

Communal Leisure in Late-Medieval England

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Since leisure can be defined as 'time free from employment',¹ it should not be viewed as a purely modern concept: all workers in the past, apart from slaves, had some time to themselves once their day's work had been completed. The Church's influence on medieval society was so great that people's lives were regulated by the liturgical calendar: they were expected to observe not only Sundays, but also religious feast days, or holy days, of which, depending on regional variations, there were forty to fifty throughout the year. On these feast days

total or partial abstention from servile work was required and the laity were expected to observe the Sunday pattern of attendance at matins, Mass and evensong, fasting on the previous eve.²

Only essential work was permitted on holy days, so for most workers they were leisure days: although required to attend certain church services, they were free from employment. It is clear that religion and leisure were closely connected for the word 'holiday' is derived from 'holy day'.

Most people lived and worked in the same community. As religion played a large part in every day life, much communal activity was centred on the parish, which was the local area of church administration. In the countryside the parish often covered the same area as a village and its outlying settlements; in towns there were often several parishes, each of which formed its own community within the town. Responsibility for the parish church was shared between the rector (or his representative) and the parishioners, with the former caring for the chancel and the latter the rest of the building and the churchyard. Churchwardens were appointed to take charge of the maintenance of the parishioners' part of the church. It seems to have been a matter of communal pride to keep the building itself in good condition and to provide furnishings such as statues and altar cloths. Occasionally a parish held a special fund-raising event, such as a religious play: on St

Margaret's Day, Sunday 20 July, 1511, the parishioners of Bassingbourn, Cambridgeshire, staged a play about 'the holy martir Seynte Georg 'in order to finance the purchase of a statue of that saint for their church.'

A more common parish fund-raising method was to hold a church-ale in the church: some parishioners provided malt, which others brewed, and the ale thus produced was then sold (and drunk) and the proceeds of the sale were used to maintain or improve the church building. Details of the proceeds, if not the actual proceedings, of these and other fund-raising activities were recorded in the churchwardens' accounts, some of which have survived.

In addition to clear, and oblique, references in churchwardens' accounts, some information on communal leisure in the medieval period can be found in the constitutions and financial accounts of religious gilds. The Church's teaching emphasised the need to prepare oneself for the afterlife. Purgatory was believed to be the intermediate place between heaven and hell: the souls of the irretrievably evil went straight to hell, those of saints went straight to heaven and all others went to purgatory where they would be purged, or purified, in order to be fit to enter the presence of God. No-one knew exactly how long a soul could be expected to remain in purgatory but it was widely believed that prayers for the soul of a dead person could ease the pains of the torment suffered there.⁴ Most individuals could not afford to pay for many prayers for their soul but they could join a group, usually known as a gild, which had been formed to say prayers for the souls of its members. Provided that they paid the entrance fee, the value of which varied considerably, membership of a gild was normally open to anyone, including 'Bachelers and Maydons'.⁵ Gild meetings were one of the few gatherings which a spinster, as opposed to a widow, could attend in her own right. Members were expected to attend the funerals of former gild members and various commemorative masses throughout the year. There was an annual meeting of gild members at the guildhall, which was usually held on the same religious feast day each year. At this business meeting new gild officers were appointed and the gild's income and expenditure during the past year were carefully accounted for. The annual general meeting was followed by a dinner which was an important occasion of much feasting and socialising with fellow members.

The information provided by churchwardens' accounts and gild records creates the general impression that communal leisure activities in late-medieval England were confined to religious matters (and drinking). Some details about other pastimes can be gained by inference from regulations about the working day and from those which sought to prohibit certain modes of behaviour:

the growing disapproval of time-consuming sports and games serve to reinforce the impression of the anxiety of employers to combat workers' strong preference for leisure.⁶

Some inventories of personal possessions have survived and various items listed relate to leisure pursuits, such as 'dice, cards, chessmen, footballs, musical instruments and "nine-men's morris" boards'.⁷ Leisure activities were sometimes noted in court rolls, usually when these had resulted in damage to persons or property. When fatal accidents occurred during recreation, for example, at a football match or on a fishing trip, these pastimes were mentioned in the coroner's rolls.

Occasionally unusual bequests were made in wills, which have survived, and these provide details about everyday life that might otherwise have remained unknown. One such bequest was made in 1474 by John Botryght, rector of the parish church of Swaffham, Norfolk.⁸ In return for annual masses for the 'health of my soul' Botryght provided the people of the parish with a croft in the town which was to be used as a recreation ground.⁹ He stipulated that this croft was to be held by trustees, on condition that they should gather annually in the parish church to celebrate the anniversary of his death and he stated the exact form which the services should take. The churchwardens were to lease out the croft and use its revenues to pay for the masses and any remaining money should be spent on the fabric of the church. Whoever leased the croft was to make the land available

for all and each of the parishioners of the same town, in which they may play games, such as involve running, shooting and carrying out those things pertaining to military drill, and other honest games which it will please them to so, for evermore.

The rector must have recognised that there was a need for such a place: from the evidence in the will, it is not possible to say whether he had been involved in disputes with parishioners over the way in which the church and churchyard had been used in the past, but, in view of the provision made by him, it seems possible that the churchyard had previously been the site for these activities. The men of Swaffham would have needed a fairly large area in which to practise their archery and the croft provided them with a suitable place for this 'for evermore'. Military drill would have been necessary at that time, 1474, because although Edward IV was by then secure on the throne, there was still the threat of war with France and the duke of Norfolk and other local lords were likely to call up fighting men. The croft donated by Botryght is also referred to as 'camping land': 'camp' was an old form of the game of football, probably played in a similar manner to American football, with players both kicking and running with the ball.¹⁰ Sometimes the game was played 'cross-country'. Strictly speaking camping was an illegal game, so it was probably not one of the 'honest games' that Botryght wished to encourage; however, it may be that he realised that this popular game could not be eliminated and his provision of a playing field would enable local people to exert more control over the playing of the game.¹¹ It would be interesting to know what other

'dishonest' games they may have played!

Botryght's will shows not only his concern for the welfare of his soul, but also his concern for the recreational needs of his former parishioners. It also gives a rare insight into secular communal leisure activities in late-medieval England.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. *Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary*.
2. E. Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England 1400-1580*, London, 1992, p.42.
3. Churchwardens' Accounts of Bassingbourn, Cambridgeshire, 1511 and later, Cambridgeshire Record Office, RO P11/5/2. See also S. Doree, 'The Bassingbourn St George Play of 1511', *Hertfordshire's Past*, vol. 33 (Autumn 1992), pp.36-44.
4. Duffy (see n.2), chapter 9 gives an account of this doctrine.
5. For example, see H. Gough, ed, *The Register of the Fraternity ... of the Holy Trinity ... Luton ... 1475-1546 ... with the Annual Accounts 1526-47 ...*, London, 1906.
6. C. Dyer, *Standards of Living in the later Middle Ages*, Cambridge, 1989, reprinted 1993, p.224.
7. Dyer (see n.6), p.174.
8. For Botryght's career, see A.B. Emden, *A Biographical Register of the University of Cambridge to 1500*, Cambridge, 1963, p.81.
9. Grant of Le Cherchecroft or Camping Land at Swaffham, Norfolk, in 1474, Norfolk Record Office, PD 52/273-78.
10. David Dymond, 'A Lost Social Institution: the Camping Close', *Rural History: Economy, Society and Culture*, vol. 1 (1990), pp.165-92.
11. Dymond (see n.10), p.172.

I am at present studying for a Certificate in Local History with the Cambridge University Board of Continuing Education. One of the set essays for the Certificate last year was on the subject of leisure in late-medieval communities. Transcripts of the original documents cited in notes 3, 5 and 9 were provided for that essay. I would like to thank Dr Mark Bailey, Staff Tutor in Local History, for his encouragement and helpful comments.