Daughters, Wives and Widows after the Black Death

WOMEN IN SUSSEX, 1350–1535

Mavis E. Mate

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For Barbara Harvey
Who first aroused my interest in
Medieval History

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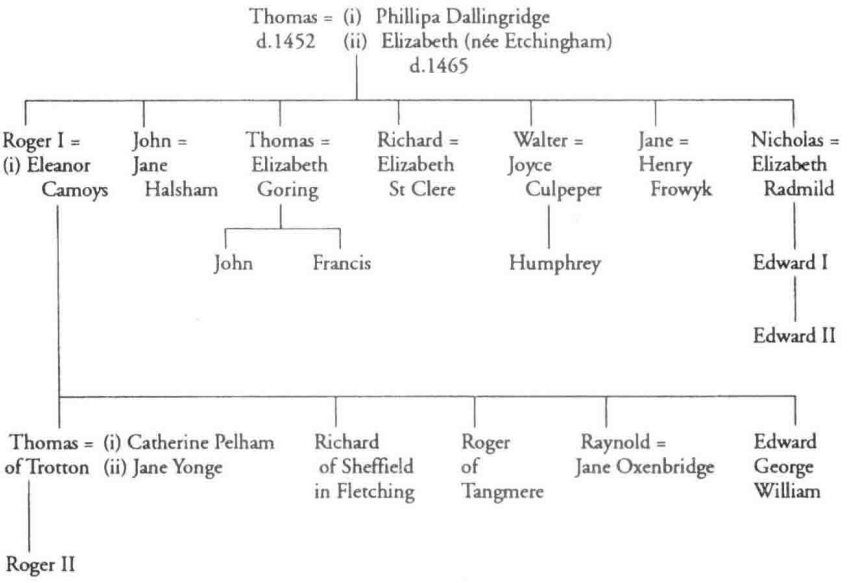
M.E.M.
Eugene, Oregon
October 1997

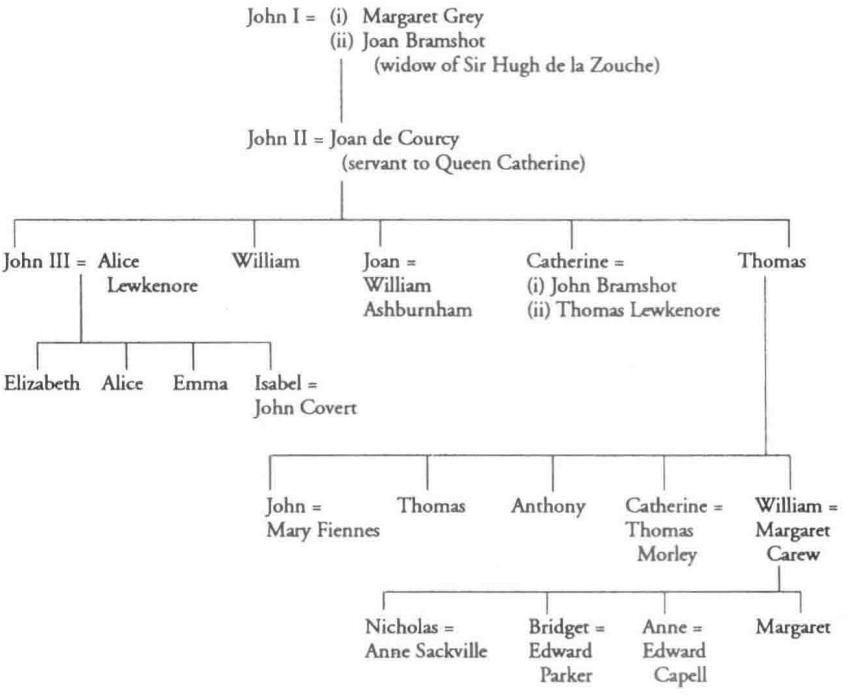
Abbreviations

PRO	Public Record Office
ESRO	East Sussex Record Office
BL	British Library
Hunt. Lib.	Huntington Library, San Marino, California
SAC	*Sussex Archaeological Collections*

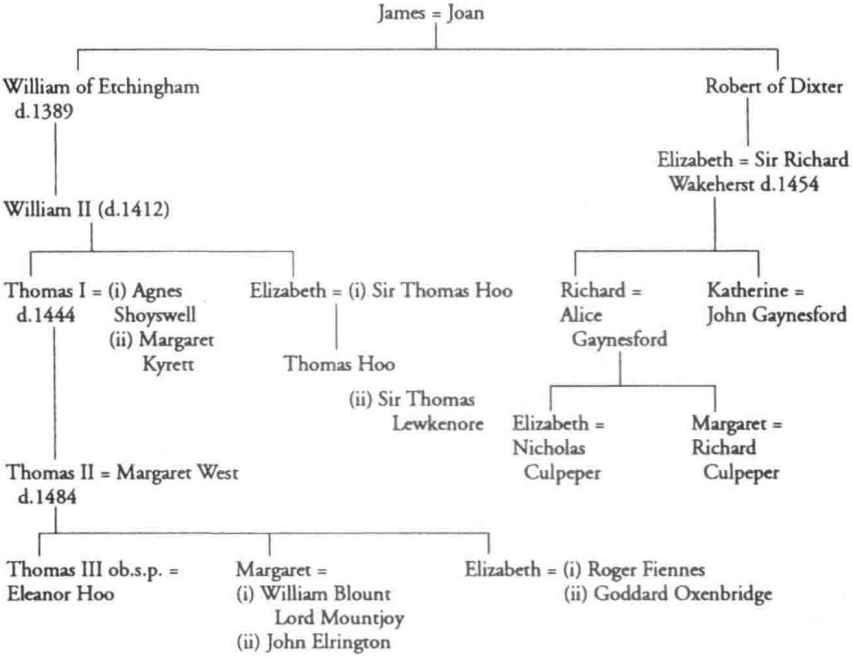
The Lewkenore family



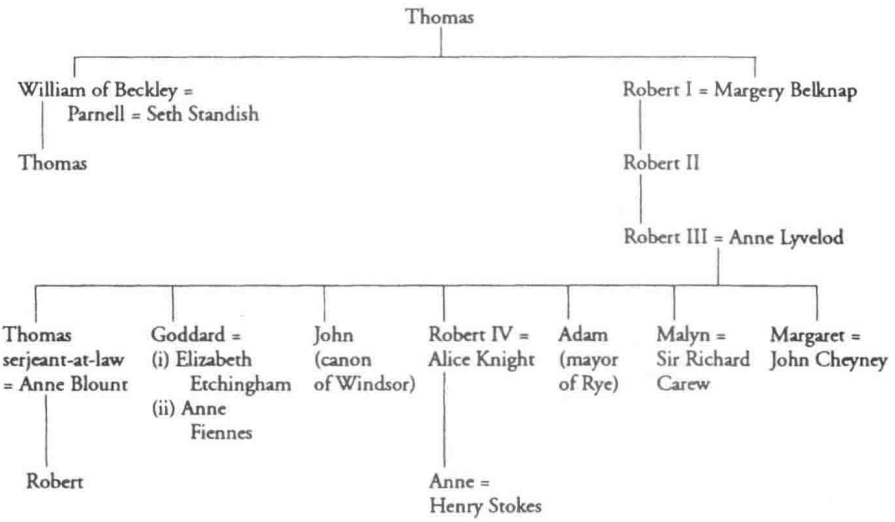
The Pelham family



The Etchingham family



The Oxenbridge family



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Contents

Tables

Introduction

The economy of late medieval England was shattered by a demographic crisis as a result of the Black Death and subsequent outbreaks of plague. Yet this disaster, because of its severity, appears to have provided unparalleled opportunities for women. The death of at least a third of the population in 1348–51, and even further reductions later, produced a severe labour shortage. Wages everywhere rose. Women were recruited into the work-force partly because they could be hired more cheaply, and partly because they were often the only available source of labour. In some years women could be found doing jobs, such as harrowing, that in the past had been confined primarily to men. At the same time the high death rate expanded the opportunities for female landholding. Widows took over the responsibility of the land on the demise of their husbands and daughters inherited when there were no surviving sons.

Demographic developments, however, were not the only factors influencing society. The state of the economy affected the number and kind of opportunities open to women. They were able to earn money as spinsters and harvest workers only when there was a need for them. Thus in the late fourteenth century, when the economy was booming, most women had no trouble finding work. In the mid fifteenth century the country was hit by a severe recession. As a consequence the cloth trade collapsed, the area under cultivation shrank and in many parts of England the need for female labour diminished despite the continued demographic decline. Inflation and deflation also had an impact on women's lives. With the high prices prevailing after the Black Death, women who sold eggs, butter and cheese in town markets might make considerable profits if they gained more from their sales than they were forced to spend on purchases. Conversely during the deflation that accompanied the recession, women found that the market for their goods had dried up and their profits, and thus their contribution to the family income, dropped. Finally legal change profoundly affected women. New systems of conveyancing – the deathbed transfer, the use, the jointure – provided additional opportunities for granting land to women, but could also deprive them of it.

Although much has been written about women in late medieval society, there has been no detailed study of how the economic and legal changes in the post-Black Death period affected women in rural, southern England. J.M. Bennett's path-breaking work on women in the English countryside did

not consider the period after 1348.[1] A more general study of peasant families, B.A. Hanawalt's book *The Ties that Bound* did not clearly distinguish between conditions pre- and post-Black Death.[2] Other historians, in their analysis of rural conditions in a particular region or place, have mentioned the position of women but it has not been their main focus.[3] The two historians who have studied in some detail the position of rural women in post-Black Death England have done so for the northern county of Yorkshire (P.J.P. Goldberg) and for the Midlands (R.H. Hilton).[4] Conditions of land tenure, however, and the opportunities for industrial bye-employments varied widely from place to place and time to time. Thus conclusions about women that are perfectly valid for one time period, and one area, are not necessarily true for other time periods and other parts of the country, although they might well be. Hilton's suggestion that the greater economic independence of peasant women after 1348 gave them a 'better situation in their own class than was enjoyed by women of the aristocracy or the bourgeoisie' may not hold in the different social and economic conditions of southern England.[5] Hilton, moreover, did not engage in a detailed analysis of the lives of either the bourgeoisie or the aristocracy. Historians writing about aristocratic women have not delved into the lives of women of the lower social orders, and thus have not been in a position to make cross-class comparisons.[6] Some urban historians, on the other hand, believe that if women's position did improve, it did so primarily in large towns such as

1 J.M. Bennett, *Women in the Medieval English Countryside: Gender and Household in Brigstock before the Plague* (New York and Oxford, 1987).

2 B.A. Hanawalt, *The Ties that Bound: Peasant Families in Medieval England* (New York and Oxford, 1986).

3 C.C. Dyer, *Lords and Peasants in a Changing Society: The Estates of the Bishopric of Worcester, 680–1540* (Cambridge, 1980); Z. Razi, *Life, Marriage and Death in a Medieval Parish: Economy, Society and Demography in Halesowen, 1270–1400* (Cambridge, 1980); M.K. McIntosh, *Autonomy and Community: The Royal Manor of Havering, 1200–1500* (Cambridge, 1986); L.R. Poos, *A Rural Society after the Black Death: Essex, 1350–1525* (Cambridge, 1991).

4 P.J.P. Goldberg, *Women, Work and Life-cycle in a Medieval Economy: York and Yorkshire c.1300–1520* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992); P.J.P. Goldberg, 'For Better, For Worse: Marriage and Economic Opportunity for Women in Town and Country', in *Woman is a Worthy Wight*, ed. P.J.P. Goldberg (Stroud, Glos., 1992); R.H. Hilton, *The English Peasantry in the Late Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1975).

5 Hilton, *The English Peasantry*, p. 105.

6 Jennifer C. Ward, *The English Noblewoman in the Later Middle Ages* (London, 1992); Rowena Archer, 'Rich Old Ladies: The Problem of Late Medieval Dowagers', in *Property and Politics: Essays in Later Medieval History*, ed. A. Pollard (Stroud, Glos., and New York, 1984), pp. 15–35, and with B.E. Ferme, 'Testamentary Procedure with Special Reference to the Executrix', *Reading Medieval Studies*, xv (1989), pp. 3–34; Barbara J. Harris, 'Women and Politics in Early Tudor England', *The Historical Journal*, 33 (1990), pp. 259–81, and 'Property, Power and Personal Relations: Elite Mothers and Sons in Yorkist and Early Tudor England', *Signs*, 15 (1990), pp. 606–32; Joel Rosenthal, *Patriarchy and Families of Privilege in Fifteenth Century England* (Philadelphia, 1991).

London and York, but in such places medieval urban women, especially in the period 1370–1470, did enjoy a kind of 'golden age'.[7]

The whole notion of a 'golden age', in which women's lives were somehow better than in other periods, has been challenged by J.M. Bennett. In a major article she insisted that medieval women primarily worked in low-skilled, low-status, and low paid jobs and that they did not enjoy equal access to the collective resources of the family.[8] Furthermore the continuities in the occupational patterns of working women in medieval and subsequent periods were, to her way of thinking, more significant than any minor changes that took place. This emphasis on the underlying continuity of much of women's history was developed in a talk that Bennett gave in which she stressed that so often changes in women's lives occurred without any significant transformation in women's status or in the imbalance of power between the sexes.[9] Women's historians, she suggested, should move away from the focus on history-as-transformation for women to a new consideration of history-as-continuity.

In line with this argument, it is important to remember that, despite the profound economic and legal changes affecting late medieval England, the ideology governing women's lives did not change significantly. A young girl, if she did not choose to enter a religious order, would be expected to marry. Once married her primary responsibility was to run the household of the family and take care of any children. Yet these tasks were accorded less value and less prestige by society than the more public roles taken on by men. A woman would nearly always be identified by the stage in her life-cycle *vis à vis* marriage: a single woman or virgin, a wife or a widow. Even though a woman might carry out a trade such as brewster or a spinster, she would still usually be described in official records by her marital status. In contrast a boy, although he too was expected to marry if he did not enter the church, would always be identified by his trade or profession. Marriage for him was not a career as it was for a girl. It was the work and the status of the male head of household and of his male relatives that determined the family's position in society. Moreover, a boy, once he came of age, acquired full legal autonomy and was responsible for the actions not only of himself, but his dependants. A girl, as soon as she married, became a *femme couverte*, a woman under the authority and in the legal custody of her husband.

7 Caroline M. Barron, 'The "Golden Age" of Women in Medieval London', *Reading Medieval Studies*, xv (1989), pp. 35–58; Caroline Barron and Anne Sutton, eds., *Medieval London Widows, 1300–1500* (London, 1994); see also the work of P.J.P. Goldberg, cited in note 4.

8 Judith M. Bennett, 'Medieval Women, Modern Women: Across the Great Divide', in *Culture and History: Essays on English Communities, Identities and Writing, 1350–1600*, ed. David Aers (London, 1992), pp. 147–75.

9 Talk given at the 1993 Anglo-American Conference at the Institute of Historical Research in London. Used with permission of the author.