

A General Sketch of England in 1500

England in the 1400s was a turbulent nation. Over the course of two centuries four rulers had met a violent death and several important noble families had been wiped out. In fact, the closer an aristocrat got to the throne, the greater the danger. Commoners also suffered from the chaos of the late-fourteenth and early-fifteenth centuries. The period was punctuated by plague, civil war and famine. The population of England suffered a great deal between 1300 and 1450, in fact, the population of England in 1500 (around 2 million) may not have been as great as that of the Roman Period. England would experience a period of recovery in terms of population that would begin in the 1500s and continue into the Modern Era.

The Consequences of British Insularity

Britain is an island. This fact is probably not a surprise, but it is an important factor in the historical development of England, so it needs to be said. Britain's insularity makes its development and history different from that of nations on the European Continent.

As an island Britain was both open to occasional invasion and closed to developments that took place in Medieval Europe. England was invaded by the Romans twice, and became a province of that state during the reign of the Emperor Claudius in the 40s A.D. Roman influences took root on the island, and Britain had become romanized and by the end of the first century, and christianized by 300. After the Romans left the island in the later 300s, Britain was invaded again from the Continent, this time by a series of Germanic peoples, among which the most important were the Angles and Saxons. These tribal groups pushed many of the older Celtic peoples west into Wales and Cornwall, and North into Scotland. They brought Germanic Paganism with them de-christianizing much of England. The rechristianization of England had a profound effect on the island and its Germanic rulers.

The earliest missionaries who came to England after the Germanic invasions were Irish. They brought with them an idiosyncratic Irish version of the faith that had, as a result of Irish isolation and traditions, parted ways somewhat with Rome. These missionaries settled in the North and began to teach and convert Germans in the northern kingdoms to their brand of Christianity. By the end of the fifth century, the papal see had begun to send missionaries to England as well, and it was these who began to convert the southern German kingdoms to Christianity.

Influenced primarily by Germanic traditions and Germanic laws and political institutions, and isolated from Europe during the formative period from around 850 to 1066, England was insulated from the growth of the most important Medieval institutions that developed during the "hard times" of the 800s and early 900s. Feudalism and feudal traditions did not take root in Anglo-Saxon England. Similarly, the manorial system was absent from English economics and society. When England was again invaded by the Normans in 1066, William the Conqueror found much in the systems already in place that were worth keeping. During the early period of Norman rule, the peculiar English legal system, the common law, continued to develop and grow in

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isolation from the resurgence and development of Continental feudal law that grew out of feudal arrangements and the Roman Civil Law.

Geography of England

England can be differentiated into two general geographic zones, highlands and lowlands.

The north and west of England are comprised of rugged hills and valleys referred to as the highlands. These areas are not particularly useful for the production of crops, but offer good grazing land for livestock, especially sheep. The highlands were culturally backward, intensely conservative, had few towns of any size, and were more sparsely populated, and more stratified in terms of society. The highlands, especially in the north, were considerably poorer than the lowlands. Sparse economic benefits led to a smaller, poorer, aristocracy and a common population that was more independent and less deferential to their “betters.” In general highland society was more troublesome, more violent, and less controllable either by their lords or the Crown.

The south and east of England (lowlands) are made up of low rolling hills and good farmland fed by numerous rivers and streams. The lowlands are very good for growing grains and vegetables and rivers make trade over wide areas possible. The lowland population was considerably greater than that of the highlands, and numerous towns and villages spotted the landscape, providing markets for lowland products, trade and consumption. The lowland population was richer on average than their highland cousins and also both better educated and less conservative, and more amenable to change. The lowlands had a more placid social structure. The “common sort” were, often as not, tenants or leasers of lands held by the greater gentry or noblemen, and thus more beholden to their “betters” and more deferential. The lowland magnates were comprised of both gentry (common families who owned large tracts of land) and aristocrats.

It should also be noted that there is a third, though less important region of England that we might call the forests. In the early 1500s much of England was still covered by several large forests that provided hunting (to aristocrats and the king), timber, and other raw materials to the economy. Additionally, the forest was used to graze pigs and for the production of charcoal for heating and manufacturing.

England’s relatively short growing season made the production of grains a chore, and tended throughout the late Middle Ages and Early Modern periods to lure landholders to abandon food production in favor of wool. This fact is quite important, because it would leave England with occasional food shortages, which in turn would require trade in order to feed a growing population.

Natural resources included lead and tin, iron and coal, timber, salt and clay. Britain lacks both silver and gold, so precious metals had to be imported, and were paid for with abundant supplies of wool.

Towns and Cities

There were few big cities in England in 1500, none if we apply modern standards. England was far less urban than other areas of Europe. Only about one in thirty people lived in towns. London and other cities grew quickly during the Tudor dynasty. The largest city was London with a population of some 60,000 and an area a little larger than one square mile. London was a small

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city by European standards. Housing was very densely packed. With the exception of a few areas of relative wealth, people lived in crowded dirty squalid conditions, packed together in inadequate housing. The city stank. Garbage and human waste were simply emptied into the streets. These streets themselves were narrow (8-10 feet wide) and heavily travelled by both foot and cart traffic; it was not unusual for people to be trampled or run over by horses or carts. Since London was contained within its walls, as the city grew it was necessary to grow up rather than out. Tenements and other housing continually “grew” new stories, often with little attention paid to the amount of weight the lower walls could support. House collapse was not an unusual occurrence, and since the houses were made of wood and thatched roofs were the standard in most housing, fires were frequent and often devastating. London experienced serious fires in 1130, 1132, 1135, 1212, 1220, 1227, 1299, and lesser fires that destroyed some extent of the city at least three times in every decade. Norwich, with 5,000 people, York (3,500) and Bristol (2,000) rounded out the top four English cities. Many people lived in villages of fewer than 500 residents that dotted the English landscape. A larger number of people lived on manors and farms living as tenants, lessees and small farmers (yeomen).

The most important towns in England held charters from the Crown that granted various kinds of rights and privileges to residents. Chartered towns also had the right to send a representative to the House of Commons, so chartered towns were politically important. They were usually market towns, so they were also important centers of trade and manufacturing, usually wealthier and better organized than unchartered towns.

English Society

English society was largely homogeneous in terms of ethnicity. After all, there had been no real influx of new blood for 400 years. A small number of foreign immigrants lived in port cities, and especially London, but they were largely confined to the “foreign quarters” of the city. But, homogeneity doesn’t necessarily argue complete uniformity. All Englishmen spoke English, but that said, there were very few people who spoke what might be called a standard dialect of English. The language varied from region to region and regional dialects were widely varied. Sixty years ago an individual whose interests ran in that direction could identify an Englishman, not only his region of residence, but where and how much he was educated, and even what he did for a living, all by listening to him speak. Those differences would have been even more stark in 1500. Nevertheless, in those relatively rare instances when they bothered to consider their nationality, they identified themselves with England. The exception, of course, was Wales. The Welsh did not consider themselves English, still spoke *Cymraeg* (Welsh Gaelic) in preference to English, and considered themselves a separate people. By the way, there are plenty of Welsh people today who feel the same way.

It should also be noted that, in 1500, England was uniformly Christian, and almost entirely Roman Catholic. The Protestant Reformation had not yet begun, so, in the West, Catholicism was the only brand of Christianity available. There were no Jews in England, since all of them had been expelled in 1290, and no Muslims.

The vast majority of people lived in small communities and never left their county. Their first and most important allegiance was to their town, village or county (the word country and county were

synonymous). They were more likely to give their loyalty to their local magnates, be they noblemen or, more likely, leading local landowners and landlords than to a far away king. They were leery of strangers, not only people from foreign nations, but even fellow Englishmen from outside of their county whom they treated with distrust and suspicion as possible bringers of crime, disease and disorder. Regional dialects made the differences among Englishmen both stark and obvious.

English society was not so much a society of classes but of orders. The simple Continental division of the three estates into clergy, nobility and peasantry, simply would not suffice for England. Instead, society was divided based on a whole host of considerations of ranks and social places based on birth and birth order. Wealth played some small role in considering social position, but not as much as birth. In the Middle Ages social position had been fairly rigidly stratified—a place for everyone and everyone in their place. A rigid social structure was considered to provide social stability and order. Change was thought to undermine stability and thus, increase the likelihood of violence. However, in the Tudor Era a greater degree of social mobility became possible.

At the top of the social heap sat the peerage. These were titled lords who received a writ from the king to sit in the House of Lords in Parliament. They had various titles that distinguished their rank, from Dukes (highest) to Barons (lowest). The title passed only to the eldest son, so the size of the peerage underwent little change, except through attrition, and in the Late Middle Ages, as a result of plague and war, the peerage had shrunk considerably. In 1509, there were only 42 peers and there were never more than 60 during the Tudor Period. Their numbers were small, but their power and influence was great. The peers owned some 10% of the land in England. Most were very wealthy, the richest peer in 1500 was the Duke of Buckingham whose annual income amounted to £6,000. A few, a very few, members of the peerage were poor, but poor peers didn't stay peers long. Peers were social, political and military leaders. They provided troops, leadership and advice in war. Peers received legal privileges: they were free from arrest for petty crimes, were immune to some taxes, sat in the House of Lords and had the right to be tried there for crimes. Finally, a peer who committed treason had the right to be beheaded instead of being hanged, drawn and quartered, and THEN beheaded.

Peers owed obligations to the king above and the people below. They owed the king a fixed number of days of military service and troops for the king's service. They were required to come to the king when called upon, to render required service and to act as the king's administrators and judges. They owed the king Hospitality, that is they had to put up the king and his court should he decide to visit. In their relations with the "lower sort," they were expected to practice "good lordship." They should feed the poor, provide fêtes to the locals, support their local churches and parishes, provide patronage and support to their less-highly-ranked friends. They employed lots of retainers, and they were supposed to care for the well-being of their tenants.

Below the nobles were the knights. Whereas the nobles are called "lord," The knight's title is "sir." The title provided no privilege. Knights had long ago been full-time soldiers, but, by 1500 this was no longer the case. The knights were the highest class of commoner land owners. The average knight owned an estate of some 6,000 acres, and derived his living from the proceeds of agriculture. Virtually all knights were wealthy, some as wealthy as most lords might be. In 1500

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there were only about 350 of these families, and, except for their titles, they were largely indistinguishable from the gentry.

Below the knights were the gentry, which might be defined as anyone who could maintain himself and his family without working, and/or was from gentry stock. Along with the knights, the gentry represented the social and political leadership of the county. They were large landholders who derived their power from their county leadership. Although seats in the House of Commons were elective, if a member of the gentry wanted to sit in Commons, his seat was secure. Many members of the gentry derived administrative offices from the Crown. They sat on the various county courts and assizes, often collected local taxes for the king. They formed the backbone of the “better sort” of common families. By 1500 there were about 3,000 gentry families in England who owned estates that averaged some 1,000 acres.

Next, below the gentry, were the yeomen who comprised a sort of rural middle class. Yeomen lived in relative comfort as farmers, either owning small farms themselves or renting land on which they farmed. They were the most socially mobile of the various orders, sometimes either moving up into the gentry, or occasionally down into the peasantry. In 1500 there were some 50-60,000 yeoman farmer families in England.

The groups above comprise what the English called “the better sort” in English society, and consisted of not much more than 100,000 people. The rest, some two million people, fall below the line. It was their lot to be ruled and never to rule, to defer to the “better sort” and never to be deferred to. Most farmed but owned no farmland. They were tenants who paid for their livelihood and homes with some fraction of what they produced. In the north they might be herders who herded sheep and cattle for some lord, in the south they were generally farmers who lived and worked on the lands of a lord, or knight or gentleman. They were free, to the extent that they were not tied to the land or some other person as a serf or a slave might be. But in a way their freedom was as much a curse as a boon, because what it meant was that their landlord could eject them if he so desired, at which point their status would fall catastrophically into the next class.

Below the tenants were a very small group called vagrants. They were itinerant laborers who travelled from place to place trying to find work. A great many of these had been tenants who had been evicted, and evictions of this kind grew steadily during the Tudor period as landlords came to realize that they could make a better living from their land if they converted from grain agriculture to raising sheep. The vagrants were universally hated in England and subjected to fierce punishment wherever they went. Landlords didn’t want them around because they were “disorderly,” men without masters and therefore a danger to the order of the county. The government didn’t want them around because their care became a drain on the treasury. Tenants despised them because they would work for day wages for far less than the tenants would, and because they didn’t want to be reminded that “there but for the Grace of God...”

Finally, at the very bottom of the social barrel were a very small group of people who were unfree. These are the serfs, a vestige of Norman feudalism in England and a dwindling number of people. They were tied to the land upon which they worked, had no rights at all, couldn’t even testify in court, make contracts or own property. Their lives were pretty awful, and yet not much unlike the

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lives of the vast majority of peasants across the channel in Europe. By the end of the 16th century they had all but vanished.

This social system was far more mobile than that of other European nations. By the 1500s, peers and knights intermarried and so knightly families rose into the peerage, expanding the size of the higher body. Some knights were granted peerages for service to the Crown. Important gentry families rose to knighthoods and even, on rare occasions jumped up into the peerage. Successful and substantial yeomen rose into the gentry. Some yeomen actually achieved high office and honors under Henry VII and Henry VIII, among them Thomas Cardinal Wolsey and Thomas Cromwell. Mobility as a general idea was not looked upon with relish by most people. Mobility was seen as a challenge to stability and order; wealth was seen as finite and so people perceived that if Tom rose in society, perforce Dick and Harry had to fall. Shows of affluence were viewed as somehow wrong, especially when displayed by those who were “acting above their station.” As a result of these views sumptuary laws were passed during the reigns of Henry VII and Henry VIII to discourage presumptuousness and also perhaps to check social mobility. Only people of certain orders might wear certain clothing, eat certain foods, own certain kinds of tableware and furniture. Rapid mobility was especially disliked. It was possible to accept an individual or family who rose slowly from station to station, but people who rose too quickly through the ranks did best to hide it. Often quick risers would invent elaborate family trees showing lots of either early Norman ancestors, or even Anglo-Saxon heroes in order to show, in effect, that the family had come from high social standing, but had fallen on hard times of late.

The Church

Of course the Church in England was the Roman Catholic Church, but distance from Rome and perhaps the idiosyncratic development of the Church in England historically created a different kind of Church system in England than that which existed on the Continent. Papal powers in England were limited. there were fairly wide variations in papal authority and influence all over Europe, but papal authority was especially difficult to enforce in far away England, and the Papal See had long ago learned to tolerate this distance so long as the meager tithes (£5,000 pr. an.) continued to come in.

English Church Courts had caused some degree of controversy in the later Middle Ages, and still operated differently to Canon Courts in Europe. A series of laws were passed by Parliament in the 1300s called Praemunire Statutes that made it illegal to appeal from English Church Courts to Rome. In effect, since English clergy lost the right to appeal to Rome, the Church courts in England were cut off from papal legal authority. The Church Courts continued to do a great deal of business in England, but they primarily functioned as what we might call family law courts today. The courts handled separations, annulments, sex crimes, contract breaches and impediments, slander and libels, wills and inheritance cases. Often Church Courts had overlapping jurisdictions with Common Law courts but people found the Church Courts more convenient and cheaper for minor cases.

The papacy had very limited patronage power in England. Again, distance dictated that the pope had little real intelligence of clerical matters so far away. As a result, the pope had never really applied the various rules governing the selection of clergy to England that popes had insisted on in

the Empire and France. In England the king appointed all of the bishops and other high Church officials and the pope confirmed the king's appointments without comment.

The Pope was well respected by the English people, he was held in a great deal of awe, but much of this awe might be attributed as much to distance as to any rational religious feelings.

The Church was very important as a part of the social order. It affirmed all of the basic mechanisms of society, and all of the spiritual rites of passage within the community and each soul—birth, death, marriage, baptism, confirmation. It was the spiritual center of England as it was in all of Western Europe. People still believed that the most important concern in this life was preparation for the next, and the Church provided the resources needed to prepare for Grace. It was also both an economic institution, and an important one, and an important part of the political body of England. It was very wealthy, accumulating wealth over a long time through bequests, tithes, and production. The Church was the largest landholder, owning between a fourth and a third of all of the land in England. Of the 40 richest dioceses in Europe, 12 were English. Economic power translated into political power. As we will see, the Church provided most of the highest appointments within the government.

The Clergy

Secular Clergy—priests. At the top of the secular-clergy heap stood the Bishops, the princes of the Church. There were 19 bishops in England. They occupied the same position in the Church as the nobility of England occupied in society. In fact these Princes Spiritual had seats in the House of Lords. They had lifestyles similar to the lay peerage as well. Their income varied depending on the diocese they ruled. Money came largely from rents on church lands. The Bishop of Winchester received an annual income of £3,000. The Archbishop of Canterbury, the highest ranked prelate in England received around £6,000 from tithes, chapter funds, land rents, and other forms of revenue. The poorest prelate was the Bishop of Bangor (in Wales) at £130 per annum.

At one time bishops had come pretty much exclusively from noble families, but sometime just before Henry VII this trend had changed. Henry appointed bishops from minor gentry families. Education had become more important than social status. Henry VII appointed 30 bishops during his reign of whom 25 held university degrees, primarily in law rather than theology. Lawyer bishops also tended to get the best dioceses. After all bishops were administrators as much as spiritual leaders, they handled properties within their sees, and needed to be mindful of both Common and Canon Law. They were also active in local and national politics, occupying seats in the House of Lords, and often acting as loyal and learned advisors to the king. Bishops were Lord Chancellors of England. But, of course, they also had spiritual duties. It was their responsibility to ordain priests, confirm and baptize children, even preach from time to time. Most appear to have been good at it, but not all. A few were more consummate politicians than ministers in Christ, for instance Cardinal Wolsey only actually entered his own church one time, just before his death.

Below the bishops there existed thousands of church posts held by secular clergymen. The bulk of these posts were the offices of parish priests. There were some 9,000 parishes in England. The parish system had grown haphazardly over the course of the Middle Ages. Sizes and congregations were not uniform. There were 60 parishes in London. In other areas parishes might be huge, a

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couple covered over 100 square miles. Of course a small urban parish was many times more lucrative than a large parish in the boonies. The income of parish priests varied just as widely. Priests' income was derived from tithes, an annual church tax, and sometimes rents on lands that were held by the church. Priests who held a wealthy parish had very comfortable lives indeed. Poorer parishes barely offered a living to their priests. Some had to take on more than one parish (pluralism) to make ends meet. A priest could derive a living income from this arrangement, but it was a lousy deal for the parishioners who were often deprived of the comforts of the sacraments on a regular basis. One way to get around this problem was to hire curates to work for them, but poorly paid curates often lacked education and other skills, so the quality of their office was poor. Getting income even out of prosperous parishes was often complicated by the fact that not all churches held unencumbered title to the revenues of the parish. Sometimes these revenues had to be split between the priest and some local magnate, lord or monastery.

The appointment of local priests was often complicated. In theory, local bishops placed priests within the parishes. But, in practice, local lords or gentlemen (or in some cases the abbots of important monasteries) had the power to designate priests for churches within their area of influence. These parishes often provided livings for younger sons and relatives of the magnate.

In addition to parish churches, many priests found livings in endowed chantries and family chapels all over England. A chantry is a chapel endowed by a trust fund that employed one or more priests to sing a stipulated number of Masses during a period of time for the spiritual benefit of a deceased person. Chantries were commonly established in England before the Reformation and were endowed with lands, rents and other assets given by donors, often in their wills, the income from which maintained the chantry priest or priests. These jobs often paid relatively well, some chantries offered an annual salary of as much as £200, and chapels paid quite well as the priest became a sort of cherished family retainer. On the other hand, some chantries often lacked the money to pay much and, as the endowment dwindled over time, could only attract lousy priests. In fact, by the 1530s, chantries had fallen into low repute. Sometimes chantries would become regular churches if there was no other church in the area. In that case the chantry priest's income would increase, but his duties to parishioners and trustees might complicate his life considerably.

The regular clergy consisted of monks and nuns living in monastic religious houses. There were some 600 monastic houses in England in 1500, occupied by some 8,000 monks and 2,000 nuns. Most monks came from middling families; nuns were often of higher birth. Nobles might farm their younger daughters away to convents in order to avoid paying dowries. Most monastic houses had between 50 and 60 members. There was a fairly wide variation of income among the houses. The wealthiest was Durham Abbey; the Abbot even had a seat in the House of Lords.

The primary reason for monasteries was prayer. Monks traditionally spent their lives working and praying. The prayers of monks were considered to have a special efficacy, were considered more likely to be heard by God than the prayers of other people. By 1500 some monasteries had extensive lands and tenants and so had given up on the more strenuous aspects of monastic life, specifically the farm work, and, if they worked at all, devoted their time (out of prayer) to transcribing books, making salable commodities like ale and cider and teaching the young. Monks also provided hospitality to travelers, provided basic Christian education to local boys (and

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sometimes even girls), gave charity to the poor, and produced books and collected libraries (some with as many as 10,000 volumes). Most monastic orders fulfilled their responsibilities well, but not all. By the early 1500s, people had begun to complain that local monks were not doing their duty, and that churches in their care were falling into disrepair. English monasteries, by the early 1500s were also more and more frequently accused of corrupt practices, but the truth seems to be that the English houses never really reached the depths of corruption of some houses on the Continent. It should also be noted that, especially in the North, life as a tenant on monastic lands was often far better than on the lands of the great lords, who were harsher landlords and, in the inflationary period of the 14-1500s often raised rents more frequently than the monastic houses.

Political Background

In the 1480s the king's constitutional position and actual powers are hard to nail down. Henry Tudor's right to the throne is pretty foggy at best. He won his title in 1485 on the battlefield. If pressed, Henry's supporters would have said that God had given him the right to be king. Henry persuaded the pope to recognize his title (which couldn't hurt) and married the daughter of Edward IV, Elizabeth of York, in order to give his title more legitimacy.

Fortunately England was never really big on political theory until the seventeenth century, so, few bothered to ask embarrassing political-philosophical questions about the niceties of succession. So most people, though certainly not all, were willing to accept Henry Tudor's accession. England had no written constitution, so there was some confusion over what, in fact, were the prerogatives of the Crown. England was basically conservative, so the English wanted to continue to do things the way they had always been done. Changes in government nevertheless took place under Henry VII, but those changes were generally based on practicality rather than any real impulse toward reform.

In modern politics there exist important distinctions between makers of law and implementors of law. In the 1500s there was no such distinction. The law was made in the king's name and implemented by royal officials of various kinds. There were no modern bureaucrats to filter out the details of the law, and the buck literally stopped at the king's desk. Administration took place where the king was at any given moment. The court, the center of government, took place wherever the king happened to be. Henry was in various places at various times and the royal court followed him and operated, so to speak, in his presence. Summer progresses took Henry all over England. He had at least twenty palaces scattered all over the countryside. Wherever the king was immediately became the vital center of English government. In short, the government of England was a personal government. The nation was governed by the king's will.

The Physical Organization of the Court

In the Middle Ages "government" may be said to have occupied two rooms, the Great Hall and the Chamber. Public matters took place in the Great Hall, dominated at one end by the royal throne. Here the ceremonies of monarchy took place. Here the roles of the king and members of his court were publicly defined and acted out. Here the public spectacle of monarchy was played out for all, or at least the better sort of subjects, to see. The Tudor Hall was more elaborate and more subtle. The one Great Room was split up into a series of rooms. In the Throne Room, the biggest of the set, the king sat in public display and made public pronouncements, accepted supplicants, introduced servants, and publicly welcomed diplomats. In a smaller room behind the throne, the

king met with his various servants and guests for private conversations. these rooms were often divided up based on size and purpose. The first was the Anteroom, an entrance area which was the least private space in which anybody could assemble. The next was the Great Chamber, which was limited to only important members of the English polity, The Presence Chamber was open to more important members of the court and noblemen. Finally, the Privy chamber was the most private area in the hall, open only to those who were closest to the king. The ultimate ambition of every courtier was admission and free access to the Privy Chamber. Here the most important policies were discussed by the king and his closest and most influential advisors.

One of the most important offices of the court was the Groom of the Stool who had the honor of emptying the king's chamber pot. The closer one came to the king's body, the more important the position. A successful courtier might rise to great power in service to the king. But to fail in service could be expensive, could mean the fall of a great house, or might even be fatal. The king paid no attention to shabby servants. Many individuals drove themselves to bankruptcy attempting to gain the king's eye by means of gambling or putting on lavish displays. There were always plenty of people at court eager to see their rivals fail and fall, and, often as not come to an unfortunate end. The court was always filled with frenzied activity, with everyone trying to outdo each other, trying to catch the ear or eye of the king. Fights among courtiers for precedence in seeing the king were often furious. Duels were fought over who got to be in the royal presence first. All of this stuff may seem trivial to us, but it is important to remember that those who succeeded in royal service could expect a future that contained vast power, prestige and wealth for generations, and the price of failure often led to personal and familial ruination.

The royal household was the biggest employer in the kingdom. It ranged from the Lord Steward at the top to a whole range of "dogsbodyes"—cupbearers, laundresses, chamber maids, guards, cooks, scullery maids, etc. People purchased their positions with bribes and favors. In addition to good pay, room and board for service, the king's servants also received special privileges. They were immune to arrest for debt, lived in secure housing, and even the lowliest positions carried the prestige of royal service.

As I mentioned earlier, the King was, in all the ways that count, a sovereign authority over the realm. That is, laws were made by him and in his name. Though sovereign, the king still had advisors and political servants to advise on policy matters and implement policy. The most important of these bodies was the King's Council. The Council was composed of trusted noblemen and Church magnates who handled the routine activities of government and advised the king on policy. It also functioned as a court of law. although the Council officially had around 100 members, in fact there were only rarely more than ten or fifteen members present at any meetings. The decisions made by the king and Council were communicated by means of orders (writs) issued by the various Keepers of the Seals, the most important of which were:

- ✓Great Seal — Held by the Lord Chancellor (who was generally a bishop).
- ✓Exchequer — The Exchequer collected and accounted for the royal revenues. The office was an antiquated institution that developed in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. the system involved keeping track of money by carving notches on sticks called tallies. It had developed

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during a period when most folks were illiterate and innumerate. The activities of the Exchequer were efficient but slow.

By tradition the laws were enforced under the authority of the king through the Courts of Law. The basic law of England was called the Common Law. The Common Law is a body of law developed out of legal traditions, statute, legal decisions and case precedent from at least the mid-twelfth century. As a matter of tradition in England going back to the Anglo-Saxon Period, the king dispensed the laws of the realm, and kings from Henry II forward took a special interest in the law. By 1500, there were a wide range of courts in England that were derived from royal authority. The king assigned “benches” to hear cases under Common Law. The King’s Bench customarily heard criminal cases, while civil cases were tried before the Court of Common Pleas. In some particular cases, especially civil ones, there was little or no precedent from which to make rulings, so from about 1280, people began to write requests to the Lord Chancellor asking him to act as judge and arbiter in cases that were difficult to figure out under the Common Law. The Chancellor began to hear these cases and adjudicate them based on “fairness,” or what came to be called “equity.” Several times a year the judges went on circuits throughout the kingdom to hear local cases (mostly criminal). Justices from the courts of King’s Bench and Common Pleas sat in the counties along with local magnates in courts called the assizes. Additionally, a case could be appealed to the king in Council. This Prerogative Court could overrule the decisions of lower courts.

Criminal law presumed the guilt of the defendant who was not allowed council, and was judged by juries of his peers. This was more fair than it sounds to us, since the juries knew the defendant and made their decisions primarily based on whether he was good or bad (if bad, he *must* be guilty of something). Punishments were generally swift and often fatal. The guilty party might be hanged, fined or disfigured. The king had the right to pardon anyone. The importance of royal justice was that the guilty be *seen* to be punished and order maintained.

The only other central institution of government was Parliament. Perhaps “institution” is not the best term to use for the Parliament as early as 1500. It was less an institution than an event. It was called by the king and dissolved by the king. It sat rarely and was only called when the king had some great matter upon which he needed the advice of the whole of political society. These Parliaments had two main functions; first, to do the king’s business, and second, to do the nation’s business. The king generally called Parliament either to bolster support for a policy or to raise money. Either way he expected that body to rubber stamp policies which had already been decided by the king in Council. Parliament nevertheless had the power to present grievances and pass statutes. The king could ignore the former and veto (by refusing to sign) the latter.

Under Henry VII, Parliament consisted of the House of Lords with 60 members (clergy made up a slight majority), and the House of Commons of around 400 members; two from each county and borough and one from each chartered town. Parliamentary membership was rather poorly distributed across the nation. Wiltshire, for instance had 36 members and many areas went largely unrepresented. Most Englishmen didn’t care though, because Parliament wasn’t really seen either as a representative body or a legislative body. Parliament was a sort of social occasion and it was a great honor to serve.

A General Sketch of England in 1500

Finally, local administration served the king in various ways. Local gentry held office at the county and parish levels as justices of the peace, constables and church wardens.



So, this is what England “looked like” in general terms of demographics, society, church and government in 1500, just before our study begins. I have not spent any time in this little sketch on the society of towns and cities primarily because it would unnecessarily complicate matters and also because, with the exception of London, towns had little impact on the period just before and just after 1500. This has been only a short thumbnail sketch, but I hope that it gives you some kind of framework upon which to place the more extensive, certainly more sophisticated and more important readings that we will be taking up over the first unit of this course—The Tudor Reformations.

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