

REVIEWS

S. A. Mileson, *Parks in Medieval England*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2009. Pp. x + 219, 22 maps and diagrams, 8 half-tone illustrations. £60. ISBN/ISSN 978-0199565672.

The park in medieval England was a hunting ground for the aristocracy. Or was it? This long-held assumption has been questioned more recently, and Stephen Mileson's book takes a fresh look and reviews the newer ideas on the functions of parklands.

As a means for producing deer, there is no question over the purpose of a park, but rather than purely for hunting, which may be an over-egged notion, parks may well have been farms, breeding deer for the aristocratic table, rather than purely for leisure. It is a possibility, too, that parks were a means of controlling woodland and grassland for economic purposes. And, as an aesthetic backdrop to grand manor houses and castles, the park made a real statement about wealth and status, a statement which may have become increasingly common in the later middle ages, with the move away from defensive buildings to homes designed more for comfort.

The first half of Mileson's book looks at the functions of parks, but the second looks more at their social impact. The Crown, perhaps better known as the creator and strict defender of the Royal Forests, was also interested in parks, not least because its licensing was a source of potential revenue. There is a string of useful maps showing the location of new parks licensed from 1200 to 1500, all showing liberal scatterings throughout the central south, but with a marked increase during the fourteenth century throughout the rest of the country.

For the aristocrats the parks presented possibilities, not least because they could be appointed sinecure stewards or could be granted the farm of the parks, as well as the opportunities for hunting and social engagement. But there were problems, too. Carving out parks and enclosing them could intrude on the free hunting in forests, and by holding deer in with walls the number of animals within forests was depleted. Disputes between aristocrats were not uncommon.

Mileson also investigates the effect of park-making on the wider community. That history is usually written by the winners presents a problem, as the interreaction between park owner and peasant was generally recorded only when the peasant was in trouble. New parks could be created on former common land; parks on the edge of towns prevented expansion – Woodstock is a prime example; in some places, whole communities were moved to make way for a park; in others, the amount of agricultural land available for food production could be affected.

This book gives a fresh and thorough new look at parks, both in the physical landscape and in the social landscape of England throughout the Middle Ages. It is clearly set out and a pleasure to read. There are clear maps and diagrams, and a few illustrations. It is a shame that there are not more, but the OUP is notoriously stingy, given the price of their monographs, and there is a note in the acknowledgements that most of the maps and pictures were produced through generous grants from other bodies.

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Elizabeth Noble, *The World of the Stonors: a Gentry Society*. The Boydell Press, Woodbridge, 2009. Pp. x + 224, 5 tables, 2 maps. £50. ISBN/ISSN 978-1843834298.

The Stonors are remarkable for their long residence at Stonor in south Oxfordshire since the thirteenth century. All the more unusual is the survival of a collection of their fourteenth- and fifteenth-century letters and papers. These documents, now kept in the Public Record Office, comprise one of just a handful of surviving gentry archives from medieval England. Though less voluminous than the more famous Paston Letters, the Stonor material is pre-eminent in its variety, including numerous estate and household accounts as well as personal correspondence. Some of the documents have long been available in print: the letters were published by Charles Kingsford in 1919 in an edition reissued by Christine Carpenter in 1996 with a fuller listing of unpublished items.¹ These sources are of special interest to scholars investigating the workings of landed society in late medieval England, especially since the Stonors were by the fifteenth century a well-established gentry family, living in a fairly stable area. When the Stonor letters are combined with other records there is plenty of scope for a study of land dealings and business relationships. But the sheer variety of the Stonor archive offers much more than this, including potential insight into the values and attitudes of the gentry. This makes the collection of great interest to those seeking to understand the role of ideas in political life, and, equally, to historians concerned with interpreting contemporary social relations, religious practices, estate management, and material culture.

Given this background, it is perhaps surprising that Elizabeth Noble's book is the first full-length study of the Stonors, though there have been several important articles and an unpublished doctoral thesis on the family. Noble has paid attention to most of this previous work and also to a range of scholarship on the late medieval gentry more generally. In the early part of the book she shows herself alert to debates about correct terminology and categorization: 'county', 'community', and 'gentry' are tested and rejected in favour of 'region' (here the Thames Valley, especially south Oxfordshire and Berkshire), 'networks', and, in the case of the Stonors specifically, 'elite gentry'. She is also aware of the importance of growing lay literacy in shaping discourse and behaviour. Thus armed, the book sets off in search of the mentalities which held the Stonor network together, the role of 'mass media' (popular literature, sermons, and songs) in shaping these mentalities, and the expression of gentry values in the day-to-day business of seeking and securing land, lineage, and lordship. Much of this intellectual apparatus owes a deep and acknowledged debt to Carpenter's work in particular, including the latter's article on the Stonor circle in the fifteenth century.²

The meat of the book comes in six chapters. The first of these looks at the careers of the various male heads of the family and their involvement in royal government at the centre and, more often, in the localities. The second chapter examines the family's conception of and interest in their lineage. Chapter 3 provides an examination of the running of the Stonor estate, which, besides Stonor itself, included manors and lands spread across southern England; with holdings worth well over £200 a year, the Stonors were comfortably at the higher end of the gentry in terms of wealth. The next chapter analyses the family's vertical relationships by looking at their lords. This includes an interesting discussion of the honor of Wallingford, which for a time acted as a framework for a kind of corporate lordship directed by royal officials. In the early fifteenth century the network was headed by Thomas Chaucer, who had extremely close ties with the Stonors. The final two chapters provide a detailed account of the whole range of Stonor relationships and contacts, including those with servants as well as fellow gentry. It is suggested that the geographical extent

¹ C. L. Kingsford, ed., *The Stonor Letters and Papers, 1290-1483*, 2 vols., Camden Society, ser.3, pp. 29-30 (London, 1919); Christine Carpenter, ed., *Kingsford's Stonor Letters and Papers, 1290-1483* (Cambridge, 1996).

² Christine Carpenter, 'The Stonor circle in the fifteenth century', in Rowena E. Archer and S. Walker, eds., *Rulers and Ruled in Late Medieval England* (London, 1995), pp. 175-200.

of their regular contacts shrank in the later fifteenth century as the honor and the network it provided became less important.

The *World of the Stonors* is a solid and well-researched piece of work which adds to the corpus of gentry studies. There are a number of things to commend. The analysis of social networks provides an interesting example of a gentry group maintaining relatively harmonious relations in a region where nobles, though not unimportant, exerted a secondary level of influence. Valuable attention is also paid to the relationships of the Stonors with people from a variety of social classes, including rich provincial merchants like John Elmes senior of Henley. Noble recognizes the use of different forms of address in the letters, which reflect the presence of a strict social hierarchy. The discussion of lineage is strengthened by consideration of the social performance inherent in ceremonies such as christenings and funerals, and there are some interesting passages dealing with family relationships, personal debts, and bequests (e.g., pp. 164–7). Her detailed work on the Stonor lands provides a contribution to studies of gentry estate management. Particularly helpful is the corrective to the misleading impression given by Jefferies that there is strong evidence that Sir John Stonor (c.1280–1354) was a large-scale sheep farmer and wool trader.³ At the end of the volume there is a full and helpful bibliography.

However, the book has some serious limitations. In many areas Noble does not seem to have taken us much beyond the insights or information provided by Carpenter or, indeed, Kingsford himself. This may be partly because of the nature of the sources: at times Noble seems to be rather disappointed with her material, and clearly its limitations have set certain boundaries to her work. As she points out, only 44 of the 250-odd letters were written by members of the Stonor family, compared with almost 350 of the 800 plus Paston letters (p. 2). Not surprisingly, it is harder with the Stonors to gain a sense of individual personalities or shared attitudes. Her sensible discussion of gentry mentality provides some indication of *Gemeinschaft* as well as *Gesellschaft* – even if the central common values of mutual ‘kinship’ and trustworthiness appear to derive largely from self-interest – but the findings stem as much from Peter Idle’s *Instructions* as from the Stonor letters. Nor has she been able to find any real sign of the bookish interests which might tell us more about a common literary culture (p. 197): there are one or two hints of chivalric language (p. 165), but the surviving sources suggest Stonor literacy was focused on pragmatic business matters and conventional devotion. Meanwhile the estate accounts are extremely patchy in survival and do not allow for a full reconstruction of changing patterns of exploitation in a period of low agricultural profits, high wages, and irregularly paid rents. In particular, it is difficult to assess the full significance of mill leases or wood and wool sales to estate profits (p. 93).

Nevertheless, in important respects Noble has not made full use of the opportunities presented to her. Though purporting to be a book about the ‘world’ of the Stonors, it is actually somewhat narrow, with most of the focus on social networks. A more rounded study might have included several other topics which are well illustrated in the documents. It is surprising, for instance, not to find a more sustained discussion of religious life, or at least some justification for not covering a topic so central to contemporary society. Nor is there much mention of household spending, diet, and leisure activities, or any real exploration of the links between lifestyle and social display. Provisioning and the source of goods are left largely untreated, and too little is made of the important economic and social ties between the Henley area and London, where the Stonors kept a house. Just as importantly, the rather dense and detailed text would have been enlivened by providing more of a flavour of the actual content of the documents, which are only occasionally cited in detail. Two very interesting close readings of the sources provide a glimpse into heirlooms and their location in different rooms (p. 54) and an account of the costs of providing shoes to fit

³ P. J. Jefferies, ‘Profitable fourteenth-century legal practice and landed investment: the case of Judge Stonor, c.1281 to 1354’, *Southern History*, 15 (1993), pp. 18–35, at pp. 26–8.

out a suitably 'worshipful' household (p. 181). But such intimate contact with the rich texture of the original documents is all too rare.

In many cases Noble could also have made more effective use of sources outside the Stonor papers to deepen her analysis. Architectural evidence, for instance, receives short shrift. The family seat at Stonor and its adjacent chapel receive only brief mentions, and so, too, the parish church at Pyrton. The author seems to be unaware of the fifteenth-century stained-glass window in Harpsden church, commemorating the marriage of Humphrey Forster and Alice Stonor. Local fieldwork might have allowed for some appreciation of the way the landscape was apparently manipulated through the creation of parkland and gardens to advertise the family's wealth and high status. In this respect it is notable that the most likely creator of the deer park on high ground across the valley from the house was the family's main early 'riser', Sir John, and that it was the most successful later family head, Sir William (1449–94), who closely supervised the creation of an up-to-date and sophisticated pleasure garden. John Steane's article⁴ would have shed some light here. More generally, Noble might have used a wider range of past studies of landholding and economy in the south Chilterns, including Yu Ul'yanov's Russian language articles about the piecemeal creation of Stonor manor and its subsequent management.⁵ At a more basic level, careful checking of the *VCH* and printed sources would have saved her from making the incorrect suggestion that Bix Brand, Bix Gibwyn, and Watcombe became manors only in the fourteenth century (p. 75), and recourse to the English Place-Name Society volumes might have improved the rather poor standard of place-name identification.

Overall, Noble's book takes our knowledge of the Stonors and their world somewhat further. The fact that there is a great deal in the Stonor papers still to be fully exploited should only encourage other scholars seeking to construct a larger social history of the late medieval gentry.

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⁴ John Steane, 'Stonor – a lost park and a garden found', *Oxoniensia*, 59 (1994), pp. 449–70.

⁵ Yu R. Ul'yanov, 'The genesis and structural evolution of the Stonor Manor in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, I & II', *Srednie Veka*, 34–5 (1971–2), pp. 117–44, 154–73; Yu R. Ul'yanov, 'The economic development of Stonor Manor in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, I & II', *Srednie Veka*, 49–50 (1986–7), pp. 60–81, 185–211.