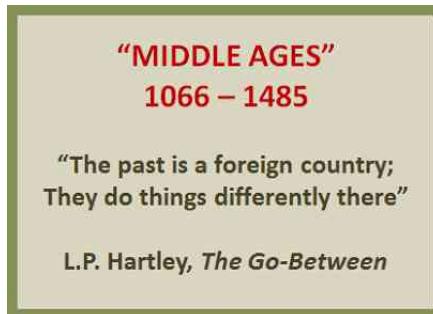


# Branscombe in the Middle Ages

(AGM Talk – November 2011)

John Torrance

What was Branscombe like in the Middle Ages?



People argue about when the 'Middle Ages' began: it'll do to say the 400 years or so between William the Conqueror and Henry VII, first of the Tudors .

The Middle Ages seem far away, very foreign. But it's worse: the past is a country that doesn't exist, so we can't go there to check it out. So how to get an idea of what Branscombe was like, say, 700 years ago, in 1311?

## Material Remains

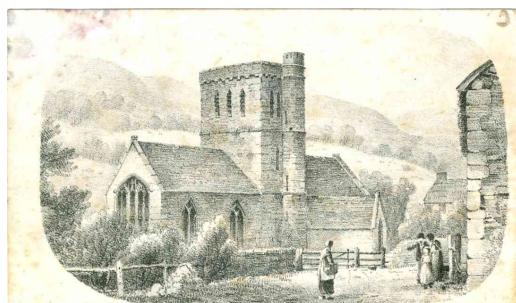


to begin with, let's see what's left.

The parish boundaries are the same: Saxons drew them, using old landmarks such as the Exeter to Seaton road , used by Romans, and the Hangman Stone and Balin's Mound, as well as geographical features like Weston combe.

Two medieval  
Living Cottage.

The church  
earlier. It was



buildings — the church, and Church

dates from about 1160, parts are extended about 1260.

Church Living Cottage dates from the 1200s. I'll say more about it later.

Most of the old farmhouses were built after the Middle Ages but some contain medieval stonework. ('medieval' = from the Middle Ages.) Edge Barton has 13<sup>th</sup> century stonework, Hole House has a partly



14<sup>th</sup> century wing.

So not much, but modern development has not changed the Brandscombe landscape all that much since the Middle Ages, so it's easier to imagine.

## Documentary Remains



and the rest English.

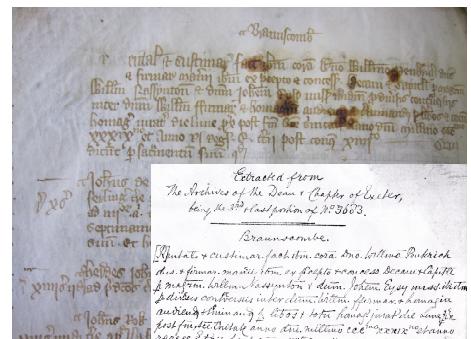
Documents are the main sources. The documents do indeed look foreign. You might be able to read the word 'Branscombe' here, but not much else. And they're in a foreign language, Latin. England was a three-language country: the church used Latin, the upper classes spoke Norman French,

Luckily, many of the documents have been transcribed into modern writing and some have been translated into English.

The earliest document is Branscombe's entry in Domesday Book, the survey which William the Conqueror had made of his newly won kingdom in 1085-6. Domesday tells us that Branscombe was a manor belonging to the Bishop of Exeter, and its produce was 'for the sustenance of the canons' of the cathedral:

The bishop himself holds BRANSCOMBE. TRE it paid geld for 5 hides. There is land for 16 ploughs. In demesne is 1 plough, with 1 slave; and 22 villans and 5 bordars with 15 ploughs. There are 2 acres of meadow and 12 acres of scrub-land. It is worth £6. This is for the canons' sustenance.

The canons were the 20 or so senior clergy of the cathedral, the Dean, Chancellor, Treasurer, Precentor and so on, who formed a corporation called the Dean and Chapter, and lived round the Cathedral Close in Exeter. A local aristocracy of celibate men. A little later, one of the bishops presented the manor to the canons outright, so the Dean and Chapter became lords of the manor, and



remained so until Henry Ford bought them out in 1868.

Because Branscombe belonged to the church — i.e. to literate people—quite a few documents have survived in Exeter Cathedral Archives. There aren't many before 1280, although there is a record of a murder in 1248.

**Adam the miller with his wife Matilda and sons William and Richard killed Stephen de la Dene. Richard was arrested and imprisoned, but escaped. Adam and the others took sanctuary in the church. After forty days they had either to stand trial or confess their crime and abjure the realm i.e. choose lifelong exile, which they did. Their goods were forfeited and they were allotted a port where they had to take the first ship abroad, dressed in sackcloth and carrying crosses.**

(date: 1248)

Note the name de la Dene here: we shall meet it again. And one wonders what happened to them across the Channel. Were they treated as pilgrims or beggars?

## 'Branscombe 1280 to 1340' or 'Branscombe before the Black Death'

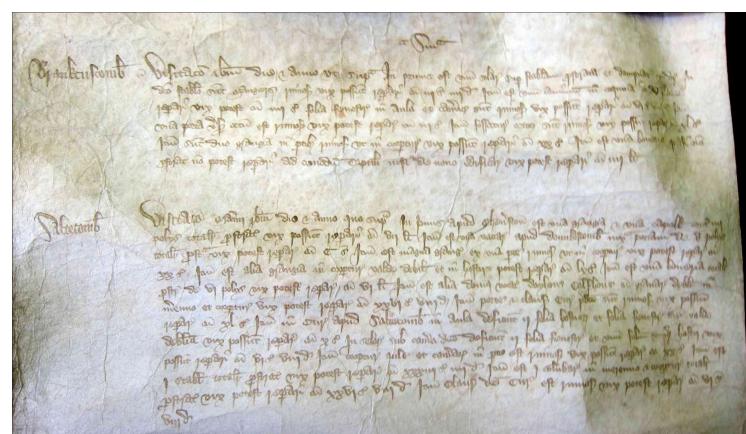
Edward II (1307 - 1327)

Edward III (1327 - 1377)

Black Death 1348 - 49

Enough records remain from the first half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century (i.e. the 1300s) to open a window on life in Branscombe. This talk could just as well be called 'Branscombe 1280-1340' or 'Branscombe before the Black Death'.

We mustn't expect too much of the documents: they are dry, legal stuff but include reports of 'visitations' i.e. inspections of the manor by senior canons from Exeter. The most important document is a rental list from 1339. It shows the holdings of all the tenants, with their names, the rent paid and the labour services they had to perform.



## VICARS

- Lawrence of Sidbury 1268 – 1283
- Thomas Faitcoul 1283 – 1318
- Walter Lovecoke 1318 -1362
- Robert Hamond 1362 - 1401

At Branscombe the boundaries of the manor and the parish coincided (this was not the case everywhere). The Dean and Chapter were both lords of the manor and patrons of the living, so we know a bit about the vicars.

Lawrence of Sidbury. Before him resident priests lived in the 'priest's room' on the first-floor of the church tower, but there was a long vacancy (no candidates, perhaps?) so

in 1269 the Dean and Chapter upgraded the job. Lawrence was called a 'vicar' and given a vicarage and glebe land to grow vegetables and keep a cow and a horse. This was at 'at La Forde'.

Lawrence's vicarage was on the site of the former vicarage in the Square. It was the vicarage until 1884, later the site held a wartime factory and is now flats. The glebe land ran beside Parson's Lane behind it, and is now built up. So the Square was called La Forde in 1269, which tells us that the lane from Beer ran where it runs today, while the stream from the eastern valley ran across it in a ford.



Thomas Faitcoul. At a visitation in 1307 the parishioners said he had given an organ and rolls of music to the church, that he preached from the heart, visited the sick, and performed his duties diligently. He died in 1318 (vicars didn't retire in those days).

Walter Lovecoke came from Exeter. He was probably related to Philip Lovecoke, the richest man in Exeter, who was elected mayor ten times. Walter got into trouble for 'scornfully tearing to pieces' the Bishops' seal, but he was forgiven.



These three incumbencies spanned 118 years, including the years of the Black Death to which clergymen were especially vulnerable, from visiting and burying victims.

The Black Death, depicted in this fresco at Pisa, killed between a third and a half of the population of England. It killed three vicars of Colyton, so it's

amazing that Lovecote survived.

## The Manor

### THE MANOR

- An estate whose owner had rights of lordship over its inhabitants
- Part of the land was kept by the lord 'in demesne' for his own benefit
- Part of the land was occupied by rent-paying tenants
- Most of the tenants were peasants, owing labour services on the demesne
- The peasants had some rights to use the 'commons and waste'

barons or knights, who led the king's armies, or else the church establishment of cathedrals and monasteries. The church supplied the king's civil service, kept the people in order with fear of hellfire, and comforted them with prayer and elementary social services.

Branscombe: a typical manor. The lord's 'demesne' included the demesne farm and the mill, with mineral rights and so forth, from all of which the lord profited.



personal slaves. They weren't allowed to leave the manor. At death their families paid a death duty or 'heriot' to the lord, in the form of their best animal, but a widow could continue as a tenant if she didn't remarry.

What was a medieval manor like, how did it work?

The Normans divided the country into manors as a way of turning the conquered English peasants into serfs, forced to work for their lords. It was also a way of feeding and maintaining those who ran the state and church. So lords of manors were either

The peasants, or 'villeins' as serfs were called in England, paid the lord both a money rent and a labour rent, that is, had to perform a fixed amount of work annually on the demesne farm.

The villeins were not free men: they and their families were the lord's dependants, but they weren't his



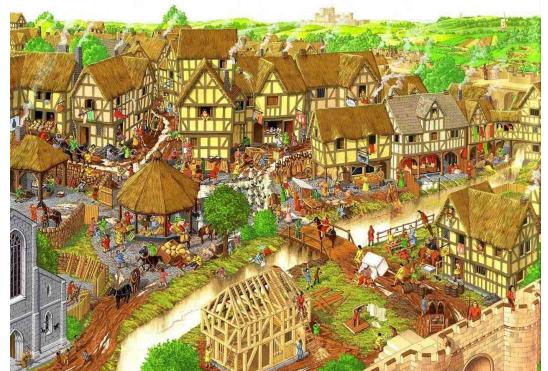
They to get permission to marry, and for many other things too, and had to pay for it. Their compliance was enforced by the manor court. For a payment, their heirs could inherit the family holding.



Villeins had customary rights to share the use of waste and commons. (The picture shows 'pannage' – pigs running in the woods at acorn time.) And the villeins carried on an internal trade in land use and produce, which enabled some of

them to become better off.

By 1300 England was becoming one nation, no longer a Norman colony. Towns had grown and absorbed runaway villeins, or landless villeins' children. Members of the urban working class, though poor, were free, without a personal lord and master.



A middle class of lesser landowners had grown up, free men who were not knights, not clergy and not merchants, so a typical manor now had free tenants as well as villein tenants. They paid rent but had only nominal duties to the lord. They might be free tenant farmers, or minor landowners who sub-let farms to others, or government officials. There was at least one of each of these in Branscombe.



Lords often owned several manors, and employed stewards to run them, with a bailiff to manage the demesne farm. At Branscombe, the Exeter canons would appoint one of themselves to act as steward. He had to remit a fixed annual rent to Exeter, and pocketed the profits of the demesne farm and fines levied on the villeins. Some of these top clergy became very rich.

The  
Branscombe  
stewards

were notable men. Henry de Somerset (1301) was Dean of the Cathedral. James de Berkeley followed him in 1307. He was a grandson of the Earl of Derby. In 1326 he became Bishop of



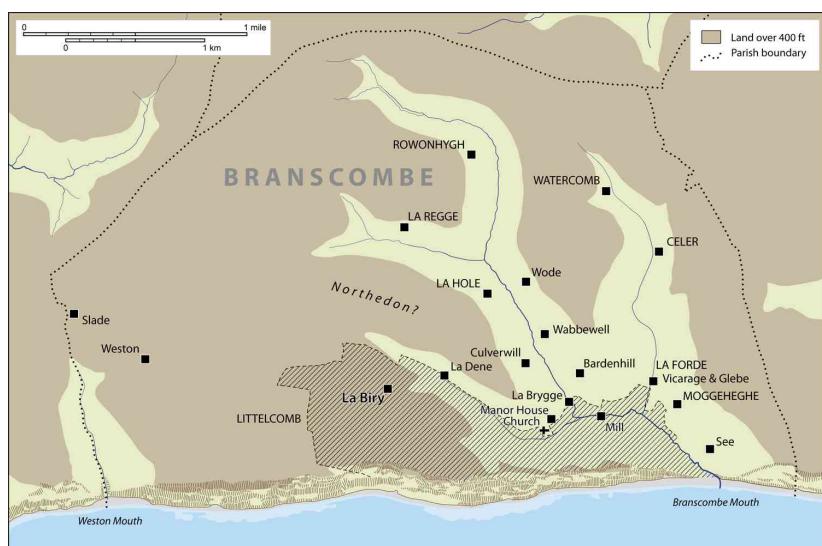
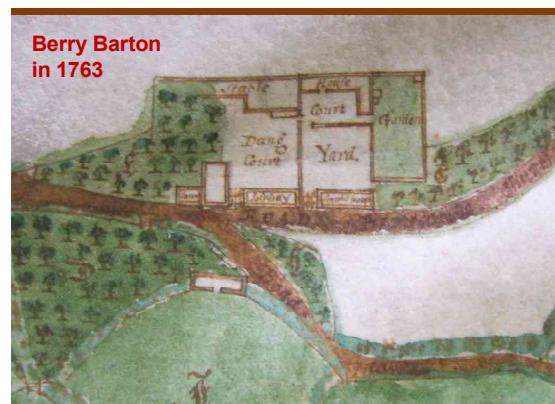
Exeter and resigned the Stewardship. He died a year later, and his tomb in the cathedral was revered as that of a saint.

## THE DEMESNE FARM

'The barton of the manor' was  
La Biry  
i.e. Berry Barton –  
altogether about five hundred  
acres

The documents call the demesne farm or 'the barton of the manor', La Biry i.e. Berry Barton. Parts of some buildings there are probably medieval.

Berry farmhouse burnt down about 1890 but this 1763 map may show the medieval layout. the visitation reports tell us quite a lot about La Biry: in 1307 repairs were needed to the 'wain house' (a shed for carts), two barns, the granary, the bake house, and the bailiff's room. By 1330, two new barns, and the byre, dairy and other buildings were all well roofed and maintained.



Meadow, Manor Mill, Withy Beare and Little Seaside. They all border the north side of Berry Barton's land. Being called 'barton land' means they had once been part of the demesne farm. In later centuries they were rented out as separate farms.

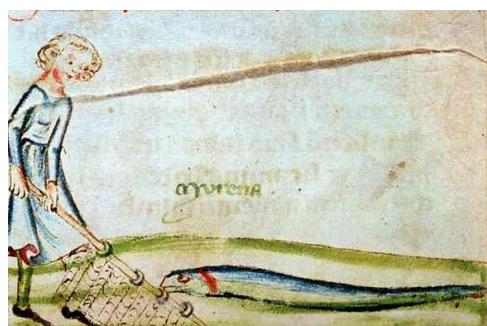
So the demesne farm, La Biry, contained all the land south of the lane from above Street to

We can work out the size of demesne farm from the 1840 tithe map. In The tithe apportionments or notes that go with the map add the words 'barton land' to a series of farms and parcels of land running from above Street to the Sea: Cotte, Deem's, Lower Deane, Pitt, Church Living, Hole

the Square and all the flood-plain down to Branscombe Mouth. (All the land, that is, except church land — churchyard and parson's glebe.) It was bounded on the west by Littlecombe, already a separate estate. La Biry was about 500 acres in all.

The demesne included the mill and a wood, with gardens and orchards. Orchards were on the hill-slopes, which were much less wooded than now. Cider was made, and provided for workers at harvest time. Beer was brewed from barley.

Harvesters' rations included lettuce, so there were large vegetable gardens, also growing peas and beans, which are mentioned as produce to be carried to town.



The fish pond was probably opposite the present village hall. Steward James de Berkeley drew it and took a bream, twelve roach and some eels (not much!).

## THE MANOR HOUSE

- 'A hall in the chief manor house next to the church'
- 'The chamber opposite the church'

house was leased out as part of a farm. The lease described the building that was there then as 'the hall of

the court of the manor'. The tenants replaced it with the present farmhouse.

Attached to the hall was 'the chamber opposite the church', now Church Living Cottage. This was

The manor court was held every few weeks in 'a hall in the chief manor house next to the church' .

This was on the site of what later became Church Living farmhouse. In 1463, when serfdom and stewardship had both come to an end, the manor



described in 1463 as 'the little chamber with the solar above'. Where the Steward would have stayed, if he rode over from Exeter to preside at the court — or he may even have resided there.



In 1330 the building was said to have two rooms and a garderobe (lavatory), with a new kitchen and a stable outside.

## The Villeins

The rental list of 1339 lists 75 households of villeins. Allowing for other inhabitants, such as the bailiff and manor staff, free tenants and a few cottagers, this suggests a population of perhaps 350. (Compare Domesday, 1086, certainly less than 100: population had increased everywhere).

Each villein household rented a house and some land. Holdings were measured in

'ferlings'. One ferling was probably about 8.75 acres. Most had just one ferling — the basic holding which gave a villein certain rights and duties, especially the duty to work on the demesne farm. 22 had bigger holdings, but none more than about 22 acres. Compared with some other manors, these holdings were quite small: 8.75 acres could hardly have supported a family.

Was the small size of holdings due to pressure of population? Not entirely, for right up to 1300 the Dean and Chapter were granting empty villein land as free holdings to outsiders, instead of renting it to other villeins.(In these cases the previous villein tenants had presumably died without heirs, or fled.)

Although holdings were small, the labour services owed by the villeins were not as heavy as in some other manors.

### THE VILLEINS

- 75 households.
- 53 of them rented just one ferling (about 8.75 acres).
- 22 rented more land, up to about 22 acres.



Each villein household had to plough on the demesne twice a year if they owned a plough and oxen, or harrow if they didn't.



Each household had to mow, turn, stack and carry the hay from eleven acres of the demesne meadow. At harvest, each had to reap one and half acres for four half-days.

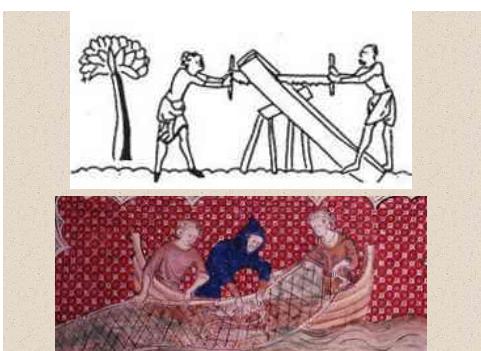
in whatever waggon or cart they owned to bring crops to the barton and stack them in the barns, and also to thresh them



They also had to carry goods by packhorse twice a year to 'Axe or Exe', if so required, carrying given amounts of wheat, barley, oats or rye — so these were the cereals grown.

If a new millstone was needed at the mill, someone with a waggon had to fetch it from Somerset, and villeins had to maintain the mill leat. Each of the compulsory

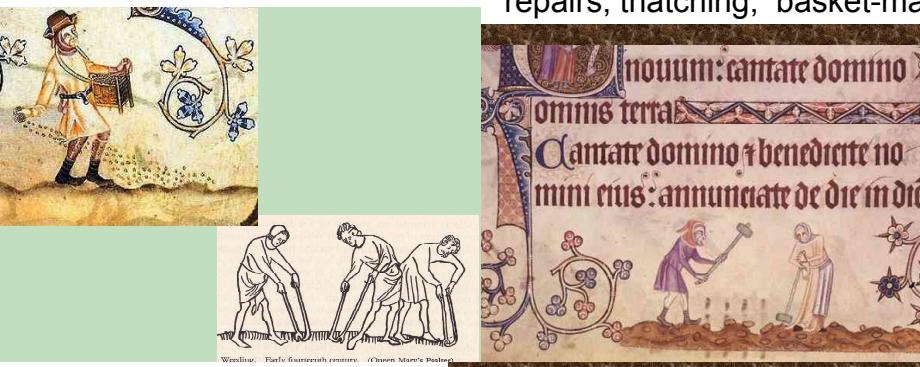
jobs had a money value which the villeins had to pay as a fine if they didn't do them or if they weren't needed.



These labour services were seasonal or occasional. In many manors villeins were obliged to do 'week work' i.e. so many hours per week throughout the year, but not in Branscombe. So the members of villein families

were relatively free to cultivate their plots or earn money at other trades as carpenters, cobblers, tailors, fishermen etc.

There was also a lot of other work needed on the barton, the demesne farm, beside compulsory labour — sowing, weeding woodcutting, sawing, hedging and ditching, building repairs, thatching, basket-making, etc— and this must have been



done by employing villein families for wages. It's probably how they survived on such small plots of land.

Of the 75  
villeins,

44 were well enough off to be assessed for a royal tax (a 'subsidy') in 1332. This was levied on livestock and crops, after deduction for subsistence and for rents and services due to the manor. So Branscombe villeins were not all impoverished, and there were some more prosperous villeins who took leading roles in the community. Here, Walter atte Brygge ('at the bridge') was assessed for 20d, about £47 today.

A photograph of a medieval manuscript page. The page is filled with dense handwritten text in two columns. Several orange arrows point to specific entries in the list, which appear to be names followed by numbers, likely indicating assessments or taxes.

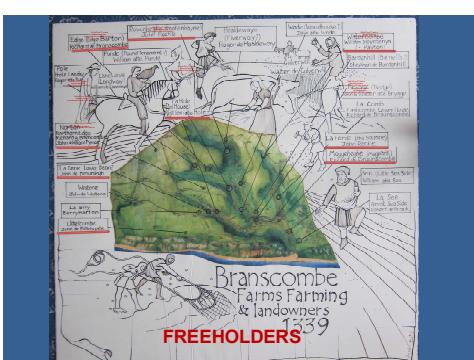


Among the duties of villeins was an obligation to act as a 'reeve' or foreman for a year when chosen. There may have been as many as six reeves at a time. They collected rents, organised and supervised labour, impounded stray animals, carried out the bailiff's

business at fairs and markets, and generally assisted in running the manor. In return they were let off a year's rent and the labour service due on one ferling of their land, and were given the value of one ferling's annual rent when they finished.

Reeves ate at the lord's table at harvest, and were given hay, fodder and pasture for one animal during the year. Probably the better-off villeins filled these posts, perhaps

the same people year after year. We'll see in a minute where some of these leading men lived.



But first, let's get to know the free tenants.. They held by

hereditary right, but if one died his heir had to hand over his best draught animal (usually an ox) to the lord of the manor, with an extra year's rent, in order to inherit. But they owed no labour dues and their rents were low and fixed. [This map drawn by Angela Lambert]

In 1339 there were eight free tenants. We are told where they lived, and their holdings can often be traced right through to the 1840 tithe map, where they appear as modern freeholds, i.e. not owned by the Dean and Chapter. Medieval free tenancies weren't quite freeholds in the modern sense, but I'll call the free tenants 'freeholders' to make things easy.

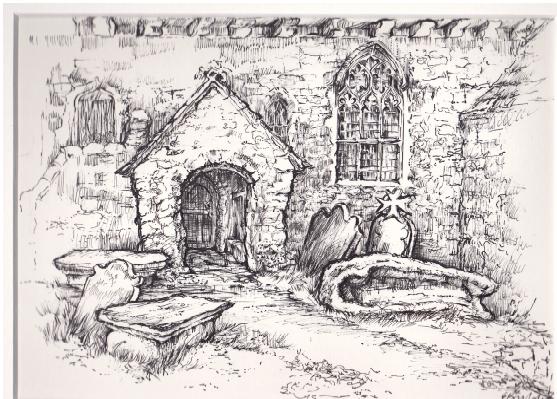
**Assarting:** This was one way of getting a freehold farm. A free man could obtain a charter from the lord of a manor to clear wasteland and create a new holding for himself. Two Branscombe freeholds probably began this way: Lower Watercombe and Rockenhayne.

Watercombe was held by a family called Le Poitevin, sometimes written Peytewin.

They must have been of French origin (Poitou) and were ancestors of the Payton family who appear in Branscombe parish registers from the beginning (1560) to the 1800s.

## ASSARTING

- Watercomb  
William le Peytewin
- Rowonhygh (Rockenhayne)  
John Rocke



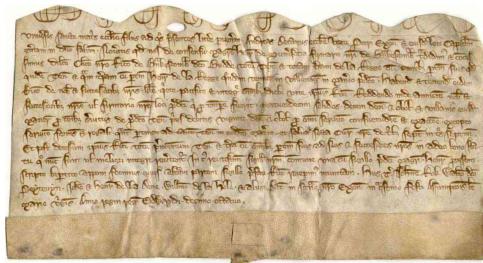
This medieval stone coffin by Branscombe church may have been William le Peytewin's or one of his family's. 19<sup>th</sup> century informants said that a person called Payton brought it from Otterton or Budleigh, saying that it belonged to his ancestor at Branscombe. (Why wasn't he in it?)

Rockenhayne was held by John Rocke, whose ancestor may have cleared the wooded upper central valley. John Rocke also had a freehold farm at La Forde, probably the freehold near the Square called Wootons.

Richard de Branscombe of Edge is the most interesting of these freeholders. The name Edge



Barton dates only from the 1700s, when the house was let as a farm (barton): there was no connection with the medieval barton at Berry Barton.

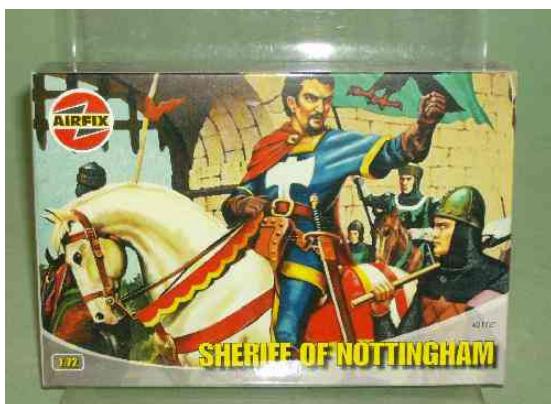


Edge was originally a villein holding called La Regge.

The Dean and Chapter granted it to Richard de Branscombe as a freehold in the 1290s, together with other land in the village. There's a mystery here: Richard de Branscombe was called 'alias Budde'. There was a

villein called John Budde in the village, so was Richard also of villein origin? And why did he get these grants of land?

Possibly he was related to Bishop Walter Bronescomb, who d. 1280. The bishop was said to be an Exeter man of humble birth, though his family probably came from Branscombe originally.



Richard's son, also Richard, had a distinguished career in Devon as a judge and sheriff for the county; he acquired land, and eventually moved to Torbay. He sold Edge to Sir John Wadham, also a judge, early in the 1370s; in 1374 Lady Wadham

won permission to have mass celebrated in her private chapel at Edge. Though it was never a manor house, Edge was one of the first stone-built houses in Branscombe.

The Wadham family enlarged the estate and were the local gentry until the family died out in 1610. Dorothy Wadham, the last of the line, founded Wadham College at Oxford.

Further down the central valley, Hole House had been held at least since 1238 by a family called atte Hole or de

la Hole.

They also owned Wabbewell, then called

Wabbewell. Hole was bought by a family



called Holcombe about 1400.

They sported a coat of arms, seen on the Holcombe tomb in St Winifred's, and they claimed a crusader ancestor. They were gentlemen farmers until they sold out to the Bartletts in 1600.



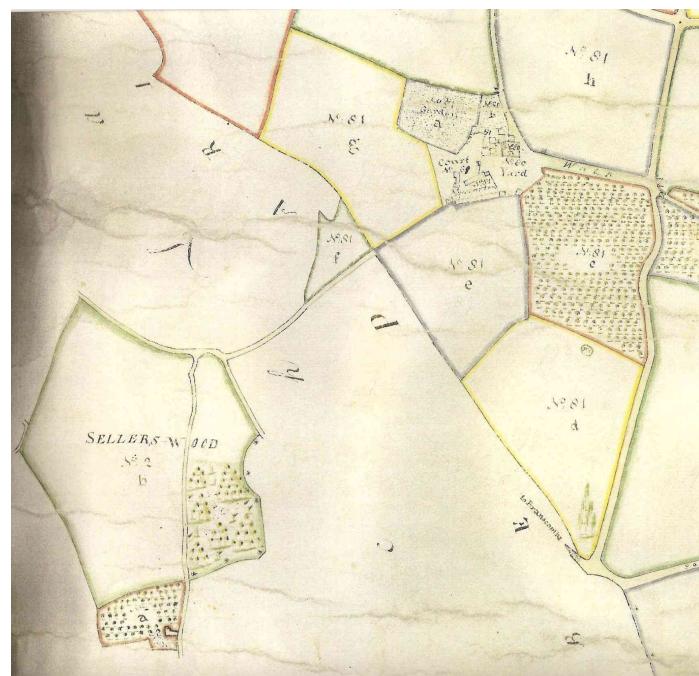
None of these freeholds was very large, but there were some bigger ones. John Pymore held five ferlings (about 44 acres) at Norton, where Richard de Branscombe also had a 13-acre holding. So where was Norton? Possibly on the high ground above Edge, between the eastern and

western branches of the central valley. But Norton (which means 'north settlement') sounds like the name of a hamlet, like Weston, from which the land could have taken its name. If so, it has vanished, but it might have been near the later Edge Farm.

Pymore's holding was not the biggest. Littlecombe, held by Thomas of Littlecombe in the 1290s and in 1339 by John de Bittelesgate, and later by the Knollys family, measured: one 'carucate', that is to say, 16 ferlings or 140 acres. These large holdings were probably for sheep farming.

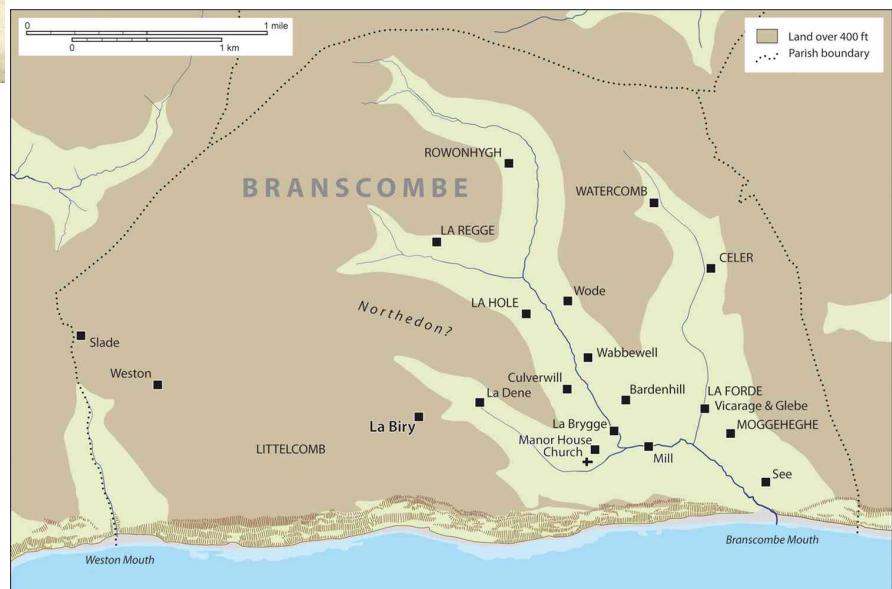
Even bigger was the holding of two carucates of John de Bromleghe at La Dene. La Dene (meaning 'narrow valley') was the name for Street, which was known as Dean until the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and Bromleghe's holding must have been further on up the western valley. There are records of freehold farms called 'Upper Deane' (later Cox's) and Lugs Moor (further

west), each about 70 acres, which, together with Littlecombe, belonged to the Marquis of Dorset in 1506. Upper Deane and Lugs Moor would have made up one of Bromleghe's two carucates of 140 acres. The Marquis of Dorset also held a freehold called Brome park, which had probably been Bromleghe's other carucate. Probably this estate was split later into the three farms of Lower Bulstone, Higher Bulstone and Ashton. These farms lay north of Upper Deane and Lugs Moor and in 1840 they amounted to about 135 acres, roughly one carucate. Ashton was a freehold in 1840, the Bulstone farms were leasehold. The significant point is that they were not copyholds, because copyhold tenure was the legal form taken later by the holdings of villeins.



The smallest of the free holdings was Celer, or Sellers Wood, consisting only of a house and field, which belonged to John Walrond of Bovey, ancestor of the present lady of Bovey House. Interestingly, in the 1270s somebody offered the huge sum of 100 silver marks for it. Why? I think Mike Fielden found the answer when he noticed lumps of iron slag in the stream, the field must have contained a workable lode of iron ore, along with clay for a furnace and timber for charcoal.

Now we are beginning to build up a picture of the medieval landscape: La Forde and La Dene, the two ends of the village, joined by a lane, as now, with the church in between. Opposite the church, the manor house with the hall. Near La Dene, the barton farm La Biry, with its 500 acres taking in everything south of the lane down to the sea, including Branscombe Mouth. There were independent farms high in the valleys — Watercombe, Rockenhayne, Edge, Hole — and to the west lay a belt of enclosed high ground, either cultivated or pasture or both, running north from the cliff and comprising the holdings of Littlecombe and La Dene. To fill in more details we must see where the villeins holdings were.



## Villein holdings

Villeins' surnames are the key to this. Surnames were still not fixed at this time. Some villeins had surnames suggesting trades and activities — Taylor, Draper, Webber, Hayward, Stone, Cole or Hunt — but others are named by places, such as 'atte Slade' (at the shallow valley), 'in the Dene' (in the narrow valley), 'atte Wode' (at the wood), and these are clues to where their holdings were. Let's see how many can be located.



John atte Slade was probably the furthest west, on the Branscombe side of the parish boundary, near Slade House in Salcombe Regis, where Little Slade is now. John de Weston probably had the main holding at Weston, perhaps where the ruins of John Stuckey's mansion stand today. Between Weston and the main road William de Laneweye must have had his holding at what was later Landway Farm, now Kingsdown Farm (John de Bittelesgate also had a free holding there). At the head of the valley below Edge the tithe map shows Poole Lands, which may have been the two ferlings held by Roger atte Pole. In 1840 Poole lands contained 35 acres, i.e. four ferlings, 29 of which were rabbit-warrens. A rabbit-warren would have belonged to the lord of the manor so perhaps Roger looked after a warren of two ferlings for the Steward, and farmed the other two ferlings.



Coming down the central valley, it is possible that John

Hokenleghe's name was preserved at Hooknell, an old farm now lost in the woods south of Rockenhayne. The atte Wode family were almost certainly at Woodhouse. Further down and opposite were John Langhe de Culverwill and Walter de Culverwill. Walter atte Brigge held two acres of meadow and other land, probably where Bridge Farm stood until the 18th century, on the present site of the National Trust office. His name tells us that the lane already crossed the main stream on a bridge there. There was also John atte Brygge who paid extra rent for land next to his holding described as 'above la Guappe' and Stephen de Bardenhill also rented some land adjacent to his holding 'above Guappe'. 'Guappe' may mean the 'gap' in the hills created by the valley mouth, so perhaps we can place John atte Brygge at Rising Sun Cottage and Stephen de Bardenhill opposite at Barnells (Trafalgar Barton).

William Le Smyth would have been their neighbour, if the old forge was there, as seems likely, and not far away was Richard the miller.



Going back up the western valley with demesne fields on the left of the lane, past the church and the manor house to La Dene, or Street, we would have come, on the right, to a house with two ferlings belonging to Richard in the Dene senior, a house with one and a half ferlings belonging to Richard in the Dene junior and a house with one ferling belonging to Lucas in the Dene. Their neighbour was probably William atte Punde, whose holding later became Pound Tenement, beyond Margells. His name tells us that the manor pound was on the opposite side of the lane, on demesne land. That was where villeins' animals were impounded and ransomed if found on demesne land.



Curiously enough, none of the villeins' names place them on the eastern side of Castle Hill or in the eastern valley, unless William in the Lane lived somewhere near Bank. But William atte See must have been at Great Seaside because Little Seaside was thenstill part of the demesne farm. There was a

two-ferling villein holding called Moggeheghe belonging to a woman called Wymarca Mugge, which was given as a freehold to Richard de Branscombe, and the name remains in Mug's Lane (Beach Road) and an 1840 field-name Mugpark, then part of Great Seaside.

## Homesteads or strips?

These place-names ran in families, so their holdings were hereditary homesteads fixed in the landscape. Many of these villeins paid rent for extra land 'adjacent to their holdings', often specified as a 'close', which again indicates permanent enclosures surrounding a home and a farmyard. But was this true of all villeins?

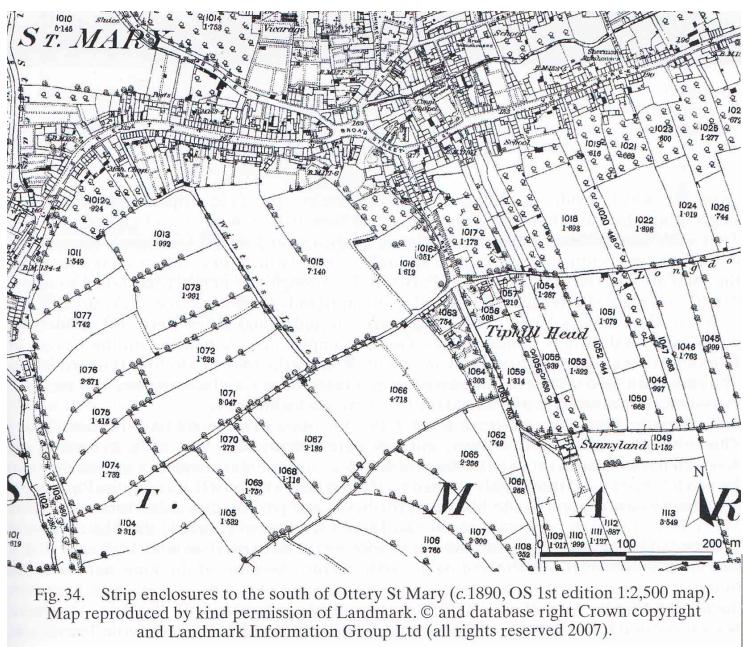


Fig. 34. Strip enclosures to the south of Ottery St Mary (c.1890, OS 1st edition 1:2,500 map). Map reproduced by kind permission of Landmark. © and database right Crown copyright and Landmark Information Group Ltd (all rights reserved 2007).

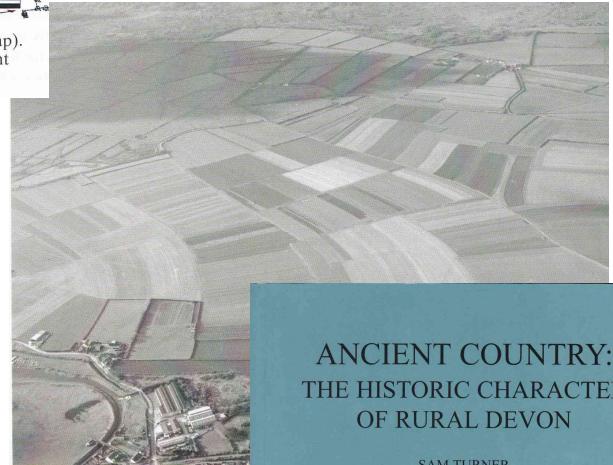
Branscombe, even the demesne land was spread about among the villein holdings in this way.

A suggestion that the villeins' holdings at Branscombe were arranged in strips has been made by the authors of the Historical Landscape Characterisation project for Devon.

Their idea is that by studying field-shapes on old Ordnance Survey maps or tithe maps they can distinguish enclosures of broadly different dates. So their map of Branscombe marks 'medieval enclosures', 'post-medieval enclosures' and 'modern enclosures'.

In Devon, as in most of England, manorial land was traditionally laid out in strips of an acre or more, and the strips lay in blocks in what is often called an 'open field', that is, without hedges or enclosures.

Individual holdings were made up of a number of scattered strips, some on better land, some on worse. In some manors, though not in



ANCIENT COUNTRY:  
THE HISTORIC CHARACTER  
OF RURAL DEVON

SAM TURNER



DEVON ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY OCCASIONAL PAPER 20

These labels are only informed guesses, but many of the areas which seem to have contained enclosed homesteads in 1339 are indeed marked 'medieval enclosures' – e.g. Rockenhayne, Hole, Culverwell, Barnells, Great Seaside. But also, large areas of high ground around the village are marked 'medieval enclosures based on strip fields' at



Weston, Ashton and Bulstone, above Edge and Rockenhayne, and on Stockham's Hill. So it seems likely that a majority of the villeins, perhaps most of the 53 who held just one ferling, did still hold their land in the form of scattered strips in 1339. Most of these had surnames which were not based on place-names.

So perhaps we should think of Branscombe

in the C14 as changing from an open strip-field landscape to a landscape of hedges and homesteads. The homesteads, the small farms, were mostly in the valleys, and therefore suited to pasture and orchards, often with some meadow. These small-farmer villeins would have been raising cattle and oxen, high-value goods, which is probably why many of them were quite prosperous taxpayers. The open fields of strips would have covered much of the higher ground near the village, and this would have been mostly arable. Cattle-farmers in the valleys might have rented arable strips on the high ground from villeins who might have worked for wages or pursued a trade. For example, we know that there was quarrying and that Branscombe supplied building stone and gypsum, for plaster, to Cathedral during the 1330s. People were do this work under the supervision of John who was himself a villein, renting one and a ferlings (about 12 acres).



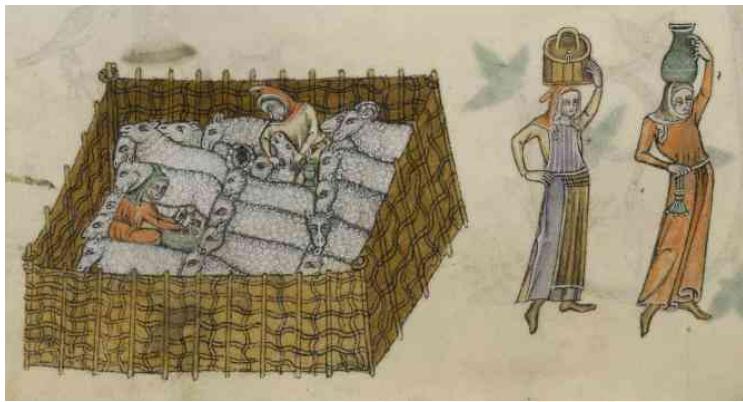


Exeter  
paid to  
Stone,  
third

the  
would

There would still have been strip holdings in valleys as well as on the hills, and these

have been slowly added to the homesteads of the small farmers, and enclosed. The successors of these small farmers became the yeomen copyholders of later centuries, with farms of 30, 40 and 50 acres or more, while the descendants of most villeins, if they stayed in Branscombe, eventually became landless labourers working on local farms for wages.



One visitation report mentions sheep on common land, and this must have been an important part of the village economy, for lord and villeins alike. Some of this common land probably lay beyond the open fields of strips, on the furthest and highest parts of

the parish. It could have bordered Beer Common to the east and what was then Kingsdown Common to the north, across the road in Colyton. We do not know if there were cliff plats in the Middle Ages, but if so, this might have been another way in which villeins could use the 'waste and commons' of the manor.



## Conclusion:

The 14<sup>th</sup> century was not a happy time. The Little Ice Age, as it has been called — a 400-year cooling of the climate — began about 1300. Cold and rain caused widespread crop failure, with disease and starvation among animals and humans. There was a disastrous famine all over northern Europe in 1318. Because of low crop yields, the Dean and Chapter temporarily halved the price they charged the villeins for seed-corn each year.

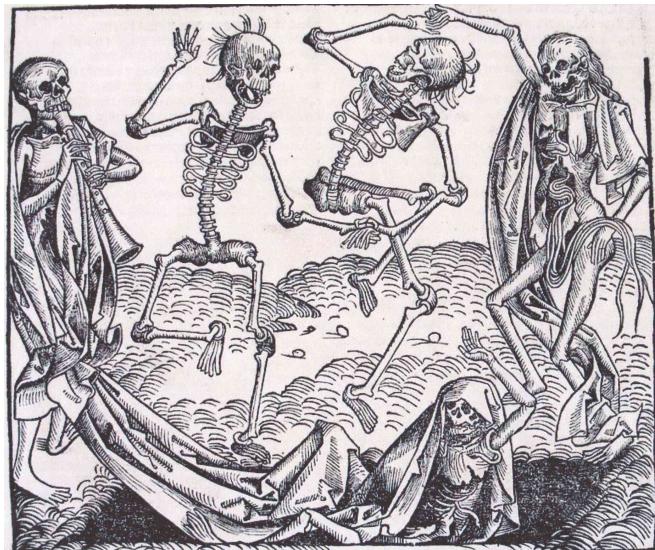
A succession of great storms started to build up the pebble banks along the coast of East Devon. There is a hint in the documents that by blocking what would previously have been a

little  
estuary  
and



saltmarsh at Branscombe mouth, storms put an end to salt panning.

The Black Death arrived in 1348 at Weymouth, from Asia via Europe. It killed between a third and a half of the population of England, although I can't say anything yet about its impact on Branscombe. The result was a chronic shortage of labour, and this eventually contributed to the breakdown of the manorial system. Rising wages tempted more villeins to flee to towns and



strengthened the demands which those who stayed made on their lords. One of Richard de Branscombe's tasks as a royal official was to try to enforce throughout the county a futile wage-cap imposed by Edward III. From the 1330s onwards the Hundred Years' War waged between the kings of England and France imposed unpopular tax demands on freemen



and villeins alike. But possibly, as a manor belonging to the church Branscombe avoided having to contribute troops trained in archery.

Towards the end of the century, French raids on the south coast of England became bolder, and Branscombe folk must have been glad, as their ancestors had been in the days of the Vikings, that their village was hidden from the sea.

About the more intimate and personal aspects of Branscombe life in the Middle Ages –

about relations between the sexes, for example – almost nothing, alas, can be said.

