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Neifs and Villeins in Later Medieval England

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Whilst I was editing the early fifteenth-century *Register* of Coventry Priory a question persistently nagged at me. Now that the *Register* is published I have decided to make an attempt at answering it. First of all, I will outline the context. During the summer of 1411 three obedientiaries of Coventry Cathedral Priory produced a series of extents of the priory's manors. The extents take as their point of departure an ancient survey of 1303 but reflect the difficulties the priory had encountered, in common with landowners in general, in the wake of the plague and the demographic collapse of the second half of the fourteenth century. On one manor after another we find that the demesne had been leased to farmers. The raison d'être for the whole exercise is clear. A decision was made to produce an up-to-date survey of the priory's income in order to manage it effectively and, where necessary, to stem its decline.[1] My concern in this essay, however, is not with the overall economy of the priory estates but with an aspect of the relationship between lords and tenants. I am interested in the terminology deployed when discussing unfree tenants and unfree tenure.

Let us take, as a first example, the extent of the Warwickshire manor of Offchurch.[2] Here the prior had in addition to two free tenants and thirteen cottars, six tenants for the term of life and thirty-five unfree tenants (*native tenentes*, i.e., literally those holding unfreely). One of the tenants for life was John Heyn, described as the lord's neif (*nativus*). He holds a messuage and a half virgate. He pays 5s. per annum quarterly and works for the lord for two days in autumn; he pays heriot and makes two appearances in the lord's court (i.e. at view of frankpledge). All but one of the tenants at will owe the same services as John; his tenure is not substantially different from the others. What appears to be different is his personal status. Of the thirty-five unfree tenants, most hold a messuage and virgate or half virgate (occasionally a quarter virgate). Their labour services (presumably regular week-work) are as noted, the *Register* tells us, in the old extent but are pardoned by the lord 'as long as it pleases him', except for harvest boon services which are variable. They, too, owe heriot and suit of court. In the first three entries the tenants are said to do their autumn services with their fellow customary tenants. Two of them are designated as lord's neifs. One of them was once again John Heyn, here holding three messuages and a half virgate once held by another tenant. The other neif is Robert Wilde, who also has a standard

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holding once held by another named tenant. The former tenants named may well be those in the old extent of 1303, sadly no longer extant. Robert, however, holds another standard tenement and yet another jointly. In these instances he is not designated neif. Why are these two tenants singled out in this way? This is what has puzzled me and is the question my essay will attempt to address.

It should be noted before we leave Offchurch that the lord was drawing additional income from his seigniorial court, while the sum of 66s. 8d. was coming annually from unfree tenants' aid (*auxilium native tenentes*) 'at the will of the lord' and as contained in the old extent. Unfree tenants' aid is not a term usually used in the *Register*, however. More generally it speaks of villeins' aid. It should be noted that at Offchurch no-one else among these tenants other than the two neifs is given any personal status whatsoever. They are not called villeins (*villani*).

Similar features are found elsewhere. Among the lists of unfree tenants we find some described as neifs.[3] At Prior's Marston one unfree tenant out of twenty-six is described as the lord's neif: he is Thomas Heyne who holds two messuages and a virgate of land for 10s. per annum and standard services. Thomas stands out in no other way except his status. The same is true at Honington where two out of the twenty-five tenants are described as the lord's neifs. Otherwise Thomas Herward and Thomas Machin do not stand out. Their holdings and services are the same as for the other unfree tenants. There were a few neifs, too, among the forty-seven unfree tenants at Southam. The following occur: Thomas Adam, John Bate, John Bate again, William Adam, Thomas Adam again, John Adam junior and John Adam senior. The terms were once again more-or-less the same throughout, with reference to the old rental. One of them appears to have been doing particularly well: John Adam junior, lord's neif, is holding three messuages and one and a half virgates, previously held by three different tenants. He pays 30s. rent for the established services and for a hand-mill for making his own malt. At Woolscot one of the tenants at will is described as the lord's neif. At Wasperton, where no-one is designated as a neif, the list of services is spelled out for all of the seventeen unfree tenants. They give merchet and are forbidden to have their sons ordained. There are restrictions on the sale of stock. They give aid at the will of the lord. Finally, however, we are told that each neif (*quilibet nativorum*) will have twice as much hay as he can lift on his scythe on the first day of mowing. Here then all the unfree tenants are by implication neifs and the distinction seems to dissolve. We are just about to think that we are addressing a non-question, when the distinction is raised again at Scraptoft, where we hear of 'neifs and those holding by unfree tenure (*nativi et native tenentes*)'. Again the labour services are spelled out for all of the unfree tenants. Of the fifty tenants named, however, only Robert at Kirk and John Walter, smith, are specifically called

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3   For what follows see *Coventry Priory Register*, ed. by Coss and Lancaster, nos 220.3, 230.8, 233b.6, 239.4, 248b, 251b.9.

neifs. Both hold a standard message and virgate. All of them are called customary tenants when it is noted that works given in the old extent have been commuted. Finally, Robert at Kirk also held a toft and a half virgate as tenant at the lord's will, where he is again designated as lord's neif. He is said to hold here by hereditary succession after the death of Richard de [*sic*] Reveson, chaplain, once again the lord's neif. Why are some tenants picked out in this way?

One suggestion might be that the Coventry Priory *Register* is simply haphazard in its recording of status and tenure. This would seem unlikely, however, given that the whole raison d'être of these surveys was to record the lord's rights, including those *à propos* his tenants. There may be an element of inconsistency but this does not seem to be a satisfactory explanation overall. A second possible explanation derives from the agrarian conditions themselves. Mark Bailey puts the situation very succinctly: 'The fall in demographic pressure after the arrival of the plague in the mid-fourteenth century, the growing confidence and assertiveness of the lower orders of medieval society, and the gradual dissolution of serfdom and its trappings all eased the seigneurial grip upon the manorial regime. Serfdom and villeinage effectively dissolved during the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, to be replaced by a more contractual — as opposed to personal — relationship between lords and tenants'.[4]

Was the status of neifs then different from that of other customary tenants? Support for such an argument comes from some fifteenth-century court rolls which speak not just of *nativi* but of *nativi de sanguine*, that is peasants who were unfree by blood. Did there remain a difference in social perception between the *nativi* and villeins despite the fact that they became synonymous in law? Hilton, the great expert on peasant society, was aware of this as a possible interpretation: 'There must have been ... a substantial number of the descendants of Anglo-Saxon slaves ... among the unfree peasants of thirteenth-century England. These could in theory be the *nativi* who are bracketed with the *villani* in many descriptions of estates well into the fifteenth century, or the *nativi de sanguine* who appear in the fifteenth-century court rolls. But this verbal distinction between neifty and villeinage did not amount to very much because the pressure of landowners' demand for extra revenue ... from the manorial population resulted in the total confusion of the two, to the disadvantage, naturally, of the villein or customary tenant'.[5] Hilton tended to think that the uneven survival of neifty by blood was in fact due to the incidence of the peasants' geographical mobility, a form of resistance to their lords. Neif was applied now to 'members of those few villein families who had been in the village before 1350.'[6]

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4   Mark Bailey, *The English Manor c.1200-c.1500* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), p. 17.

5   R. H. Hilton, *The Decline of Serfdom in Medieval England*, second edn (London: Macmillan, 1983), p. 16.

6   Hilton, *Decline of Serfdom*, p. 49.

A new interpretation, running counter to this, has been offered recently by Mark Bailey.[7] Drawing on a series of case studies of manors of various types and histories and held by a mixture of individual and institutional lords, he argues that villein tenure disappeared to a large degree during the third quarter of the fourteenth century, that is to say considerably earlier than historians have generally supposed. Villein tenure was converted into other forms of tenure, including leasehold, tenure for life or lives, and hereditary tenure without servile incidents; tenures that were more appropriate to the social and economic conditions that prevailed in the wake of the Black Death. It is undeniable, though, that the failure on the part of lords to find tenants willing to take on land on traditional terms was the crucial factor.

However, this does not explain the survival of neifs, still less the spasmodic nature of their survival on the Coventry Priory estates. A plausible argument would be to link the restricted usage to the high mortality from the plagues, the designated neifs being descendants of survivors from an earlier tenantry. It should be noted, though, that a number of the neifs are said to hold tenancies once in the hands of tenants with different surnames, making their unique position as survivors less likely. For this interpretation to hold true here, there would have to have been huge mortality or mobility. It is clear that some lords did not wish to see serfdom by blood disappear. On the Bishop of Worcester's estate as late as 1503 a man described as *nativus domini de sanguine* took on a customary holding. Was the prior of Coventry simply waging a rearguard action when he called some of his unfree tenants neifs? Maybe. In the survival of neifty, however, we may well be seeing either the continuation, or perhaps the resurrection, of an old distinction between status and tenure. Historians — even if they have noted the *nativi de sanguine* — have generally, like Hilton, treated villeins, serfs and neifs as one. Much of our documentation tends to support this. But has it tended to mask a continuous, underlying distinction?

Unfortunately the priory's extents of 1303 do not survive, so that it is difficult to explore the situation on its estates at an earlier date than the *Register.* However, we do have the Hundred Rolls of 1279. At Biggin there were eight serfs (*servos*) holding four virgates in servage (*in servagio*).[8] A later rental talks of four sets of joint tenants holding the same four virgates. Their land is in roods, mixed with those of other neifs (*mixtim cum al(iis) nativis*). By the time the Coventry Priory *Register* was compiled this land was held by tenants at will; three of the earlier tenants are recorded, however, and described as neifs.[9]

7   Mark Bailey, *The Decline of Serfdom in Late Medieval England: From Bondage to Freedom* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2014).

8   *The Warwickshire Hundred Rolls of 1279-80*, ed. by Trevor John, British Academy Records of Social and Economic History, new series, 19 (Oxford: OUP for The British Academy, 1992), p. 135.

9   *Coventry Priory Register*, ed. by Coss and Lancaster, nos 60b.2-61.2, 188.7.

At Biggin then serfs or neifs had held in servage or villeinage. In the early thirteenth century when Sir Walter Deyville conveyed to the priory the hamlet of Biggin he gave it with the villein-services and works of all the inhabitants and of all their offspring (*sequele*), a sure mark of servitude.[10] The general interchangeability of the terms seems abundantly clear, echoing the common law. In 1202, when a Berkshire man laid claim to land, it was alleged against him that he was a *villanus ... ex nativitate*: a villein by birth; hence his claim was ineligible in a royal court.[11]

In order to gain an historical perspective on the social terminology used we need to go back to the origins of the common law. In Domesday Book *servi* was used to describe slaves whereas villein (*villanus*) meant villager. Other terms used to describe the villager were rustic (*rusticus*) or native (*nativus*). Common law villeinage was to change the deployment, if not the meaning, of these words. I should say, at this point, that preparing this paper has given me the opportunity to re-read Paul Hyams's groundbreaking book on the origins of common law villeinage.[12] In part one he deals with the distinctive characteristics of villein status. Part two discusses *Bracton*'s theory of villeinage, with its blending of English and Roman material, and deals with the few legal rights of the villein. Part three examines how cases were decided when villeinage was the issue. Part four famously deals with how villeinage came into existence, i.e. as a by-product of the Angevin legal reforms, 'born out of the courts' need to define the groups to whom the benefits of the novel royal remedies ought to be offered'.[13] Villeinage was a matter of exclusion. Thus, 'even if the terms of their tenure remained the same as before, villeins' conditions would seem to have worsened by comparison with their more fortunate neighbours'.[14]

It would be very tempting to précis *King, Lords, and Peasants*; however, even if we had the space one could hardly do justice to its nuances. A few of his observations, however, need to be noted at this point. First of all, there was always a difference between the position of the villein in law and the position on the ground, differences that increased over time, for example the hereditability in practice of his holding and his capacity to buy and sell land. Moreover, as Vinogradoff pointed out, 'in the *criminal law* of the feudal

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10 *The Early Records of Medieval Coventry*, ed. by P. R. Coss, British Academy Records of Social and Economic History, new series, 11 (Oxford: OUP for The British Academy, 1986), no. 28g.

11 Edward Miller and John Hatcher, *Medieval England: Rural Society and Economic Change 1086-1348* (London: Longman, 1978), p. 112.

12 Paul R. Hyams, *King, Lords, and Peasants in Medieval England: The Common Law of Villeinage in Medieval England in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries* (Oxford: OUP, 1980).

13 Hyams, *King, Lords, and Peasants*, pp. xxi-xxii.

14 Hyams, *King, Lords, and Peasants*, p. xxii.

epoch there is hardly any distinction between free men and villeins'.[15] The distinction between status and tenure is also important. A free man holding as a tenant in villeinage remained personally free but he could bring no action under the common law because villein tenure was excluded; it applied only to the *liberum tenementum*. The key to *Bracton*'s theory, Hyams astutely emphasises, is that villeinage is a relationship between two people only. To succeed in law a defendant must not merely show that the plaintiff is a villein, but that he is the defendant's own villein. A special procedure, the action of neifty, came into existence to determine disputes over common-law freedom. However this was often an interlocutory issue in actions about property rights or other matters. Proof of villeinage, however, eventually settled on the content of tenure. Kinship with others who owed villein services and the payment of merchet were particularly important. Tallage, interestingly, never quite equalled the decisiveness of merchet. The wise litigant did not plead it on its own. In practice the majority of disputes were probably decided by the courts on the more general basis of a rough test of services. The overriding hypothesis of the book is that 'villeinage', as a lawyer's body of doctrine for people on the fringe of the common law or beyond it, originated in the late twelfth century. Any suggestion that English serfdom was only born at this time he dismisses as 'patently absurd'.[16] Indeed, at the outset he explains that he will use 'villein' and 'villeinage' exclusively in a legal context; by contrast when talking of 'dependent social classes' or an economic context he uses serfs and serfdom.[17]

Nonetheless, the effect of the common law doctrine was to amalgamate the two. The terminology used to describe villeinage varied at the outset. Richard Fitz Neal generally used the Roman-canonist term *ascripticius,* with its classical ring and its connotations of being bound to the soil. The standard Exchequer term was *rusticus*, and was frequently used in its documents from the Pipe Roll 31 Henry I onwards; it was the equivalent of *nativus* in Chancery documents and *villanus* in some early legal records. *Bracton*'s treatise translates villein as *servus*. Hyams adds that this has concealed from historians the use on several occasions of an analogy between the Roman-canonist *ascripticius* and the villein. The common law soon came to treat *servus, rusticus, nativus*, and *villanus* as synonymous. The English common law had effectively excluded a large proportion of the rural population from access to the royal courts. Customary tenants were consigned to the jurisdiction of their lords, virtually assimilating them with the descendants of slaves and making the terms *villein* (*villanus*) and serf essentially interchangeable. As a late thirteenth-century lawyer tells us, they:

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15 Hyams, *King, Lords, and Peasants*, p. 132, quoting from Sir P. Vinogradoff, *Villainage in England* (Oxford: OUP, 1892), p. 64.

16 Hyams, *King, Lords, and Peasants*, p. 233.

17 Hyams, *King, Lords, and Peasants*, p. vii.

> Cannot acquire anything save to the use of their lord; they do not know in the evening what service they will do in the morning, and there is nothing certain in their services. The lords may put them in fetters and in the stocks, may imprison, beat and chastise them at will, saving their life and limbs. They cannot escape, flee or withdraw themselves from their lords, so long as their lords find them wherewithal they may live, and no one may receive them without the will of their lords...[18]

This reflected legal theory and in reality much of it was tempered by practical needs, by custom and by peasant resistance. There was much more certainty in peasant life than is implied here. Nonetheless, these beliefs were ideologically potent and had a general effect upon social attitudes. Freedom was by no means an abstraction. The disabilities faced by villeins were real enough and were very considerable.[19] Of course, by no means all peasants were unfree. In the second half of the thirteenth century, when there is sufficient evidence available to make an attempt at a quantitative assessment, somewhere in the region of a half of all rural tenants were free, although they were not necessarily better off economically.[20] Many free tenants were cottars (cottagers), often holding less than five acres of land. As this was insufficient to support a family, they needed to supplement their income by wage labour and/or a variety of other occupations. England enjoyed an expanding and commercialising economy in which there were both opportunities and rural poverty. When all diversity has been allowed for, the relationship between lord and villein, institutionalised by the manor court and mediated through the lord's bailiffs and other agents, was the most basic relationship in society. It did much by its very existence to colour and condition rural life. The greatest expression of this subordination is that a lord could sell his serfs singly, as well as part and parcel of an estate. Either way, they were sold with their goods, chattels and offspring. Nothing can convey the social gulf between lord and serf more clearly than this. As Maitland pointed out, the same Latin word (*sequela*) was used in the documents for the offspring of both cattle and unfree tenants.

Not surprisingly, the language of courtesy was matched by a language of deprecation. In courtly literature we find the adjective *vilein* and the noun *vileinie* to describe all that is vile, mean and unpleasant, close in meaning to similar words derived from old English like churlish (from churl or *ceorl*) and boorish (from boor, *gebur*). The Latin word *rusticus*, both

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18   *The Mirror of Justices*, ed. by W. J Whittaker et al., (London: Bernard Quaritch for Selden Society, 8, 1895), p. 79.

19   The literature on this subject is very considerable, but see, for example, Hilton, *Decline of Serfdom in Medieval England*, esp. pp. 25-6.

20   The issue is discussed by John Hatcher, 'English Serfdom and Villeinage: Towards a Reassessment', *Past and Present*, 90 (1981): 3-39 (at p. 8).

as noun and as adjective, could be used in the same sense.[21] From the late twelfth century artists began to depict the shepherds of the Nativity 'as gross beings, with thick lips, leering mouths, and matted hair', whilst literary depictions of peasants showed them to be 'filthy and corrupt, cunning but stupid, immune, and even allergic, to the finer things in life'.[22] It is hardly surprising that in romances to throw words such as *vilein* and *vileinie* at a noble man was one of the greatest of all insults. And not only in romance. To be accused of servile origins was both insulting and damaging. In a famous incident in 1448, Margaret Paston and her mother-in-law were called 'strong whores' and this was coupled with the jibe that the Pastons and all their kin were serfs. Margaret's letter to her husband seems to have been deliberately damaged to take out the most offending word: that is serf, not whore.[23]

In all of this two features stand out. The first is that the common law, despite various qualifications, ends up eliding status and tenure. Paul Hyams showed us how, faced with the many difficulties thrown up by the action of neifty, seignorial litigants voted with their feet to desert status litigation and turned to tenure. Servile customs, rather than kinship, became the crucial issue, pre-eminently merchet. The second feature is the tendency of the lawyers, legal proceedings, royal surveys and estate documents to present us with a very stark picture. It is easy to come away from these with the view that the rest of the population viewed the unfree as almost a sub-species. There was a time when I tended to hold to this view. I modified my response when, a few years ago, I came to study the records of a fourteenth-century gentry family, the Multons of Frampton in Lincolnshire.[24] I was fortunate in the survival of documents. A series of Frampton manor court rolls survives for the years 1330-1332. The serfs or *nativi*, who were personally unfree, were obliged to attend the court by reason of their tenure. Indeed, they would be amerced if they failed to do so. In addition to the well-known services and restrictions, the unfree tenants could be called upon to hold office, as reeve for example and as collector of rents. They could be called upon to perform other, more *ad hoc*, duties too. In 1331 six of them were sworn to make a survey of the land of the lord's *nativi* in Wyberton (that is, literally, to measure it) and report back to the next court. One of them was Reginald Bishop, who was also the lord's stockman.

We learn more about the Multon serfs from a document that was drawn up barely a generation later, *c*.1340. This is an 'arrentation' of the services due from the *nativi*. Twenty

21 David Crouch, *The Image of Aristocracy in Britain, 1000-1300* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 17-20.

22 Crouch, *Image of Aristocracy*, pp. 18, 20.

23 *Paston Letters and Papers of the Fifteenth Century*, Part I, ed. by Norman Davis (Oxford: OUP, 1971), no. 129.

24 Peter Coss, *The Foundations of Gentry Life: The Multons of Frampton and their World 1270-1370*, Past and Present Publications (Oxford: OUP, 2010). The relevant material is discussed in ch. 7.

tenancies in all are named. However, there had once been twenty-eight standard units performing equally standard services. Four of these were now held on favourable terms; to these we will return in a moment. The 'arrentation' does not stand alone as a means of understanding the situation of the Multon tenantry. A collector's account of 1330-1 records unfree tenants paying substantial rents for other tenements held 'at the will of the lord' and some holding free land they had purchased. Altogether these men probably had substantial holdings, and this is echoed by their contribution to national taxation. When we are talking about the lord's relationship with his unfree tenants, therefore, we must bear in mind that we are not necessarily talking about insubstantial men. There is every reason to suppose that the reeves and collectors were chosen from among the more substantial of those who were Multon tenants.

This brings us to confront more squarely the issue of the lord's attitude towards his unfree tenants. The overriding impression one gains from the extant sources is that the gentry saw their tenants primarily as assets to be exploited. However, these assets were human and their exploitation must have involved some negotiation. This was naturally the case when it came to leases, farms and other contracts. The basic medieval set-up could take landlord-peasant relations in different directions according to the 'quality' of lordship and the presiding social and economic conditions. The question of direct contact between the lord and the unfree tenants, such as the reeve and the collector who ran his estate, is problematic. However, it is hard to believe that they never met face to face or that when they did they could not communicate with a degree of mutual understanding, if not exactly 'civility'. It was not unknown, moreover, for a *nativus* to be employed on 'household' duties. One clear example from the Multon archive is Robert del Park. Robert is found in the court rolls being amerced and in the arrentation where he has a standard holding. At the same time, however, the household account of 1343-4 shows Robert going on journeys for the lord — to Lincoln on two occasions and once to Windsor — and being paid expenses.

What then of those *nativi* who had come to hold their standard bovates on 'favourable terms'? The collector in 1325-6 held his tenement by money rent and very light labour services. There is surely a connection between his low rent and his service to the lord. Similarly, given his name, it is conceivable that Gilbert the Cook's heirs held on favourable terms as a result of service in the household. We also come across a deceased *nativus* called Walter of the Kitchen, with its obvious implication. It seems likely then that gentry families like the Multons drew some of their more menial household servants directly from their estates. In terms of social interaction, occupation in the household is likely to have been of a different order from service on the land. The least we can say is that the relationship between a lord and his neifs was likely to have been a more complex one than the normative legal texts might lead one to suppose. It was perhaps more complex, too, than the manor court rolls might suggest, given that these portray life as largely determined by the consequences of tenure.

Another insight is provided by a case which came before royal justices at Reading in March 1269.[25] It belongs to the special eyre dealing with cases arising from the disturbance during the period of the Barons' War of 1264-5, as part of the process of pacification. The case was brought against three men — John Plugenet, William Bitheway and Simon Steperand — that they had robbed John le Fleming in Wiltshire and then been received at East Garston, Berkshire. Their defence was that they were *nativi* of the knight John fitz John and had been sent there through distraint by his bailiff and had appropriated nothing. We must be sceptical about their line of defence, however, because on their own admission they had each received a sheep from the proceeds of the robbery as wages (*unam bidentem pro mercede sua de dicta preda*). We know no more of the relationship between John fitz John and these *nativi*, but it is remarkable that he should have persuaded or ordered them to take part in such an enterprise; it is certainly a long way from the normal conditions of tenure. It suggests that the relationship between this lord and his *nativi* was considered, by him at least, to be personal rather than tenurial.

What bearing does this have on the issue of Coventry Priory and its neifs of the early fifteenth century? Just this: that relations between lords and tenants were many and various, both tenurially and personally. The coercive side to lordship was not the only dimension. There were, of course, different styles of lordship. One would expect a monastic lordship to be more 'impersonal' in nature compared to that of a minor baron or knight. Nevertheless, if it were traditional to regard *nativi* as having a personal relationship to the lord, or indeed lordship, whose content was more affective, this would have potential implications across the board.

How then do we explain Coventry Priory's sporadic neifs? There are perhaps several factors at work. Geographical mobility may have snapped many traditional bonds, although arguably mortality among traditional tenant families may also have been a stronger factor at this date. A lord like the prior of Coventry was fighting a rearguard action, still able as yet to retain unfree tenure but less able to claim that his tenants were necessarily unfree by status. The pool of those who could be claimed as personally unfree, i.e. his neifs, was in decline for a variety of reasons. In order to retain this relationship he needed to tap into a distinction that had remained beneath the surface of the common law and estate documents, that is to say the distinction between villein tenants and those who were unfree by blood. The two had been conflated for centuries, but were tending to separate once again. Looked at from a different angle, the latent tension between status and tenure was resurfacing. Perhaps the peasants in 1381 were effectively making the same point when they demanded the abolition of serfdom *and* villeinage?

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25   TNA, JUST1/42, m. 1d.

There clearly were lords who strove to maintain personal servility, even if they were in an increasing minority. Hence the production of servile genealogies and specific lists of serfs.[26] These could be used in a variety of ways; to secure one-off payments, for example, of merchet, of entry fines or for manumission. They could be used to keep a watchful eye on the acquisition of free land by *nativi*, or perhaps to track those tenants who were more easily subject to controls as they took on additional land under other tenures. Lords might possibly have hoped to lay claim to those who had fled their manors.[27]

Whatever may have been the motive in such instances, the traditional affective relationship between a lord and his neifs may have encouraged the continuance of this bond. Needless to say, I am not suggesting the existence of a form of seigniorial paternalism that was appreciated as such by both parties, but rather the existence of a bond that formed an hereditary personal tie. None of this negates the underlying coercion and exploitative dimensions to this relationship, let us be clear. But there were less debilitating aspects too. It is well known that the unfree were often better off economically than the free. There are instances, however, where neifs appear to be particularly favoured. On the Coventry Priory estates, as we have seen, those described as neifs tended to acquire multiple holdings, under various tenures. In one case a neif seems to have been spectacularly advantaged. At the prior of Coventry's manor of Scraptoft in 1411 the demesne of three carucates (around 360 acres), together with the meadow yielding forty cartloads of hay and the works of the customary tenants, was being farmed at the will of the lord. The farmer was none other than William Walter, the lord's neif.

26   Bailey, *The Decline of Serfdom*, pp. 57-61.

27   For peasant life more generally in this period, including their relations with lords, see now Christopher Dyer, *An Age of Transition? Economy and Society in England in the Later Middle Ages* (Oxford: OUP, 2005).