

SHORTER CONTRIBUTION

AUSTIN CREMBELL: A MEDIEVAL
SUFFOLK COMMUTER

by MARK BAILEY

MANORIAL COURT ROLLS of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries can provide a good deal of information about the migratory habits of serfs, who comprised around two-fifths of the English population in 1300, and one tenth in the early fifteenth century. The common law of villeinage determined that serfs were the hereditary chattels of the lord of the manor, hence they were routinely described as ‘the serf of the lord by blood’ (*nativus/nativa domini de sanguine*). In theory, they were not able to leave the manor without the lord’s permission, although in practice they routinely did so, whether temporarily or permanently. Seigniorial sensitivity to the illegal departure of serfs increased when tenants and labourers became relatively scarce after the Black Death of 1348–9, and consequently many manor courts suddenly maintained a closer written record of the names and destinations of flown serfs.¹ Licenced absences [*payments of chevage*] and unlicenced [*presentments for absence*] became more frequent, often including the whereabouts of the migrant serf. However, historians have been sceptical about the general accuracy of this type of information, and so have been reluctant to deploy it to reconstruct patterns of migration.²

This short contribution follows the documented career of Austin Crembell, a serf of the earl of Oxford’s manor of Aldham during the first half of the fifteenth century, thereby revealing the high potential for reconstructing the movement of serfs from information recorded in manorial court rolls. His case is remarkable for two reasons. First, the information about Austin in the court rolls of Aldham can be cross-checked against the fortuitous survival of a good series of court rolls for his destination manor of Bredfield, nearly twenty miles away. Such a coincidence is very rare, and it provides an exceptional opportunity to test the accuracy of the information about flown serfs in their court of origin and, indeed, their status in their new place of residence. Second, the information from two sets of court rolls reveals that for a few years Austin maintained active interests in both communities simultaneously and so he was commuting regularly between them. The prospect of the late medieval peasantry pursuing economic activities simultaneously in more than one location some distance apart has not really been considered before, but their ability to do so provides insights into the nature of the late medieval economy, and the reasons for the collapse of serfdom in England.

In 1392 the manorial court of Aldham recorded that one Augustus [*Austin*] Crembell, serf of the manor, had died three miles away in Hadleigh.³ It is likely that this Austin had spent most of his life in Hadleigh, because in the 1350s an Austin Crembell held land there and was amerced for brewing in the town.⁴ In July 1399 the Aldham court presented Nicholas Crembell, junior, and another Austin, presumably the aforementioned Austin’s son, for defaulting from their role as tithingmen, implying that they were not living on the manor.⁵ The next year both appeared before the court and each paid two capons as chevage to licence formally their absence from the manor until Christmas 1401.⁶ In 1404 both paid the same again until Christmas 1405, when the court recorded explicitly that they were living in Hadleigh.⁷ They remained in Hadleigh for the next few years, and probably until 1416.⁸

Having resided in Hadleigh for at least fifteen years at the beginning of the fifteenth century, in 1417 Austin and Nicholas both returned to Aldham. The trigger was probably the death of their uncle, Nicholas Crembell, senior, the previous year. Nicholas junior served as a capital pledge in 1417 and again in 1418 when he lost a longstanding family claim to an acre of meadow in Hadleigh.⁹ Nicholas then largely disappears from the record, presumably having inherited some land in Aldham from Nicholas senior and living quietly close by. In contrast, Austin became very active within the Aldham court, serving as a capital pledge in 1418, 1419 and 1420, swearing fealty to the new lady of the manor in 1418, and in 1420 suing Thomas Gooche for trespass.¹⁰ Then, in September 1422, it was reported that Austin had moved to Woodbridge — nineteen miles to the east — with his son William. Yet he was back in Aldham in 1424 and 1425, serving as a capital pledge in both years, although William chose to remain in Woodbridge and in 1424 paid chevage for the first time to licence his absence.¹¹ From 1426 Austin became inactive in the Aldham court, and between 1426 and 1432 he and William were presented for being absent from Aldham and described as living ‘without [*paying*] chevage’ in Bredfield near Woodbridge.¹²

The continued absence of the two Crembells eventually prompted some direct action from the manorial administrators of Aldham. In 1429 a marginal entry in the Aldham court roll noted that the steward of the estate had decided to seek the lord’s counsel on what to do about the Crembells, and the response is reflected in a subtle change in policy in the next court held in September 1430: both were still presented for their absence in Bredfield, but both were amerced 12d for their failure to perform the view of frankpledge, and Austin was also amerced 6d for default of suit of the court baron. In other words, instead of just noting their absence, the court officials were now levying fines on the Crembells in their absence at a combined rate of 30d *per annum*, presumably to place pressure on them to answer for an annual chevage payment. This new tactic was part of a wider crackdown on the management of serfs on this estate, because the court of June 1433 contained summaries of written proofs of the servile status of a number of Aldham serf families and the session was attended by Richard de Vere, the earl of Oxford’s brother, in person.¹³

The Crembells responded promptly to this administrative crackdown by making their first chevage payments since 1424 (William) and 1416 (Austin).¹⁴ Between 1434 and 1439 they continued to pay chevage annually, and the court noted both to be resident in Dallinghoo.¹⁵ In 1435 they were amerced additionally for default of suit of the court baron, and in 1440 were amerced 3d each for default of the leet court.¹⁶ They paid unusually large sums for chevage in 1441 (40d each) and 1442 (10s each), and were described as resident in Bredfield again, before settling into lower annual payments (6d) until 1445.¹⁷ Thereafter, Austin ceased paying chevage, but was still recorded as absent and living in Bredfield, and after 1451 he ceased to be recorded in the Aldham court.¹⁸ He was now well into his sixties.

This tale of servile migration, with its shifts from unlicensed to licensed absences, is not unusual, although the intermittent ameracements of Austin for default as court suitor and as tithingman during his absences are unusual. These entries imply that he was still holding land in Aldham. What makes his case noteworthy is the survival of a very good series of court rolls from Bredfield from 1422, which therefore presents an exceptional opportunity to construct a fuller picture of Austin’s activities (Fig. 83).¹⁹ His son, William, is not mentioned in the Bredfield court rolls at all, so either the information reported to the Aldham court is incorrect, or he lived in the village, but did not have any contact with the main manor of Bredfield. The latter would have been possible if he resided on another manor within the vill. The most likely explanation is that he lived in neighbouring Dallinghoo after leaving Aldham in 1422, but the Aldham court failed to make this distinction consistently. In contrast, its information about Austin was reasonably accurate.

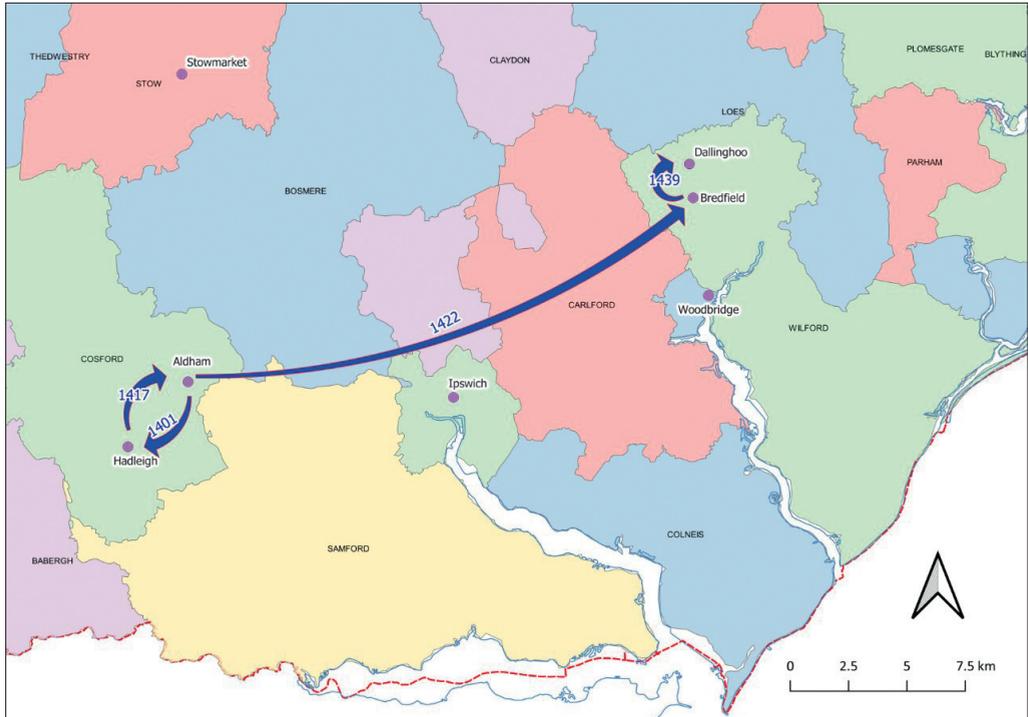


FIG. 83 – The main migratory movements of Austin Crebrell, c.1400 to 1450 (*map: David Addy*).

Thus the evidence from the Aldham court rolls indicates that in 1420 Austin was resident in Aldham, in 1422 he had moved to Woodbridge, and from 1426 he was in Bredfield. The first extant Bredfield court of the fifteenth century, held in November 1422, confirms that he was already well established there, because he was amerced for breaking the assizes of bread and ale, and he and his wife, Agnes, were involved in a commercial dispute with one John Cook of Woodbridge.²⁰ In 1423 he served on the presentment jury at Bredfield, and he was amerced for failing to ring his pigs.²¹ In 1424 and 1425 Austin also served as a capital pledge in the leet court of Bredfield.²² This information would be unremarkable if viewed in isolation, but the combination of details from Aldham and Bredfield cast it in a very different and surprising light. By 1422 Austin already had married a resident of Bredfield and established strong commercial interests there, despite still being resident in Aldham, and in 1424 and 1425 he served as a capital pledge at the leets of both villis simultaneously. The conclusion is clear: Austin was commuting regularly between the two villages, nearly twenty miles apart, during the first half of the 1420s.

In 1426, the year the Aldham court reported him to be absent once again, Austin was baking, brewing and serving as an affeorer in Bredfield.²³ For the next ten years he was highly active in Bredfield, described as a tenant of unfree land (*native tenant*) in 1427 and again in 1429; baking and selling white bread against the assize frequently; brewing and selling ale most years; and usually serving as a capital pledge, affeorer and occasionally as an aletaster.²⁴ He is never described as a serf in the Bredfield court rolls. In 1430 he had twenty quarters of malt in his possession which, together with the frequency and scale of his amercedments for baking white bread, indicate that he ran a hostelry.²⁵ Then in 1437 his wife, Agnes, died. The court records that she had married Austin as a widow, and that she was survived by an adult

son from that first marriage.²⁶ Austin remained active until 1439, then disappears from the Bredfield courts.²⁷ He may well have resided with William in the 1440s, and probably died in 1451. His main movements are summarised in Fig. 83.

The significance of this case is threefold. First, it provides reassurance that some information recorded in the court rolls of a serf's home manor about their migratory patterns is reasonably accurate. The Aldham court recorded that Austin was variously in Woodbridge, Bredfield and Dallinghoo, which was broadly correct (for example, he was stated to be in Woodbridge in 1422 when in reality he was in the next parish of Bredfield). Second, it proves that serfs migrating from their home manor were not cast as 'serfs' on their immigrant manor, and so had obtained *de facto* freedom. Austin was not once referred to as a *nativus* in the Bredfield rolls, but, if anything, as the tenant of customary land. Third, Austin retained interests in two rural communities nearly twenty miles apart: he was an innkeeper in Bredfield, while also holding land in Aldham. This reveals that servile status was not a barrier to migration in England, although the estate administration's interest in his whereabouts and the payment of chevage underlines that it was characterised by demeaning obstacles and costs. It is pertinent to note, however, that Austin chose to pay chevage, presumably to preserve an interest in a landed inheritance.²⁸ Furthermore, his ability to obtain land and a livelihood in Bredfield emphasises the range of options and the wide framework of accessible economic opportunities available to serfs in rural areas in late medieval England, which encouraged their mobility and hence was a crucial factor in explaining why serfdom in general dissolved here after the Black Death.²⁹

NOTES

- 1 Bailey 2014, 42–6.
- 2 A view captured in Postles 2000. For exceptions, see Raftis 1964; Field 1983; DeWindt 2012. For a general review, see Bailey, forthcoming.
- 3 C[ambridge] U[niversity] L[ibrary], Vanneck Ms Box 1, courts held September and December 1392.
- 4 See courts held October 1358, April 1359, April and October 1366, C[anterbury] C[athedral] A[rchives], DCC-CR19, U15/16–36 and U15/16–37. An Austin Crembell was also leasing a rood of land in the 1340s, CCA, DCC-Hadleigh 16 to 19. His wife might have been Margery Crembell: other Crembells are mentioned in the Hadleigh manorial documents from 1276. I am grateful to Margaret Woods for these references.
- 5 CUL, Vanneck Ms Box 1, courts held September and December 1392, court held July 1399. The court of September 1403 confirms that Austin was the brother of Nicholas Crembell, junior. Nicholas was usually known as junior until 1416 to distinguish him from Nicholas Crembell (probably his uncle), a regular figure in the Aldham court in the 1390s and 1400s until his death in the summer of 1416 ('*mort*' was inserted above his name in the list of capital pledges in the court of July 1416).
- 6 CUL, Vanneck Ms Box 1, court held December 1400.
- 7 CUL, Vanneck Ms Box 1, court held September 1404.
- 8 They paid chevage to reside in Hadleigh throughout 1406 and 1407, at which point there is a gap in the court series. When it resumes in 1416, they were still paying chevage for absence though their whereabouts was not stated; CUL, Vanneck Ms Box 1, courts held September 1406, September 1407 and July 1416.
- 9 CUL, Vanneck Ms Box 1, courts held June 1417, May and August 1418.
- 10 CUL, Vanneck Ms Box 1, see courts held June 1417, May 1418, October 1418, February 1420 and September 1420.
- 11 CUL, Vanneck Ms Box 1, courts held September 1424 and September 1425.
- 12 CUL, Vanneck Ms Box 1, courts held September 1426, June 1427, September 1427, June 1428, September 1429, September 1430 and July 1432.
- 13 This would have been the third son of Richard de Vere, the eleventh earl of Oxford, and brother of John de Vere, twelfth earl of Oxford, see Ross 2011, 18.
- 14 CUL, Vanneck Ms Box 1, court held June 1433.

- 15 CUL, Vanneck Ms Box 1, courts held July 1432, June 1433, December 1434, March 1436 and June 1439.
- 16 CUL, Vanneck Ms Box 1, courts held November 1435 and May 1440.
- 17 CUL, Vanneck Ms Box 1, courts held September 1441, September 1442, October 1443, April 1444 and August 1445.
- 18 S[uffolk] A[rchives]/I[pswich], HA85/484/315.
- 19 I am grateful to David Addy for producing the map.
- 20 SA/I, HA91/2, m. 1.
- 21 SA/I, HA91/2, mm. 1–2.
- 22 SA/I, HA91/2, mm. 2 (court held September 1424) and 5 (court held January 1425).
- 23 SA/I, HA91/2, m. 6, court held February 1426.
- 24 SA/I, HA91/2, mm. 8–22.
- 25 SA/I, HA91/2, m. 13, court held February 1430.
- 26 SA/I, HA91/2, m. 22, court held November 1437 records that ‘Agnes the wife of Augustus Crembell, formerly the wife of John Agas’ had died, leaving land to Thomas Agas.
- 27 SA/I, HA 91/2, m. 24 is his last record in the rolls, court held May 1439.
- 28 Bailey 2014, 141–5.
- 29 Bailey 2021, 308–13.

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