and traders in the town. Part of the profits generated in the farming sector would have been used to maintain and develop farm houses and farm buildings. Hoskins has shown how farm houses became larger after the 1600s. An increasing number of yeomen farmers followed in the footsteps of gentry families and built larger houses with more rooms for specific purposes. This can be measured by looking at particular houses over time and the inventories generated by those living in them. Some of the richest farmers also had windows put into their existing or new farm houses. 29 Yeomen and husbandmen would also have used the services of masons, carpenters, joiners, wheelwrights, ploughwrights

and blacksmiths to equip and repair their farm buildings, plough-shares, harrow teeth and wheel rims.³⁰ The demand generated for these services by the farming sector, however, would have been limited. The decreasing number of group 3 members between 1600-1650 may suggest that demand within the parish for their services was decreasing. Phelps-Brown and Hopkins have shown how real incomes for labourers in the south of England were declining between 1600-1650, and this may help account for the falling demand.

Growing prosperity amongst group 2 members before 1650, and amongst groups 3 and 4 members after 1650, is also reflected by the increasing number and variety of goods found in inventories. Items such as pewter/brass vessels, candlesticks, pots, pans, curtains, carpets, cutlery, table and bed linen became more common during the 17th century in Thame, and many of these goods would have been either manufactured and purchased in the parish or obtained from larger urban centres such as Oxford or travelling peddlers.

After the 1650s, however, those directly involved in farming experienced the first signs of decline. Two main factors were responsible for this at national level. Firstly, agricultural commodity prices began to stabilise and perhaps decline as England moved closer to the point of self-sufficiency in grain. The number of bad harvests decreased to a trickle during the second half of the century, and by 1700 England had become a net exporter of grain³¹ for the first time in some 300 years. Falling profit margins may have forced less efficient yeomen and husbandmen out of the agricultural sector and into more profitable employments like the ones practiced by group 4 members. Secondly the period experienced a slow-down in the growth of population, which coincided with increases in the production of grain, meat and dairy output due to the extension of land under cultivation and the introduction of new farming techniques. These two factors worked together to force agricultural commodity prices downwards. Alongside this, rising real wages in the south of England³² resulted in the extension of demand amongst the poorer sections of the community. Items such as lighter textiles, bed and table linen, footwear, cooking utensils, stockings, gloves and cutlery³³ fell within their reach. The quality of these goods, however, may not have reached the high standards expected by the gentry and aristocracy.

The beneficiaries of this rising demand at local level would have been the bakers, barbers, butchers, cordwainers, drapers, glaziers, shoemakers, tailors and tallow chandlers of the parish. The rising level of wealth amongst group 3 and 4 members after the 1660s may be a reflection of higher consumption by the poor sections of the community.³⁴

Many of the goods demanded would have been produced within the home in workshops or out-houses. Some inventories suggest that butchers, mercers, tailors and maltsters practised their trades within their homes, possibly throughout the year since they were less affected by seasonal factors.

Many of the raw materials used by the butcher, tanner, miller, baker, brewer and shoemaker would have come from the agricultural sector. A few butchers in the town may have purchased all their meat from local farmers, but some of their inventories show that they too were involved in rearing stock, possibly to avoid being totally dependent on the farmers for their livelihood. Richard Cotton, Richard Stribblehill and Nicholas Powell 35 are three examples of butchers who had at least 40% of their wealth tied up in livestock and crop production upon death.

Many of the farmers and butchers would have sold hides to the tanners in the area, who in turn would have processed the skins and supplied them to shoemakers, cordwainers and glovers to manufacture shoes, gloves and other leather goods. Surplus animal fats would have been used by the tallow chandler to prepare and soften leather skins and make candles. All these goods would have been sold to the inhabitants of Thame, those visiting the town on market day or travelling merchants and peddlers for re-sale elsewhere.

After the 1660s the town became dependent on the services of the miller, brewer and baker. The demand for flour, bread and beer seems to have increased, possibly due to rising real incomes in the area. To avoid being totally dependent on farmers for grain some brewers and millers 36 were also involved in the cultivation of land, which helps to explain why John Louch was described as a victualler/yeoman³⁷ and Henry Ayres, a miller, had 30% of his wealth tied up in grain and livestock upon death.³⁸

Malting was a skilled trade which processed grain, and many of the households in the area would have depended on this processing to brew their own beer. The extent of this operation was very large in the case of Thomas Baker, who had £97 of 'dire mault' and £55 of barley and 'green mault' in his inventory. The structure of his home was determined by his trade since it consisted of a hall, shop, parlour, cellar, a quartermaster's room, maltman's room, best chamber and a brewhouse. The brewhouse contained a furnace, a cooler and 18 other vessels.

Ale consumption outside the home seems to have increased after the 1650s since there were at least 21 brewers, distillers, innkeepers and victuallers in Thame and 76% of them left probate records after 1650. As the 17th century progressed public houses may have acquired a greater degree of importance since they acted as meeting places for waged labourers seeking employment, traders wishing to sell their goods and travellers passing through and wanting to stay the night. The rising wealth of innkeepers and victuallers may indicate the growing importance of the service sector after c.1650.

The growth of this sector and the provision of specialist services would help to explain the existence of three barbers, a locksmith, two gunsmiths and a bookseller in Thame after 1670. The availability of these services, and the rising wealth of those providing them, suggests that sufficient demand existed in Thame and adjoining parishes to keep these trades in profit and business. The absence of residential lawyers and jewellers, however, suggests that their services were less frequently demanded.

The need for such luxury items would have come from the gentlemen, esquires, knights, vicars and schoolmasters of Thame. These people accounted for about 10% of Thame's population but held a disproportionately large degree of power. They would have leased lands to yeomen and husbandmen in the area, generated employment within their homes for domestic servants, and perhaps on their lands for farm labourers. The influence of the two vicars in the town is most evident in their frequent appearance in probate records as witnesses, appraisers and beneficiaries of bequests.

In conclusion, probate records are limited in scope when used to construct the occupational structure of any community since they contain a class, age and gender bias. The occupational status used in them does not 'bear any real relationship to the actual work done' 41 during the year. These records can nonetheless be used to gain some understanding of the past.

The occupational information emerging suggests a close inter-relationship between farmers, manufacturers, tradesmen and consumers. Each depended on the other to produce, manufacture and consume goods. During the 17th century agricultural and manufactured goods produced in Ibame became available to a large market area which extended to London. By implication the integration of the local and regional economy with the national economy may reflect similar trends taking place elsewhere in England. These changes may have contributed to the mix from which the Industrial Revolution emerged and flourished during the next two centuries.

REFERENCES

Thame is a market town located 15 miles east of Oxford on the Oxfordshire/Buckinghamshire border.

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Ibid, p.126.

5. C.G.A. Clay, *Economic Expansion and Social Change: England 1500-1700, Vol.1* (1984), pp.1-13.

J. Garlick, 'Fanning Activities at Thame and Woodstock in the Early Seventeenth Century: the Evidence of Probate Inventories', in *Oxfordshire Local History*, Vol.3, No.7 (Autumn 1991), p.291.

Several years during the 1640s and 1650s are patchy and incomplete. Therefore all population projections after this period need to be treated with caution. It is likely that the population of Thame was much larger than 1,100 by 1700.

8. See Figure 1.

9. Patten, *op. cit.*, p.105.

Thomas Bigg, Husbandman/Labourer, 1603, PEC 50/1/10

Edmund Clinkett, Yeoman/Husbandman, 1605, PEC 34/4/2 William Snow, Yeoman/Labourer, 1621, PEC 51/1/35 Anthony Nore, Yeoman/Labourer, 1628, PEC 47/1/17.

Clay, *op. cit.*, p.100

William Cowley, Grocer/Yeoman, 1682, PEC 35/3/10 Emanuel Shepherd,

Innholder/Yeoman, 1625, PEC 51/1/42 William Ayres, Victualer/Gardener, 1681, PEC 32/2/4.

13 Roberts, *op. cit.*, p.138.

14 Garlick, *op. cit.*, p.292, p.299.

15 Roberts, *op. cit.*, p.140.

16 *Ibid.*, p.127.

17 *Ibid.*, p.139.

18 *Ibid.*, p.141.

19 Garlick, *op. cit.*, p.291. /

20 *Ibid.*, pp.291-292

21 Patten, *op. cit.*, p.105.

22 J. Patten, 'Urban Occupations in Pre-Industrial England', in *The Institute of British Geographers*, Vol.2, No.3 (1977). pp.301-303

23. *Ibid.*, p.302.

24. Laurence Belson, Yeoman, 1622, PEC 32/5/4 Jolm Woodlxidge, Yeoman, 1647, PEC 54/3/46.
25. Clay, op. cit., Vol.I, p.44.
26. R.B. Pugh (ed.), Victorill History of the C01111ty of Oxfordshire, Vol.6 (1962), p.190.
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33. Clay, op. cit., Vol.I, pp.30-32.
34. See Figure 3.
35. Richard Cotton, 1613, PEC 34/4/17
Richard Stribblehill, 1607, PEC 50/5/36 Nicholas Powell, 1627, PEC 48/1118.
36. Garlick, op. cit., p300.
37. John Louch, 1643, PEC 4512/15.
38. Henry Ayres, 1617, PEC 32/1(13.
39. Thomas Baker, 1688, PEC 33fll12,.

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- ¹ Thame is a market town located 15 miles east of Oxford on the Oxfordshire/Buckinghamshire border.
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- ⁴ *Ibid*, p.126.