

SHORTER CONTRIBUTION

ARMS AND ARMOUR IN EARLY SIXTEENTH-CENTURY SUFFOLK: THE MILITARY RETURN FOR BABERGH HUNDRED IN 1522

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On the eve of Henry VIII's first French war in 1511 the government re-issued the ancient Statute of Winchester. Under the terms of that Statute men with lands worth £10 a year or goods worth £13 6s. 8d. were required to keep a complete set of armour and be ready to serve in war. Additionally, if their lands were valued at £15 or more a year or if they had goods totalling at least £26 13s. 4d. they were also expected to keep a horse (Goring 1975, 192). Men such as these were supposed to find a sufficient number of able-bodied men to accompany them if warfare actually occurred, but whereas prior to 1511 they could be obtained from anywhere in a particular area, after that date they were required to provide such men from their own tenants. Apparently no lists of men available for military service were drawn up at this time, and on the eve of Henry's second incursion into the European arena the situation had changed radically, partly through losses in warfare itself and even more so as a result of the great pestilence and dearth which had occurred between 1520 and 1521. In consequence, the government had little or no knowledge of the numbers of able-bodied men in 1522 or of the arms and armour available to them (Goring 1971, 683). Additionally, Henry's chief minister, Cardinal Wolsey, was well aware of the enormous costs of warfare, warfare he had been at pains to avoid, and of the natural reluctance of the English people to pay for such warfare. With this in mind he instituted a military-cum-fiscal survey of the realm which was intended to kill two birds with one stone. While the military objectives were trumpeted abroad those of the fiscal survey – to inaugurate an all-embracing tax system realistically assessed on a person's stated and sworn wealth – were kept essentially secret.

The precise instructions to the commissioners have not survived but we can get some idea of these from a document relating to the half hundred of Waltham in Essex, a document which was published by Stow in his *Chronicles of England* (1580). Apart from listing the names of the able-bodied males and indicating 'whom they belonged unto', the bailiffs and chief constables were required to provide the following details:

Who is Lord of euery towne or hamlet . . . and who bee Stewards. Item, who be parsons of the same townes, and what the benefices be worth by yeere. Also who be owners of euery parcell of land within any towne, hamlet, parish or village . . . with the yeerely value of euery mans land within the same townes, hamlets, parishes and villages. And of euery stocke and stocks of Catell, or other things that be occupied vpon any ferme . . . and who be owners of them. Also what aliants or strangers dwell in any towne . . . and where they were borne, and vnder whose dominion. Item, what occupation, mystery, or substance they be of. Item, the value and substance of euery person being of 16 yeeres and aboue . . . as well spirituall as temporall. Also what pensions goeth out of any lands there to any religious or spirituall men (Goring 1971, 681n., 684).

If such instructions were given generally they were interpreted differently. Counties such as Rutland and Berkshire followed them to the letter. Others gave both less and more information. The surviving return for Babergh Hundred in Suffolk contains most of the required details with the exception of who is tenant of whom and, like Rutland and Coventry, exceeds instructions by providing full details of the occupations of a majority of

those listed. In Babergh, indeed, just over 100 women are named (two of them gentlewomen) as well as men, a clear indication of the fiscal priorities of the survey, for not all of them were capable of providing arms and armour (Pound 1986, 132–33).

I have provided a minute analysis of the economic and social details of the Babergh material in my recent edition of the military survey published by the Suffolk Records Society.¹ Here I intend to say more about the military aspects, especially where the so-called Babergh scale is concerned.

Five commissioners were appointed to deal with Babergh Hundred: Sir William Waldegrave, Sir William Clopton, George Mannock and Robert Crane, esquires, and Robert Ford, gentleman, the first four of whom had their major residence in the area. In most places, a distinction was made between those who may or may not have been fit to serve in person but who possessed arms and armour, and those who may or may not have possessed arms and armour but who were fit to serve. The Babergh commissioners, however, decided that all men – and women, where relevant – with £4 or more in goods *should* possess arms, whether individually or collectively, and assessed them accordingly, the requirements being based on a well-defined system which seems to be an extension of that set out in the Statute of Winchester. No details of this system are provided in writing but it has been possible to reconstruct it according to the wealth of individuals and groups and the demands made upon them. All those with £20 or more in goods were required to contribute arms and armour individually. Those worth between £4 and £19 were expected to provide it collectively, Waldegrave, Crane and Ford lumping all such people together while Clopton and Mannock put them in groups of three or four with a combined goods value of between £20 and £30 and assessed them accordingly. The demands made on this middling group normally amounted to the same whether assessed in larger numbers or in threes and fours but, as indicated below, tended to be heavier, proportionately, than those made on their wealthier fellows once their combined goods value reached a certain level.

TABLE I: THE BABERGH SCALE
h = harness; ba = bows and arrows; b = bills

<i>Individual assessments</i>		<i>Collective assessments</i>	
<i>Goods value</i>	<i>Arms & armour required</i>	<i>Goods value</i>	<i>Arms & armour required</i>
£		£	
20–39	1h + 1 ba or b	20–39	1h + 1 ba or b
40–79	2h + 2 ba or bs*	40–59	2h + 2 ba or bs*
80–149	3h + 3 ba or bs	60–79	3h + 3 ba or bs
150–199	4h + 4 ba or bs	80–99	4h + 4 ba or bs
200–249	5h + 5 ba or bs	100–124	5h + 5 ba or bs
250–299	6h + 6 ba or bs	125–149	6h + 6 ba or bs
300–349	7h + 7 ba or bs	150–174	7h + 7 ba or bs
350–399	8h + 8 ba or bs	175–199	8h + 8 ba or bs
400–449	9h + 9 ba or bs	200–224	9h + 9 ba or bs
450–499	10h + 10 ba or bs	225–249	10h + 10 ba or bs
500–549	11h + 11 ba or bs	250–274	11h + 11 ba or bs
550–599	12h + 12 ba or bs	275–299	12h + 12 ba or bs
600–649	13h + 13 ba or bs	300–324	13h + 13 ba or bs

*Sometimes the demand was for two bows and arrows, sometimes for two bills and sometimes for one of each. The same point applies for the rest of the column, bows and

arrows and bills always matching the harness in number. Normally there was a rough correlation between bows and arrows and bills but on occasion, as noted below for Sudbury, bills predominated.

Only one individual, Thomas Spring of Lavenham, and one township, Sudbury, were assessed beyond these levels. Despite an assessment of forty harnesses and an equivalent number of bows and bills, Spring was treated lightly, for this was the requirement of a person with £1,950 worth of goods. His goods value of £3,200 should have led to a demand for sixty-five harnesses and their equivalents (Pound 1986, 75). The Sudbury citizens worth between £4 and £19, however, were assessed correctly. Their total goods value exceeded £525 for which they were expected to provide twenty-two harnesses, two bows and arrows and twenty bills (Pound 1986, 25). The only other exceptions to the system occurred when men were heavily endowed with lands, Clopton and Crane, for example, having to provide twice as much as their goods value alone would suggest and Mannock three times as much.² At a lesser level, the parson of Newton with a benefice of £13 6s. 8d. and goods of similar value was required to provide a harness and bow and arrows on an individual basis, despite being worth less than £20, as was the vicar of Great Cornard with a smaller benefice of £10 and goods worth no more than £6 13s. 4d. (Pound 1986, 69, 71).

For most people, however, the system was adhered to rigidly. Where individuals were concerned, it seems that they were originally intended to be assessed for arms and armour on a goods value which progressively doubled. Thus, those required to supply two harnesses and two bows and arrows or bills were contained within a band whose base was twice as high as that requiring a single harness and bow or bill. The band doubled again from £40 to £80 for those expected to produce three harnesses and their equivalents, and almost doubled where the four harness level was reached. Thereafter the bands rose progressively by £50.

Where men were assessed collectively the rate began again at £20 for a single harness and bow or bill but instead of doubling rose progressively by sums of £20 until £100 was reached and thereafter increased by sums of £25.

In consequence, whereas both individual and collective assessments were the same to a goods value of some £60, once the collective value became higher than this the demands made on such people became progressively greater. Thus men with a combined goods value of £100 were required to provide five harnesses and five bows and arrows or bills (or any variation of the two which matched the number of harnesses) whereas individuals were not expected to make such a contribution until the value of their goods reached £200. From this point the collective requirements were always twice as high as those of individuals, while in Lavenham, Long Melford and Glemsford the policy of grouping people in threes and fours to provide harness led to rather more being demanded than if the £4 to £19 group had been assessed as one large grouping as was done in the areas not covered by Clopton and Mannock.

From assessing the arms and armour which individuals or groups of people *should* have had, the commissioners moved on to distinguish the able-bodied from the others. Women were obviously excluded and eventually 1,035 out of 1,884 men, or 55 per cent of the whole, were listed as such.³ As was usual, a distinction was made between the relatively skilled, described as archers, and those with, in the main, little or no military ability who were listed as billmen. The lists were further refined by distinguishing between the really skilful archer and billman and those whose skill was, at best, limited. In every case, the letter A or

B for archer or billman was written beside the appropriate names, with AA or BB to indicate those considered more able than their fellows. As elsewhere, archers were at a premium. In Babergh 166 men, or 16 per cent of the able-bodied, were named as such, a proportion very similar to that in the county of Middlesex but decidedly below the national average of one-third, which was itself considered to be very low. Significantly, the Babergh commissioners required the provision of 377 bows and sheaves of arrows, more than twice the amount necessary in their own Hundred, whereas the 344 bills demanded were nowhere near sufficient for the 869 men designated as billmen.

The final information supplied by the commissioners concerned the number of horses available which were deemed to be worth above £1. They recorded 106 in all, fifty-two, or almost half of them, being supplied by the clothiers. It must be doubted whether all the horses of this value were, in fact, listed. While some may have been worth less than this, and thus legitimately excluded, it is hard to conceive of men as wealthy as Spring and Clopton being without animals of this standing, and several men with a goods value of £26 13s. 4d. and above were, ostensibly, without animals of sufficient quality.

When the Babergh commissioners made their lists they noted the names of thirteen men who were already absent in the King's wars. All of those of 'no substance' were deemed able-bodied, and as a group they comprised rather more than one-third of those deemed capable of fighting. Most, significantly, were single men. Some of these were undoubtedly called upon. How they were armed, assuming, as in most cases, that they possessed none themselves, remains an open question. In Hampshire and Gloucestershire, where returns survive, it seems that those unfit for military service but possessing arms supplied their fitter fellows (Goring 1971, 697). The same policy may have been applied in Babergh, but unless the poorer elements owned arms which were not recorded there must have been a substantial number of billmen lacking the essential equipment. At all events, the Babergh return supplies us with a wealth of material not available elsewhere, and the historian must be duly grateful.

Notes

- 1 Pound 1986, 1-16 and Appendices, 128-37.
- 2 Pound 1986, 83, 55 and 62 for Clopton, Crane and Mannock respectively.
- 3 The totals provided here and in the succeeding paragraphs are mine. The Tudor arithmetic in the Babergh return is quite good but far from infallible. My assumption about the letters AA and BB indicating greater proficiency is confirmed in Powell 1915, which contains details, *inter alia*, of the muster roll for Lackford Hundred in 1537. The introduction to this particular muster notes 'that as many namys as have too Ays yn and before the name be pryncypall archers and thes namys that have too bees are pryncypall bylmen, and the residue with syngle letters before ther hedds be bothe for archers and bylmen able'. I owe this reference to Peter Northeast.

References

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