

The English Poll Taxes, 1377-1381

By George Redmonds

It is possible that some genealogists in America are unaware of a recent and very significant publishing project in England entitled *The Poll Taxes of 1377, 1379 and 1381*. This three-volume work, edited by Carolyn C. Fenwick, is part of the *New Series of the Records of Social and Economic History*, published for the British Academy by the Oxford University Press. The aim has been to cover all the records of the English poll taxes, county by county, in alphabetical order. The first volume, covering Bedfordshire-Leicestershire, appeared in 1998 and was followed by Lincolnshire-Westmorland in 2001. The third volume will complete the county sequence and also include indexes, glossaries, and other information relevant to the series as a whole.

Poll taxes were something of an experiment, being designed initially to base the monies levied on the individual rather than the property. The term "poll tax" was coined to describe the first tax, that of 1377, which was based on a per capita flat rate of one groat, i.e. fourpence. It was no accident that the same name was much more recently applied to the very unpopular tax devised by the Conservative Party under Margaret Thatcher: no doubt its opponents had in mind the so-called Peasants' Revolt of 1381. In later years the charges were once again made in accordance with each man's ability to pay. In 1379 for example, they ranged from fourpence to ten marks and applied to all laypersons (including foreign merchants) over the age of sixteen. Only the clergy and genuine paupers were exempt.

The purpose of the poll tax series is to make these important documents more widely available, particularly to social and economic historians, demographers, and genealogists. Local record societies have made past attempts to transcribe and publish some of the rolls, and scholars in Yorkshire have been particularly fortunate to have had access to so many of the early lists.¹ In other counties, however, the transcriptions were less accurate than they should have been. There is no doubt that our knowledge of English surname origins suffered as a result of this carelessness and genealogists must therefore welcome this present initiative. The poll taxes project has been a mammoth undertaking, and Carolyn Fenwick is to be congratulated on her work. The carefully edited lists provide us with much new information, and her introductory notes explain how the taxes were assessed and collected while also covering important topics such as exemption and evasion.

It is now generally recognized that most hereditary surnames came into use in England between 1250 and 1450. For that reason alone the poll taxes of 1377-1381 are of great importance to genealogists and surname scholars. The printed volumes show the names of many thousands of people sorted by village, with details about occupations and status. Some relationships are also included. The majority of those listed are rarely mentioned in other documents. With the publication of the poll taxes, we can now view the names of those who survived the Black Death, that catastrophic plague which killed such a large percentage of the population in 1348-49. The volumes also provide a picture of local communities at the very moment when some new surnames were stabilizing. For example, John Godwyn, a taxpayer in Syderstone, Norfolk in 1379, is listed just below Godewyn, a man whose personal name was by then so unusual that he seems not to have needed a surname.²

The county returns are far from uniform and it is impossible to generalize about the details contained in the records. However, since Norfolk County was the original home of so many New England settlers, examples from their records will serve to illustrate the kind of information that American researchers might hope to find. A simple comparison with the Norfolk men listed by Banks reveals how many of the surnames were already established in the county by 1379.³ These include surnames derived from (1) place-names, e.g. Lincoln, Buxton, Foulsham, Gedney, and Scottow; (2) personal names, e.g. Hobart, Paine, Houchin, Jacob, and Dogget; (3) occupations, e.g. Baxter, Chamberlain, Fuller, and Cutler; and (4) nicknames, e.g. Knight, True, Grubb, and Swett. Many more could be listed of course, some of them apparently commonplace and others much more distinctive, but lists alone would not reveal the potential value of the poll tax information.

That information is of particular value when it is linked with details from other sources, some of them rarely consulted. There are, for example, numerous references in Norfolk in 1379 to the surname Thaxter: Robert and John Thaxstere lived at Pulham, Thomas Thaxtere at Bagthorpe, and John Thaxtere at Holt, to name just a few. In other cases the occupation of a taxed individual was given as "thaxster," proving that the word was still in everyday use. This

particular surname is described in *A Dictionary of English Surnames* (1997) as being "apparently peculiar to Norfolk." There appears to be no reason why such a name should be confined to Norfolk for it means "thatcher" or "thacker" and both these are more widely distributed. Surprisingly, Guppy's *The Homes of Family Names* (1890) made no mention of this surname.

More recently, Richard McKinley has commented on Thaxter's fascinating distribution: in *Norfolk Surnames in the Sixteenth Century* (1969) he produced a map to demonstrate that its main "home" in 1523 was in the northeast of the county. He went on to say that it seems likely that the bearers of such names "are descended from a common ancestor." That might seem initially very unlikely, especially as examples of the by-name were scattered all over the county in 1379. However, we now know that many such by-names either failed to stabilize as hereditary names or died out in the male line during two centuries of low population growth - the period of 1350 to 1550. Therefore, a single-family origin for Thaxter is not out of the question. In a later work on Norfolk surnames, McKinley wrote that "many of the names occurring during c.1250-1400 never became hereditary, and...in other cases families possessing hereditary occupational surnames became extinct."⁴

It is clear that the publication of *The Poll Taxes of 1377, 1379 and 1381* will open up new areas of research and throw fresh light on the regional characteristics of English surnames. It is an exciting prospect for genealogists, and it comes at a time when we are just beginning to see the role that genetics might also play in the subject. There is no doubt that in cases such as Thaxter there are massive new resources available to the genealogist.

¹. "Rolls of the Collectors in the West Riding of the Lay Subsidy, 2 Richard II", *Yorkshire Archaeological and Topographical Journal*, Vols. 5-7.

"Assessment Roll of the Poll Tax for Howdenshire, 2 Richard II", *Yorkshire Archaeological and Topographical Journal*, Vol. 9.

E. Lloyd, "Poll Tax Returns for the East Riding, 4 Richard II", *Yorkshire Archaeological Journal*, Vol. 20.

J. Leggett, "The 1377 Poll Tax Return for the City of York", *Yorkshire Archaeological Journal*, Vol. 43.

². Bo Selten, *The Anglo-Saxon Heritage in Middle English Personal Names: East Anglia 1100-1399* (1979).

³. C.E. Banks, *Topographical Dictionary of 2885 English Emigrants to New England, 1620-1650*, Reissued, Baltimore (1981).

⁴. R. McKinley, *Norfolk and Suffolk Surnames in the Middle Ages*, English Surnames Series, Vol.II, (1975)