Vale and Downland Museum – Local History Series

The 1522 Muster Role for West Berkshire (Part 4) –

Incomes in Tudor Berkshire: A Reply

by Simon Kemp

The enormous assistance which the Muster Certificates of 1522 give to the economic and social historian cannot be underestimated. Their uses in developing population projections, particularly important in the period immediately prior to the beginnings of parish registers, and in providing an insight into the general structure of society, have clearly been established (1). In a recent edition of this journal an attempt was made at ascribing to this source another possible use; namely that the lists given of the values of goods were indicative of annual income (2). An interesting argument as to why this should be so was put forward by its author, but much of it was based on some very general assumptions which led her into the realms of over-statement. The task of this paper is to assess, in a critical manner, the case put forward in the Garnish article and, on the basis of research carried out on the same geographical region during the same chronological period, to suggest where her analysis is faulty.

Beginning with the suggestion that the valuation in goods for Nicholas Radysh (3) of Wantage of £20 (4) was his yearly return from freehold land, one can only conclude that evidence from elsewhere in the document has been totally ignored. Firstly, the same person is listed under the category of land holders twice and the value of land he held came to £2 8s 5d (5). Secondly, those responsible for compiling the Muster had a specific brief which was to assess the "Yeerly Value of every mans land" and "the value and substance of every person…"(6). That Garnish should use both quotations in her own article is a further reason to believe that she is mistaken. These instructions to the commissioners, whilst originating from Essex as opposed to Berkshire in particular, make it clear that the two lists, one of land and the other of goods, are not to be confused. The latter was an assessment of total wealth and was based upon "money, plate, jewels, utensils, household stuff and ornaments, merchandise and debts"(7). The former was based simply on the value of landed income per year.

Further doubt as to the reliability of the evidence which she used to sustain a belief that goods were equal to income comes from an analysis of the data supplied which suggested that contemporary commentators gave support to her argument (8). Her assumption that tanners were a wealthy group and that, as such, a yearly income in excess of £50 would not have been unusual is based only on the returns for Wantage and the appearance there of two people who can be identified immediately with such an occupation from probate evidence. That tanners, as a whole, were in receipt of such incomes cannot be tested from the remainder of the Muster Certificates for North Berkshire. However, the corresponding document for Rutland includes the mention, in the town of Oakham, of a tanner being valued on goods of £6 (9). The distinct impression that one gets is that the article was written with the intention of proving her point, even at the risk of contradicting herself in

the use of evidence. The statement that yeomen were believed by contemporaries to be worth £3-£4 a year is sustainable when looking at the assessments for 1522 of people whom it is possible to state were yeomen. However, in the table which she produces she lists a yeoman who was valued at £ 13 6s 8d (10). Further analysis of the document, for other parts of the Vale of the White Horse, and based on tracing the probate records of those styled as yeomen in order to be able to know how a person was described, suggests strongly that the variety of goods values attributable to these individuals in no way conformed to the £3-£4 level. Some were considerably higher whilst others fell below £3.

The same mistake occurs in the case of servants (11). Whilst it was the case that most of those listed as such had assessments of below £2, significant exceptions to this are to be found. One example is the case of a servant of Robert Walter of Wantage,(12) by the name of William Hews(13). He was noted as having goods worth £6 13s 4d and was not alone, amongst servants in the Vale of the White Horse, in being attributed with a figure higher than the one Garnish suggested for yeomen. That the Muster Certificates' inclusion of goods values for servants bore no relation whatsoever to annual income is made clear by reference to the Lay Subsidy returns taken in 1524-25 (14). The prime example is that of George Clark of the Deans Fee in Lambourne(15). In 1522 he was listed as having goods to the value of 16s, however in 1525 he was said to be paying on wages worth £1. The only conclusion which can be drawn from this is that in 1522 his total wealth was being considered, whereas three years later it was his income of £1 that interested the assessors more. Equally, servants as a group are inconsistent in the sense that having been mentioned as such in 1522, in 1524-25 they may be classed as something else. One finds in the case of Rutland, for example, that Robert Christian, a servant worth £3 in goods in the Muster, was described in 1524 as a labourer being paid wages of £2 (16). Annual income therefore appears to be a more appropriate suggestion, certainly in the case of servants and labourers, for the Lay Subsidies rather than the Muster Certificates.

In order to justify her proposition Garnish attempts to use a range of sources other than the Muster itself. Whilst such a process is a useful way of placing the document in its proper context, her method of application is to be doubted. By attributing to probate wills (17) a status of comparable financial data, she ignores the nature of the material itself. She states, quite clearly, that it is possible to suggest what a person was ultimately worth by adding up the value of bequests, because those making them would not have exceeded their total wealth. The question must be raised as to whether this was indeed the case; the conclusion, on the basis of a study of the region, is that this assertion is false. To begin with, whilst wills make mention of debt, they are not always forthcoming as to the actual value of these. Such information is more the prerogative of inventories, and an analysis of inventories for a number of craft workers throughout the Vale of the White Horse indicates that some were owed money which accounted for, in some cases, a large proportion of their inventoried wealth (18). The will prefers to use the phrase “my debts paid” and thus assists the researcher little. Also overlooked in the process of making the assumption as to wills indicating total wealth is the question of a will-maker’s status. Highlighting this is a case from Lambourn which suggests strongly that, once again, her assumption is inaccurate. Sir William Essex, a prominent member of the county community in Berkshire during the 16th century, in making his will in 1548, (19) made provision for the upkeep of the town's almshouse and also for increased wages for his labourers. A 17th century document (20) makes it clear, however, that rather than having the means of covering such bequests, it began the process which was eventually to lead to the decline in that family’s fortunes. It states that, in order to meet the requirements of the will, William's son, Thomas, borrowed the sum of £12,000. By the time Thomas’s son, William, took over the estates this had increased to £18,000, Thomas himself having made an equally generous Will.(21) Whilst being an extreme example, it does suggest that it is

incorrect to assume that the total values of bequeathed goods in wills are a reliable indicator of a person's wealth.
The attempt to construe, on the basis of wages paid to workers noted in the churchwarden's accounts,(22) a notion of annual income is also fraught with dangers. Previous assertions as to the validity of such a task (23) have been confronted with some useful counter positions (24). A similar argument against this proposition is to be found amongst the data for Wantage. One of the most frequently mentioned tradesmen in the churchwarden's accounts is Bartholomew Yate. The tasks for which he was paid were generally in connection with the stone work of the church, and it is not surprising to find that his inventory describes him as a mason (25). What this document further suggests is that he was not simply a day labourer, eking out a living and dependent on what Garnish states is one hundred and twenty days work a year (26). Instead he was a master craftsman, probably employing his own labourers and supported by the mention in his inventory of a stock of three hundred bricks.

The most problematic and unsustainable claim with which she attempts to justify her position is the proposition that the value of inventories can be used to show both annual income (27) and also that people in certain broad occupational groups can be identified by the value of their inventories (28). Whilst there is general agreement as to the importance of inventories for the social and economic historian, (29) all are aware that the actual value given may miss out certain facets, most notably the value of freehold land. Take the example of William North of Lambourn (30). The given value of his inventory was £2, thus below the supposed minimum figure by which the law required such a document to be made (31). What this did not mention, but which his associated will did, was his possession of freehold land. This, of course, may have been little more than his house, but its omission led to an understatement as to his total wealth. That such figures could, by the process of multiplying assessments by five, (32) be equated to annual income is in need of testing. Taking the Muster Certificate values for individuals whom it is possible to link to probate inventories (a process not possible for Wantage because of the non-existence of such documents prior to 1580) one finds the following. John Blagrove, of West Bockhampton in the Hundred of Lambourn, was valued in goods in 1522 at £50, yet his inventory value was £77 (33). Thomas Jennings, of Watchfield in the parish of Shrivenham, yeoman, was listed at £2 and had an inventory worth £ 100 (34). Several other examples indicate that a multiplier of five produced figures which bore no relation to the inventoried value. Indeed, in only one case, that of John Young, of Ashbury in the Hundred of Shrivenham, did the multiplier get close (35). His 1522 assessment was £6 and the inventory £29 18s, which would round up to £30.

Finally, doubt is thrown upon her suggestion that certain trades and status groups can be identified from a given range of inventory values. Table 1 is based upon an analysis of inventories for people in four specific hundreds in the Vale of the White Horse (36) who can be identified as conforming to her given groups (37). It excludes all those for whom, whilst being mentioned as husbandmen, labourers and small independent craftsmen, no values are given. The table clearly suggests that her analysis cannot be supported. Inventory values do not coincide with certain groups because these groups are not simply homogeneous masses. Instead they comprise a range of individuals with a variety of levels of inventoried wealth.

Having set out to prove what would have been a very interesting argument, Garnish appears to have fallen not only into the pit of over-generalisation, tripped up by a host of methodological hurdles which she herself constructed, but also to have strayed from the task which she set herself in the first place. In an attempt to use a wide variety of documentation she has managed, particularly in the latter part with her assessment of

inventories, to lose sight of what the Muster Certificates of 1522 can provide for the historian of the Tudor period. In this document we gain a far wider picture of society than any other document is able to suggest until, arguably, the Hearth Tax returns of the 1660s. However, we should avoid using document in ways which are not sustainable.

TABLE 1

OCCUPATION/STATUS	TOTAL NUMBER	CONFORM TO GARNISH'S RANGE OF INVENTORY VALUES? YES	NO
Labourers	14	7	7
Husbandmen	17	7	24
Shoemakers	16	8	8
Glovers	7	3	4
Weavers	7	3	4

REFERENCES

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2. Liz Garnish, -Incomes in Tudor Berkshire-, *Oxfordshire Local History, Vol.* 3, No.3 (Autumn 1989), 93-102.
3. Garnish, op. *cit.*, 93.
4. Public Record Office, E/315/464, folio 48r.
5. Public Record Office, op. *cit.*, folios 44r. and 47r.
6. Garnish, *ibid.*
7. Goring, op. *cit.*, 691.
8. Garnish, op. *cit.*, 96.
9. Cornwall, op. *cit.*, 79.
10. Garnish, op. *cit.*, 95.
11. Garnish, op. *cit.*, 96.
12. Public Record Office, op. *cit.*, folio 47r.
13. *Ibid.*
14. Public Record Office, E/179174/192.
15. Public Record Office, *ibid.* and E/315/464.
16. Cornwall, op. *cit.*, 23 and 108.
17. Garnish, op. *cit.*, 94.
18. For example: Edward Filbert, tanner, of Wantage, was owed debts amounting to 20% of his total inventory value; Richard Simons, shoemaker, of Wantage, 90%; William Morris, shoemaker, of Lambourne, 67%.
19. Public Record Office, P.C.C. Wills, 12 Populwell.
20. Berkshire Record Office, D/EX51/72/1 &2.
21. Public Record Office, P.C.C Wills, Prob 11, 17, pp. 16-18.
22. Garnish, op. *cit.*, 96.
23. E.H. Phelps-Brown and S.V. Hopkins, ---Seven Centuries of Building Wages-, *Economica,* New series, 22 (1955), 195-200.

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26. Garnish, *ibid.*
27. Garnish, op. *cit.,* 99.
28. Garnish, *ibid.*
29. See the work of 0. Ashmore, -Inventories as a Source of Local History-, *Amateur Historian,* 4, Vols. 1-2 (1959), and JJ. Bagley, -Inventories as a Source of Local History-, *Amateur Historian,* 4, Vols. 3-4 (1960).
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32. Garnish, *ibid.*
33. Berkshire Record Office, C.A.B. Wills, D/A1/391226/a.
34. Berkshire Record Office, C.A.B. Wills, D/A1/86/25/a.
35. Berkshire Record Office, C.A.B. Wills, D/A1/142/21/a.
36. Faringdon, Lambourn, Shrivenham and Wantage.
37. Garnish, *ibid.*

This article was first published in "Oxfordshire Local History", Vo.3, No.5, Oxfordshire Local History Association, (1990), pp.192-197

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