

Reviews

doi:[10.1017/S0956793315000199](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0956793315000199)

Mark Bailey, *The Decline of Serfdom in Late Medieval England: From Bondage to Freedom*, Woodbridge, Boydell and Brewer, 2014. xii + 373 pp. £60. 9781843838906.

Mark Bailey's discussion of serfdom reinvigorates an important topic in the study of the medieval English countryside. Historical investigation of serfdom, its incidence and its decline has been an active theme in the relevant historiography from at least the later nineteenth century and Bailey's ambition in this book is to bring some precision to what has, in his view, been a rather anecdotal and incidental history to date. In a series of useful opening chapters, Bailey charts what is a familiar story outlining features of serfdom, its obligations and evidence for its decline. He identifies basic trends but in very few instances, in his review of the relevant literature, does he detect a systematic attempt to chart a close chronology of change and suggests that the general impression is that, on most estates, serfdom underwent a significant and essentially final decline in the decades either side of 1400.

In seeking to test these observations and to establish a detailed and systematically researched chronology of the decline of serfdom, Bailey engages in a number of case studies based upon a considerable series of later fourteenth- and fifteenth-century court and account rolls from manors and estates in eastern and midlands England. He looks to ask a number of consistent research questions of this body of material, an agenda intended to ascertain the nature of serfdom prior to its decline, the ways in which the tenurial features of serfdom were adjusted and diluted, the chronology of that change and its social response. Bailey's analysis tends both to confirm some of the more detailed work on tenurial developments conducted to date and to enhance it, based as his study is on a significant body of newly researched material. In fact, Bailey's conclusion that tenurial change happened earlier than was always conceived is also a feature, as he notes, on some estates and manors studied to date where there is plentiful evidence that the introduction of contractual tenures in place of villein tenure followed a close chronology evidently encouraged by plague and its recurrence in the third quarter of the fourteenth century. What Bailey achieves here is a thorough investigation spread across a series of manors and estates, including a variety of types of lordship and, as importantly, a variety in terms of combination of record survival. In general Bailey's work suggests that the decline of serfdom was very much under way in the decades after the Black Death, and thus before the period identified by some historians. For Bailey, this last observation, which foregrounds the role of plague as a main factor in the decline of serfdom, also encourages him to challenge one other totem of a good deal of historical work in this area, namely the issue of post-plague seigniorial reaction. While he detects a general retreat from the traditional demands of serfdom in the first years after the plague, years often

associated with an attempt by lords to tighten their grip on villein tenants, Bailey is in fact inclined not to characterise serfdom as essentially malign and therefore unlikely to generate the kind of resistance that would lead to its own destruction.

Detailed investigation of English medieval serfdom and its decline has often been the work, from one generation to the next, of no more than a small but industrious corps of historians. Bailey's analysis of a body of material has been conducted at a time when perhaps fewer still are directing their attention to issues of serfdom and the transition from feudalism to capitalism. By showing how detailed investigation of serfdom and its changing incidence can be conducted across a considerable corpus of material, by establishing a template for further research and by setting out central research questions, we can but hope that this work will encourage a new generation of researchers to test these and related issues.

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doi:[10.1017/S0956793315000205](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0956793315000205)

Nigel Everett, *The Woods of Ireland: A History, 700–1800*, Dublin, Four Courts Press, 2014. 313 pp. £29.95. 9781846825057.

In this thoroughly researched and thought provoking book, Nigel Everett provides a rich and penetrating analysis of the complicated and often controversial history of Irish woods from 700 to 1800. He transforms our understanding of the political and practical implications of the woods and how these changed over the 1,200 years he covers. Yet he also brings out continuities in attitudes to trees and woods, and their everyday economic importance. He opens the book by considering the historiography of Irish woodland history and successfully critiques Eileen McCracken's *The Irish Woods since Tudor Times* (1971) and Eion Neeson's *A History of Irish Forestry* (1991) which over emphasise the extent of woodland in the medieval period and the level of destruction of woods in the early modern period. He instead stresses the much earlier clearance of woodland, as is now accepted for Welsh, Scottish and English woodland history, and the consequent effort to establish new areas of woodland particularly after 1600.

The great strength of this book is the way evidence and ideas concerning trees and woodland are brought together from diverse sources, including political tracts, literary works, estate papers, topographical drawings and paintings, letters and correspondence, legislation and military memoirs, to produce a convincing and very welcome reinterpretation of Irish woodland history. The very careful selection of instances and examples allows Nigel Everett deftly to throw shafts of light and understanding into the way woods were experienced and valued. He brings out very well, for example, the importance of woods in providing military cover throughout the medieval and modern periods. During the Nine Years War, for instance, Captain Atherton reported in 1599 that they 'had gained a wood' and 'thought little of it' but it became 'the greatest strength we had'