

4. The Peasant Farmer in 15th Century-Scotland

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Estimates of the population, and the percentage of those obtaining their living from the land by their own labour, in late medieval Scotland vary, but it is clear that the term 'peasantry' covers the vast majority. They did not form a homogeneous group and the characteristics of their lives vary according to the type of tenure held, the region inhabited, the prevailing economic conditions and climatic factors. However, for many the main characteristics must have been insecurity and uncertainty.

Landowners held multiple estates (most commonly known as Baronies) these typically covered areas similar in size to parishes and consisted of ten to twenty small nucleated settlements known as touns or townships. These were allocated to peasants in return for services, rent in kind, and increasingly in the 15th century money. The Landlord may also have a portion of unleased demesne land. The end of serfdom (last recorded in 1370) did not leave a uniform class of tenant farmers. Freeholders held the land in return for fixed rent and a first lump payment on a hereditary basis. Although an Act of 1457 encouraged this practice of granting feus to increase much wanted money income, perhaps to encourage agricultural improvement or (like bonds of manrent and maintenance) as a reaction to the complexities of medieval feudalism, they remained a small number throughout the period.

Husbandmen held land in the townships either jointly or singly i.e. of 88 townships in the Douglas of Dalkieth estates in 1376 - 1377, 46 were held jointly. These leases were all for the duration of one year and this was typical of the early period. Despite evidence of leases being renewed, e.g. the Spalding family held Coupar's Grange of Airlie for over a hundred years, the ability of the landlord to evict or raise rent each year must have led to insecurity for many and may have militated against improvement. There does appear to have been a move towards longer leases in the 15th century, i.e. of the 418 holdings leased by Coupar Abbey between 1464 and 1516, 1587 were for life and 289 for five years. Another type of tenant were those depending on ties of kinship to previous tenants and presumably the landlord, for their claim, known as kindly tenants. Their position became increasingly untenable as the move towards freeholders spread.

Tenants could sub-let to cottars or grassmen, (sometimes landlords let directly to them) who, in return for a small area of land carried out work for the tenant. They often engaged in craft industry to supplement basically subsistence levels from their holding; a village of cottars became the Burgh of Barony of Keithock in 1492. There was also a group of landless labourers whose existence must have been precarious. Presumably they found employment on demense land as service rents decreased and also non-agricultural work. Although there were opportunities for upward mobility, the repeated legislation against beggary in the period, shows the opposite was also true.

The nature of agriculture itself also added elements of uncertainty. Townships were divided into infield land; constantly cropped, manured only every three years, varying in proportion and quality depending on the region; and outfield; consisting of pasture and some arable, not systematically fertilised. There was also communal pasture land often utilised by the transhumance system. The arable land was split into strips or rigs, individuals held scattered blocks of this, and depending on the amount, contributed oxen to the communal plough team. This meant, in theory, that individuals had differing qualities of land and that the total amount was never ploughed too late or early. After the major outbreak of plague in 1349 there appears to have been no pressure of over population on agriculture and the mixed nature of farming meant a balanced, healthy diet was available. However productivity was low, grain yields averaging three or four to one. Once the seed corn was reserved, the much resented portion given to the miller and a tenth of produce given to the Church, there was between one and a quarter to two and three-quarter grains left from every one planted. From this the family and animals had to be fed and rental paid. Feudal casualties could diminish this further at times like the marriage of a child. There were also many ways tenants could incur fines e.g. wearing coloured English cloth, failing to thresh by certain times or allowing marigold to grow on the arable land, and as landlords dispensed justice through the Baron Courts and obtained the fines, many tenants must have had this added burden. There was therefore little or nothing to fall back on in difficult times.

Late medieval Scotland was, like much of Europe, suffering a recession with an imbalance of trade (the principle export -wool - falling from 1,450 tons in 1372 to 500 tons for much of the 15th century). The currency was repeatedly devalued and prices rose. Acts of 1449 and 1482 (which were repeated as the situation worsened in the 16th century) attempted to stop the withholding of grain from sale to obtain higher prices and the export of sheep and cattle was forbidden by an Act of 1468. The price rises probably affected cottars and labourers more than husbandmen but there is also evidence of rent increases in the Douglas of Dalkieth estates of 10% between 1376 and the early 15th century and of 40% in Strathern between 1380 and 1445.

As well as the general economic conditions, low productivity, poor harvests in 1434, 1438, 1453 and 1457 and tenure arrangements causing insecurity, there were also regional disorders e.g. in Moray and the Borders which must have worsened conditions for the peasantry in those regions. Cattle raiding was also becoming increasingly common and widespread in the 15th century and there were outbreaks of plague and other serious disease throughout the period. The best evidence of insecurity and uncertainty amongst the peasantry is the nature of their dwellings. Although the technology and materials were available to create permanent dwellings, most were low oblong structures of about 20-30 feet long by 10 to 15 feet wide at the largest. They consisted of timber frames covered with wattle or turf and often housed both people and animals.

The chief characteristics of peasant life were therefore not uniform but for many must have been insecurity and uncertainty. There was not, however, any widescale unrest in Scotland unlike France in 1359 and England in 1381, but these rebellions were against changes in the status quo not general conditions.

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