

Life in Little Stretton before and after the Black Death

In our history lessons we were told about the medieval period in simple, broad brush terms. English society was presented as being strictly hierarchical with the king being dominant. He granted land holdings to barons on condition they provided military resources and other support. The barons in turn made grants of land to the lesser nobility on the same terms and the church also had extensive holdings. England was made up of manors controlled by one or other of these elites. The majority of the population were serfs (villeins) who were in effect the property of the lord of the manor in which they lived and in return for working on the lord's land they had access to small plots to grow their food. They had very few rights, had to pay taxes to the lord when they married and were not allowed to leave the village without permission. The church played a central role in systems of control.

However, society in the medieval period and the systems by which it functioned were far more complex than we were led to believe. Administrative systems varied from one manor to another and how each area was farmed reflected the differences in the topography of each region. The classic three field system incorporating crop rotation was widespread in areas across the Midlands that were very suitable for arable farming but this was not the case in other regions like around Little Stretton that were less suited to this form of agriculture. In many regions by the end of the 1200s many of the strictly imposed hierarchical regulations had increasingly been modified as economic forces came into play. Lords of manors more and more came to realise that it was more convenient and productive to rent out their land to villeins (serfs) in return for a cash payment instead of having to organise a resentful workforce who had to work on their land for a set number of days each week. By 1200 the majority of labourers (about 60%) in much of England had become freemen.

Throughout the 1200s the population was growing causing increased competition for available tenancies. Lords increased rents on holdings when new agreements were made following the death of the previous leaseholder and their incomes increased dramatically. Concurrently towns were expanding providing a market for the manors' produce and this further benefitted lords but villeins could also sell any surplus products. This made the thirteenth century a time of increasing incomes for all but the landless lower classes. Many villeins used their increased wealth to buy the services of craftsmen and women to produce houses, equipment and food such as bread and ale which enabled other villeins to become specialist providers.

However, in the first half of the fourteenth century there was a series of very bad harvests in 1315 to 1317 and famine killed 500,000 people (about 8% of the population). Prolonged economic stagnation occurred, demand for food from towns fell and the creation of new towns all but ceased. Outbreaks of plague regularly occurred and by 1340 much of the arable land in The Midlands lay uncultivated and then, between 1348 and 1352, the Black Death killed between a third and a half of the remaining English population.

The economic system could no longer function as it had previously and, although it had been gradually changing for many decades, the process rapidly accelerated after the cataclysm. Villeins, although still technically totally controlled by their lords, were more able to negotiate

terms for their work and on many manors villeins with little or no land became wage earners working on the lord's land. As controls on who could become craftsmen weakened more villeins became specialist workers such as carpenters or blacksmiths.

As incomes from manors reduced many lords had to raise money by selling freedom to villeins and traditional tenures requiring work on the lord's land were increasingly replaced by leasehold agreements. Failing to learn from King Cnut who showed the futility of trying to resist the inevitable, the Government tried to reverse the economic changes the plague had created, by introducing The Statute of Labourers in 1351. This law fixed wages at pre- Black Death levels and made a refusal to work or any breaking of pre-plague agreements punishable with fines. Villeins responded by moving to other manors where the lord was desperate to recruit labourers and would turn a blind eye to 'illegal immigrants'. In 1361 the punishments were increased to branding and imprisonment which proved to be counterproductive in that the resentment these sanctions created was a major contribution to The Peasants' Revolt in 1381. Another contributory factor to the revolt was the imposition of a series of poll taxes to pay for the war against France – it is a pity that Margaret Thatcher did not study history. If she had the poll tax riots of the 1980s could have been avoided.

In spite of the Government's futile attempts to resist economic forces, between 1340 and 1380 the spending power of rural labourers increased by 40%, (Dyer 2009). The loss of between a third and a half of the population in the Black Death meant that land was freely available, especially where whole villages had been abandoned, and entrepreneurial yeoman farmers emerged from the villein class. Throughout the medieval period Shropshire and The Welsh Marches produced top quality wool much of which was exported to Europe although by 1400 the balance had shifted from raw fleeces to finished cloth. After the Black Death the wealth from this trade trickled down to the emerging yeoman farmers in our area who now had greater incomes and wanted to show they were moving up in the world by having much more substantial houses.

The core of The Tan House, Little Stretton is typical of the sort of home an upwardly mobile yeoman farmer of 1400 would have had built. These houses used a very strong wood frame and were very much larger than the flimsy hovels that were common before 1350. Hovels were made from materials such as willow lathes, animal dung, straw and clay collected locally and being flimsy structures they often had to be rebuilt when a tenancy expired. The simple floorplan shown below was very common for houses of middle level peasants in Shropshire post The Black Death.

Service bay	Back door	Hall	Solar
	Cross Passage		
	Front door		

The floorplan makes the layout of the core of The Tan House clear but it remains challenging to accurately envisage what life in such a house would have been like in terms of the level of comfort available, the smells one would have experienced, the furniture and utensils in use and the fixtures and fittings of the house. Fortunately we can visit The Merchant's House, originally built in Bromsgrove about 1400 and which is now part of the nearby collection at Avoncroft Museum of Historical Buildings. It has been restored to show how houses like The Tan House would have looked when new. The two houses have exactly the same floorplan and the photographs below clearly illustrate the facilities available in 1400. The solar bay seen below probably closely resembles the one that could have been at The Tan House but no longer exists.



The solar gave the owner of the house privacy in a small upper level room where the family slept and a small room below which could be used for eating and relaxing. Servants would be accommodated in the open bay marked as the Hall and it was here that their meals would have been taken as well as being where they slept on simple platforms or the floor.



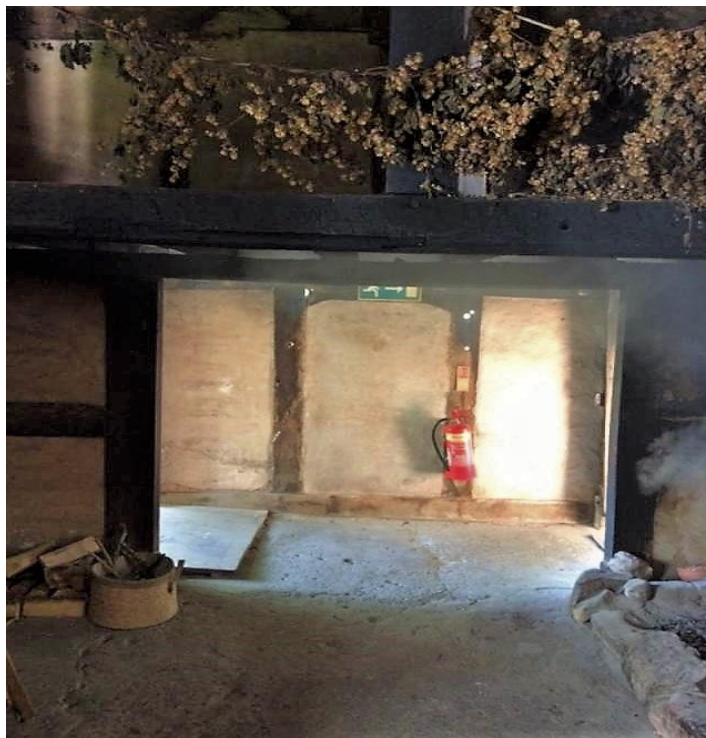
The hall had a beaten earth floor covered with straw or reeds and the open fire was on a raised stone base. The smoke from the wood or peat fire was meant to exit through an opening in the roof but, as can be seen above, the smoke spread around the room in spite of there being a simple smoke hood which was a fore-runner of a chimney. The smoke hood was intended to channel the smoke up to the vent in the roof and was usually made of wood with a lining of plaster or clay to reduce the fire risk but this was not always as successful as was intended. The rest of the Hall Bay shown below illustrates the wood frame of the house with wattle and daub infill panels as well as the furniture and equipment typical of this type of home.



The windows were unglazed but could be covered by shutters which would still allow cold air to enter and when they were closed the room would have been very dark. Candles that did not stink were relatively expensive as the fat from cows or sheep had been more thoroughly processed to remove impurities. Villeins often kept pigs but candles made from lard were very pungent and when combined with smoke from the fire would have produced very poor air quality.

The cross passage in the photograph below separated the hall from the service bay and allowed access through the house from the rear to the front. As the doors were usually left open to create a through draught to clear the smoke, chickens and animals had free access. The passage often had a gutter built in to enable debris to be flushed away but not until it had added an extra stink.

On the other side of the cross passage was the service area where the washing, brewing and other domestic tasks would have been undertaken. Unfortunately this bay is not present on the Avoncroft building but, in the picture below, the blocked up doorway that would have given access to the service bay when the house was first built, can clearly be seen. It is remarkable how the design of fire extinguishers has remained unchanged for 600 years.



Throughout history there have been times of rapid change when very well established systems that had operated for centuries like the Roman Empire, or shorter periods, as with the Soviet Union or Yugoslavia, are swept aside. The political pressures and resentments that led to these changes were built up over a long period but the final stage is often set in motion by a single event such as the death of Tito or the collapse of the Soviet economy. Radical change often follows natural disasters

that accelerate processes already underway as with The Black Death - the catalyst that finally enabled the restructuring of the social and agricultural systems and marked the end of serfdom.

Repeatedly those who have benefitted most from the status quo attempt to halt the march of events and may be successful for a short time, but history shows that change will happen and the process by which it occurs can be unstoppable. If the guidance that history offers is heeded those with power could recognise and accept this and more effectively manage the change process in ways that could benefit everyone. Alas history also shows that this rarely, if ever, happens and the first instinct of leaders and the powerful seems to be to ensure their own interests are protected.

David Haigh

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