
Literacy, Social Structure, and Local Social Dramas*

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Abstract

This paper starts by describing Roger Schofield's work on the measurement of literacy, and especially his use of the proportion of brides and grooms who could sign the marriage register to quantify the extent of illiteracy among different sections of society. The paper then discusses other potential sources of data on illiteracy. Frequently these sources describe local social events, in which the politics of the parish intersect the history of the nation, and social, cultural, and political history come together. Work using these sources can expose some of the intangibles of ideology, religion, and morality to which literacy only gestures. Linking these records to other local sources may reveal how kinship, neighbourliness, or economic associations drove participation in ritual, cultural, and quasi-political activities. The final part of the paper illustrates this using an extended example of the response of the local population to the wreck of a ship off the coast of Dorset in 1641.

Peter Laslett declared, in the first edition of *The World We Have Lost*, that ‘the discovery of how great a proportion of the population could read and write at any point in time is one of the most urgent tasks which faces the historian of social structure, who is committed to the use of numerical methods’.² Roger Schofield, uniquely, knew how to unlock that conundrum and advance that agenda. Laslett recognised that pre-industrial England was a partially literate society, in which the elite had command of reading and writing while the common people, for the most part, did not. But he could not know—no one knew—how literacy was distributed across English society, how it varied by status, occupation, or geography, or how it changed over time. Laslett was also aware and was among the first to argue that literacy was strongly gendered (although he did not use that term). But apart from passing reference to brides and bridegrooms in Georgian and Victorian Yorkshire, he had no way to differentiate male and female literacy with any precision. It took Schofield’s social science imagination, his extraordinary knowledge of English archives, and his sure-handed statistical prowess, for evidence that was trustworthy to emerge.

I was fortunate to have Roger as a teacher in my first year as an undergraduate at Clare College. Unlike other dons of the 1960s, who seemed to favour heavy tweed, Roger wore a purple shirt and a fawn safari jacket. His supervisions in social and economic history were as revolutionary as his wardrobe, with chunks of the *Economic History Review* as well as tracts like *England's Treasure by Foreign Trade*. I was even more fortunate to have Roger Schofield as director of my doctoral research, exploring the social reach of education and literacy. I was

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² P. Laslett, *The World We Have Lost* (London, 1965), p. 195.

his first research student, and it was a new experience for both of us. (The Faculty Board intended to assign me to Laslett, but he was off globe-trotting, so they turned to his untried assistant.)

Roger taught me two indispensable words: ‘illuminate’ and ‘robust’. Rather than saying that a document or data *proved* such a thing he would say that it ‘illuminated’ a problem; and, rather than claiming that certain evidence was conclusive, he would call it ‘robust’. These were expressions of modesty as well as confidence, and they would shape his work on population as well as literacy. Roger’s ideas were always illuminating, and his judgements always robust. I am forever grateful to him as a teacher and a model historian. His cautious sense of probability and confidence was a welcome turn from the Rankeian positivism that dominated academic history.

Part of Roger’s initial portfolio at the Cambridge Group was to work out the demography of literacy: to identify sources to tackle Laslett’s question. It needed large bodies of material, susceptible to statistical analysis, that revealed whether people of certain sorts, in various circumstances, could or could not sign their names. Roger recognised from the start that this was a troublesome criterion, but it had the advantage, for international social science, of being ‘universal, standard, and direct’. If you tracked this simple binary—yes/no, signature or mark, literate or not—your figures could be comparable over country and region, reveal change over time, and, if the records were good enough, demonstrate differences between men and women, and men of varying status and occupation across the social structure.

There was no naivety about this focus on signatures and marks. Roger anticipated every objection that would subsequently be raised against the method. Critics repeatedly posited the possibility—though rarely with evidence—that some people learned or copied a signature but otherwise could not write. The counting of signatures, therefore, would *inflate* literacy estimates, masking the degree of functional analphabetism. More plausible was the argument that some people who could not sign their names nonetheless had some ability to read, and so could participate in England’s literate culture. Counts of signatures and marks, in this view, would *underestimate* functional literacy, skewing the figures in the opposite direction. Keith Thomas became the most widely quoted proponent of this position when he argued that figures based on marks and signatures ‘are not just an underestimate of those who could read, but a spectacular underestimate’.³ Thomas, as a cultural historian, sought to discriminate not only between reading and writing, but also between the forms of script and print, between abilities to decipher different kinds of script and different kinds of print, such as roman or black letter. The evidence he offered was anecdotal, devoid of numbers, but persuasive to those who believed that literacy was widespread, as proved by the example of Godly women and humble autobiographers. Reviewing this debate, with veiled reference to Thomas, Rab Houston criticised ‘superficial studies [that] highlight the

3 K. Thomas, ‘The meaning of literacy in early modern England’, in G. Bauman (ed.), *The Written Word: Literacy in Transition* (Oxford, 1986), pp. 97–131, here at p. 103.

problems with signatures in order to dismiss them as a viable indicator' without actually having worked with them.⁴ Others have observed that Roger's method collapses 'a wide spectrum of early modern literate practices into a single measure', and that women who wrote initials rather than marks or signatures probably possessed 'elementary reading literacy'.⁵ Most critics wanted a cultural reflector rather than a sociological indicator, and set themselves up to be disappointed.

Roger, of course, was ahead of these arguments, making the case himself that 'literacy' covered a wide spectrum of competence, that its gradations had broad cultural consequences, and that the inability to write a signature did not necessarily inhibit participation in economic, political, or religious affairs. Sensitive to objections, which Laslett had already raised in *The World We Have Lost*, he posited that the 'ability to sign was roughly equivalent to being able to read fluently'—a 'middle range measure' that was susceptible to extensive investigation.⁶

Much to the puzzlement of historians like Lawrence Stone, Roger's figures measured 'illiteracy'—sometimes referred to as 'analphabetism'—the absence of a scribal skill. One could show, over time, that the percentage of illiteracy halved, but it was harder to argue that literacy doubled.

Where, precisely, the signature/mark distinction fell along the literacy spectrum was less important to an historian of social structure than its utility as marker of social differentiation. The Cambridge Group, we should recall, was for the History of Population *and* Social Structure, although this second part of its mandate remained underdeveloped. The sources and methods Roger identified for studying literacy would not only yield summary statistics that answered Laslett's question, but would also make possible an unprecedented anatomy of the social structure of pre-industrial England. The project had payoffs that the fledgling Cambridge Group could not have anticipated.

The records that made this possible include attestations to the Protestation of 1642 and other vows and covenants of the English revolution, huge bundles of signed and marked oaths to the Association of 1696, similar returns to the Test Oath of 1723, and signed and marked registers following Lord Hardwicke's marriage act of 1753. The records of the ecclesiastical courts, some until the 1970s buried in the Principal Probate Registry at Somerset House, and others in regional diocesan archives, included signed and marked original wills, allegations and bonds for marriage licences, and, most important, the depositions of witness in thousands of testamentary, matrimonial, and defamation cases. Few historians before Roger were familiar with these records, and none had begun the task of exploiting them for social history. Handling them required expertise in palaeography,

4 R. Houston, *Literacy in Early Modern Europe*, 2nd edn (London, 2002), p. 134.

5 E. Hubbard, 'Reading, writing, and initialing: female literacy in early modern London', *Journal of British Studies*, 54 (2015), pp. 553–77, here at p. 556, <https://doi.org/10.1017/jbr.2015.61>.

6 R.S. Schofield, 'The measurement of literacy in pre-industrial England', in J. Goody (ed.), *Literacy in Traditional Societies* (Cambridge, 1968), pp. 311–25; R.S. Schofield, 'Dimensions of illiteracy, 1750–1850', *Explorations in Economic History*, 10 (1973), pp. 437–54, [https://doi.org/10.1016/0014-4983\(73\)90026-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/0014-4983(73)90026-0).

archival practice, post-mediaeval Latin, ecclesiastical law, and early modern politics, as well as non-parametric statistics. Roger, uniquely, possessed all these skills, having honed them in his work on Tudor finance with Geoffrey Elton. He also possessed uncommon mathematical and administrative ability, which would shine in his work at the Cambridge Group. What he lacked was time to cover the country and do all the research that the literacy project required, while also developing the history of population.

One solution to the logistical problem was sampling, in harness with ‘the English secret weapon’, the army of volunteer local historians who were willing to report on parish records. Statistically-sensitive sampling made manageable the great mass of data from over 10,000 marriage registers from the 1750s to the 1840s.⁷ The resultant sample of 274 parishes found 40 per cent of men illiterate in the mid eighteenth century, making minimal improvement, while illiteracy among women fell from just over 60 per cent to just below 50 per cent across the period. These were pioneering statistics, that could be linked to the Registrar General’s figures for illiteracy across the Victorian era. Since the ages of brides and bridegrooms were recorded, the figures could also be adjusted into school generations, to demonstrate the association of literacy and education over time.

A further sample within the sample revealed, for the first time, the social and occupational hierarchy of literacy in 23 parishes, where some 65 per cent of the labourers and servants, 56 per cent of husbandmen, but only 18 per cent of yeomen and farmers could not sign their names. Published in *Explorations in Economic History* in 1973, this would be a lasting legacy, but also Roger’s final contribution to the ‘literacy’ debate.⁸

The other solution to overload was delegation. As Roger’s first research student, and later as a publishing scholar, I followed the path that he set out, at least for the period of the Tudors and Stuarts. Through extensive sampling of depositions before church courts in the dioceses of London and Norwich, Exeter and Durham, I developed figures comparing the literacy of men and women, and men of different occupations, over a 150-year period. It took 33 tables and 17 graphs in *Literacy and the Social Order* to demonstrate that two thirds of the men and 90 per cent of the women in pre-Civil War England made marks rather than signatures, and that change took place more quickly at some times than others.⁹ These figures, one may say, are ‘robust’. They, too, could be rearranged by generations, to show correlations of illiteracy, education, and the wider cultural and political environment. A marked social gradient emerged, with the gentle and clerical elite fully literate, and a discernable shading from clean, indoor and prestigious occupations to people in rougher outdoor trades. London, of course, was precocious, and may have been a literacy magnet, but 35 per cent of the yeomen in rural East Anglia could not sign, 79 per cent of the husbandmen, and 85 per cent of labourers. From across the occupational hierarchy 10 per cent of the grocers and haberdashers appeared illiterate, 38 per cent of the brewers and

7 R.S. Schofield, ‘Sampling in historical research’, in E.A. Wrigley (ed.), *Nineteenth-Century Society: Essays in the Use of Quantitative Methods for the Study of Social Data* (Cambridge, 1972), pp. 146–90.

8 Schofield, ‘Dimensions of illiteracy’.

9 D. Cressy, *Literacy and the Social Order* (Cambridge, 1980).

maltsters, and more than 80 per cent of fishermen and shepherds. The different attainments of yeomen and husbandmen were especially interesting, because some historians conflated them into a single socio-economic group. Some of these new data emerged from slide-rules and hand-crank calculators, and packing of IBM cards into DEC-10 computing machines. Some of my footnotes cited regression analyses, non-parametric tests, and standard deviations, which I have long since forgotten how to calculate. The research design was Roger's, as were its statistical underpinnings, and my debt to him is profound and long lasting.

There is more to do on literacy, and Roger would surely have wanted it done. The outlines are clear, but its local, transactional, and ecological dimensions have barely been explored. Nor has the evidence of signature literacy been linked enough with other sets of records, such as those associated with family reconstitution and inventories. We still need to know how literacy operated among kindred groups and work environments, and how it was sustained or improved locally across generations. Micro-analysis and neighbourhood mapping might connect literacy to other kinds of cultural, economic, and demographic indicators—involving social mobility, kinship, and prosperity—of the kind that Steve Hindle is developing for Chilvers Colton, Warwickshire.¹⁰

The Protestation Returns of 1642 and the Association Oath Rolls of 1696 still have untapped potential, particularly if they are linked to other records. My tabulation in *Literacy and the Social Order* summarised information from over 40,000 subscribers to the Protestation in more than 400 parishes, and found an overall male illiteracy of 70 per cent. But the local variations are intriguing and mysterious. Usable returns survive from 28 parishes each in Huntingdonshire and Sussex, 39 in Devon, 48 in Lincolnshire, 49 in Nottinghamshire, and a phenomenal 116 in Cornwall, all waiting to be linked to parish registers, manor court rolls, churchwardens' accounts, quarter sessions, and other local materials. Signed or marked subscriptions survive from almost 16,000 men in Cornwall, yielding an illiteracy rate of 72 per cent, but local parish levels varied from 47 per cent to 92 per cent. What to make of this, and how to relate it to economic and demographic structures, religion, or educational provision, remains a puzzle. I tried to make sense of similar variations among just 16 parishes in seventeenth-century Essex, but the micro-mapping of literacy for most of England has yet to be attempted.¹¹ A rare start in this direction was reported by Anne Whiteman and Vivian Russell for Penwith Hundred, Cornwall, in *Local Population Studies* in 1996.¹²

The Association Oath returns from the reign of William III have received even less attention. Their national coverage is patchy, but they survive in bulk for 215 Suffolk parishes, where the marks and signatures of more than 10,000 male residents indicate an

10 S. Hindle. 'Work, reward and labour discipline in late seventeenth-century England', in S. Hindle, A. Shepard and J. Walter (eds), *Remaking English Society: Social Relations and Social Change in Early Modern England* (Woodbridge, 2013), pp. 255–79.

11 Cressy, *Literacy and the Social Order*, pp. 77–96.

12 A. Whiteman and V. Russell, 'The Protestation Returns, 1641–1642: part II, partial census or snapshot? Some evidence from Penwith Hundred, Cornwall', *Local Population Studies*, 56 (1996), pp. 17–29.

overall illiteracy level of 53 per cent. The manuscripts are in The National Archives, for anyone who wants to link them to parish registers, court appearances, inventories, and other kinds of documentation.¹³

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Forty years on, we might have done it differently. Research questions change, as do styles of scholarship. Roger himself moved from the Tudor Exchequer to the distribution of wealth, from literacy to population, from constitutional history to demography, and my attention too has turned to other topics. The once 'new' social history drew energy from sociology and then from social anthropology, while later generations have been touched by literary historicism and cultural studies. Some of us are fascinated by language, and find discursive analysis and micro-narration a path to the past. An historian today might be more interested in social dynamics than social structure, more attentive to the cultural performance of birth, marriage and death than indices of fertility, nuptiality and mortality. We might be more interested in the meanings and uses of literacy than its social distribution. Literacy matters because it marked a hinge-point between the world of orality and the world of text, between cultures of memory and cultures of record, between fleeting imagination and documented expression. Roger knew this, but it is worth saying again.

Reading depositions today we might be more interested in telling stories than in counting crosses. Instead of sampling to skim off the metadata, we might dive into the discourse to probe the frictions of family life and the stresses of community relations. Fragments of testimony illuminate literacy in action, as individuals engaged with news, information, religion, authority, and each other, with or without the ability to read or write. Stories also make possible a more rounded social history that illuminates people's self-presentation, sociability, beliefs, and material setting. They remind us that the people we study were breathing, bleeding individuals who negotiated the challenges of faith, allegiance, ideology, and livelihood within environments of social, cultural, and economic stress. We can strain to hear their voices, and tell their tales.

One such story concerns the yeoman Richard Higginson of Aston iuxta Sutton, Cheshire, who complained in January 1642 that Edward Leadbetter owed him 27s., and that he had 'notes' to guarantee the payment thereof. He was cheated of his money, so Higginson claimed, when one of Leadbetter's friends took the notes to read, 'and knowing this examine could not read, delivered him two other papers which did neither concern this examine nor the business'.¹⁴ Richard Higginson was immersed in a world of cash and paper transactions, like most yeomen who farmed for the market, but his illiteracy let him down. He belonged to that substantial third of mid-Stuart yeomen judged illiterate because they could not write their names, and he signed his testimony with a cross. We could blend

13 The National Archives (hereafter TNA), C 213/264.

14 Cheshire Record Office, Quarter Sessions Rolls, QJF/71/1, f. 27.

this evidence into data on the social distribution of illiteracy, or use it to launch a micro-historical examination of neighbourly relations involving credit, cash, and fraud. We could also cite it as an example of signature/mark illiteracy matching an anecdotal assessment of the inability to read. Thousands of individuals, including some parish constables, lived on the fringes of literacy, or lacked its assets, without obvious handicap to their navigation of their lives.

An expanded range of sources—including state papers and court records as well as parish registers—brings together a wider range of information. We might add ballads, libels, and literature to the mix. A voraciously eclectic social history meshes national issues with local experience, exposing the interactions of rulers and subjects, elite and populace, men and women, within the larger dramas of the widening world. This is where the politics of the parish intersect the history of the nation, where social, cultural, and political history come together.

Such work, we would hope, would be demographically aware, attuned to quantitative as well as qualitative methods. It shifts attention from the generic to the specific, from patterns to particulars, from the countable, perhaps, to the inscrutable. An outstanding contribution in this vein is Keith Wrightson's *Ralph Taylor's Summer: a Scrivener, his City and the Plague* on 1630s Newcastle (the contemporary relevance of this nobody could have guessed).¹⁵ My own *Birth, Marriage and Death*, and its follow-up *Travesties and Transgressions*, trace dramas of the life-cycle in dozens of parishes, each illuminating local populations in action.¹⁶

Other work treats local history dynamically, when whole communities, or large sections of populations, were involved in social manifestations. They might be protesting against enclosures, like villagers in the Forest of Dean or the Cambridgeshire fens; rioting over grain scarcity, like the Colchester plunderers in the reign of Charles I; or parading with garlands, hobby horses, and cudgels, like mock combatants in Wiltshire parishes.¹⁷ Documented mobilisations of this sort expose some of the stresses of the social order. As local social dramas, they illuminate local legal cultures, and what John Walter has called the 'law-mindedness' of 'the ruder sort' in early modern England.¹⁸ They expose some of the intangibles of ideology, religion, and morality to which literacy only gestures. Linking these records to other local sources may reveal how kinship, neighbourliness, or economic associations drove participation in ritual, cultural, and quasi-political activities.

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- 15 K. Wrightson, *Ralph Taylor's Summer: A Scrivener, his City and the Plague* (New Haven and London, 2011).
16 D. Cressy, *Birth, Marriage and Death: Ritual, Religion and the Life Cycle in Tudor and Stuart England* (Oxford, 1997); D. Cressy, *Travesties and Transgressions in Tudor and Stuart England: Tales of Discord and Dissension* (Oxford, 2000), alternatively titled *Agnes Bowker's Cat* (Oxford, 2001).
17 B. Sharp, *In Contempt of All Authority: Rural Artisans and Riot in the West of England, 1586–1660* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1980); D. Underdown, *Revel, Riot, and Rebellion: Popular Politics and Culture in England 1603–1660* (Oxford, 1985); J. Walter, *Understanding Popular Violence in the English Revolution: the Colchester Plunderers* (Cambridge, 1999); A. Wood, *The Politics of Social Conflict: the Peak Country, 1520–1770* (Cambridge, 1999); D. Cressy, *Charles I and the People of England* (Oxford, 2015), pp. 46–51.
18 J. Walter, '“Law-mindedness”: crowds, courts, and popular knowledge of the law in early modern England', in M. Lobban, J. Begiato, and A. Green (eds), *Law, Lawyers and Litigants in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2019), pp. 164–84. See also P. Rushton, 'Local laws, local principles: the paradoxes of local legal processes in early modern England', in Lobban *et al.*, *Law, Lawyers and Litigants*, pp. 185–206.

A remarkable body of testimony, that may move us in that direction, comes from the depictions of villagers who were involved in the salvage and plunder of shipwrecks. Examination of these sources sheds new light on relations within early modern coastal populations, and challenges some historiographical nostrums.

Scholarship on this topic begins with John Rule's 1975 essay on 'Wrecking and coastal plunder', which is beholden to E.P. Thompson's concept of 'The moral economy of the English crowd'.¹⁹ More recent work includes Cathryn Pearce on *Cornish Wrecking 1700–1860*, and the medievalist Tom Johnson on 'Shipwrecks, finders, and property on the Suffolk coast, ca. 1380–1410'.²⁰ These studies rely primarily on complaints by merchants and magistrates, and presentments in manorial courts, rather than admiralty commissions of enquiry. If little is known of the social dynamics of wrecking in the early modern period, it may be because most of the manors, parishes, and communities so far studied are inland, and nothing has been published on the moral economy of the sixteenth- or seventeenth-century coastline. The marine-inflected cultures of Stokenham, Devon, Wyke Regis, Dorset, and Seaford, Sussex, for example, may well have been different from places like Earls Colne, Terling, Colyton, or Chilvers Colton.

More than 700,000 tons of commercial shipping plied English waters in the early seventeenth century, and as much as 5 per cent of this lading went amiss through shipwreck.²¹ Opportunities abounded for coastal inhabitants to acquire wrecked cargo and ship's fittings, and to receive rewards for assistance in salvage. Particularly dangerous stretches of coastline—around much of Cornwall and Devon, Deadman's Bay Dorset, the killer cliffs of Sussex and Kent, and the shipwreck shores of Winterton Norfolk—saw maritime catastrophes by the dozen. Each wreck meant disaster for merchants and mariners, but opportunities for people on shore.

A wreck was a test of law and order, and of community discipline and cohesion, as wealth transferred from the sea to the land. Claimants for the goods of shipwrecks included the crown and its assigns, admirals and vice-admirals, lords of coastal manors, a variety of other droit-holders, and agents for the original shippers. Allocations of *wreccum maris* partly

19 E.P. Thompson, 'The moral economy of the English crowd in the eighteenth century', *Past and Present*, 50 (1971), pp. 76–136, <https://doi.org/10.1093/past/50.1.76>; J. Rule, 'Wrecking and coastal plunder', in D. Hay, P. Linebaugh, J.G. Rule, E.P. Thompson, and C. Winslow (eds), *Albion's Fatal Tree: Crime and Society in Eighteenth-Century England* (London, 1975), pp. 168–88; see also J. Rule, 'Smuggling and wrecking', in P. Payton, A. Kennerley, and H. Doe (eds), *The Maritime History of Cornwall* (Exeter, 2014), pp. 195–208.

20 C. Pearce, *Cornish Wrecking 1700-1860* (Woodbridge, 2010); T. Johnson, 'Medieval law and materiality: shipwrecks, finders, and property on the Suffolk coast, ca. 1380–1410', *American Historical Review*, 120 (2015), pp. 407–32, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ahr/120.2.407>.

21 R. Davis, *The Rise of the English Shipping Industry in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (London, 1962), pp. 7, 10 and 15; R.W. Unger, 'The tonnage of Europe's merchant fleets, 1300-1800', in R.W. Unger (ed.), *Ships and Shipping in the North Sea and Atlantic, 1400–1800* (Aldershot and Brookfield, VT, 1997), pp. 253–6, 260–1; D.D. Hebb, 'Profiting from misfortune: corruption and the Admiralty under the early Stuarts', in T. Cogswell, R. Cust and P. Lake (eds), *Politics, Religion and Popularity in Early Stuart Britain. Essays in Honour of Conrad Russell* (Cambridge, 2002), p. 105.

depended on how the law was interpreted, whether there were survivors, and whether the so-called 'barbarous country people' stripped everything first.²²

Interested parties, often aggrieved merchants, could request a commission of enquiry into the circumstances and aftermath of a shipwreck, in hope of retrieving their property and validating their claims. Lords of manors contested with their neighbours over boundaries, rights, and customs. Meeting under the authority of the Lord High Admiral, often through deputies of the county Vice-Admiral, these commissions followed procedures of the civil law, with written interrogatories and notarized depositions. Roger would have been fascinated by their records, which closely match those of the ecclesiastical courts that shed such important light on literacy. Admiralty depositions record the name, age, sex, occupation, and residence of witnesses to shipwreck salvage. Signatures and marks are only rarely attached, but their lack is more than offset by details telling how people behaved, what they saved, who they worked with, and what they did with the loot. Many of the documents are filed with records of the High Court of Admiralty in The National Archives, though others are attached to lesser admiralty jurisdictions, such as that of the Duchy of Lancaster, the Warden of the Cinque Ports, and the Bishop of Chichester.

One of the richest sets of records concerns the wreck of the Anglo-Dutch freighter *Golden Grape*, that was cast away on the coast of Dorset in December 1641 with a cargo worth £10,000. Seven crewmen drowned, and one died of his injuries, but at least 12 survived to lament their lost goods as, said one of them, 'the people of the country...by force and violence took and carried the same way'.²³ Chesil Beach took on the trappings of a three-day midwinter fair, as scavengers ransacked the lading of Spanish raisins, olive oil, bales of silk, and silver bullion, and traded their goods with buyers from the hinterland.

A commission of enquiry a month later produced 118 folios of testimony from 343 witnesses, identifying 547 individuals involved in the plunder. They represent wreckers from the villages of Abbotsbury, Langton Herring, Fleet, Chickerell, and Wyke Regis, adjacent to Chesil Beach, with assistance from Weymouth, Portland, and other parishes further inland. Linking these records to Dorset Protestations shows that 93 per cent of the adult males of Chickerell participated in the wreck of the *Golden Grape*, 75 per cent of the men of Fleet and Langton Herring, 66 per cent of Wyke Regis, and 25 per cent of larger and more distant Abbotsbury.

Those involved were a cross-section of Dorset coastal society. They included 84 husbandmen and 26 yeomen, 66 sailors and 59 fishermen, plus 32 servants and nine labourers. Thirty-three of the deponents were masons from the Isle of Portland quarries, the rest a mixture of tradesmen and craftsmen, bakers, blacksmiths, carpenters, tailors, thatchers,

22 The early modern law of wreck followed 3 Edward I (1275) and 27 Edward III stat. 2, c. 13 (1354). The Privy Council proposed a proclamation in 1633 against 'the barbarous custom of rifling and robbing of ships cast away upon the coast', that was mainly concerned to preserve wreck revenue for the crown, TNA, SP 16/248, f. 53v.

23 TNA, HCA 13/244/149. A satisfactory transcription appears in S. Williams, *Treasure of the Golden Grape 11th December 1641. A Chesil Beach Wreck* (Dorchester, 2012), pp. 172–274.

and the like. Men of authority stood mostly on the sidelines, but one gentleman, two clerics, and a surgeon gave testimony, and other members of the elite were named in witness statements. Eleven of the deponents were women, and at least 27 other women were mentioned as handling or hiding shipwrecked goods, carrying raisins in their aprons, or trading in minor booty.

Salvagers often worked in teams of kinsmen, friends and servants to remove material in bulk from the beach. An informal hierarchy rapidly emerged, based on social authority and the command of equipment, with shipwrecked goods traded as an informal currency. One group used a horse-drawn plough as an improvised vehicle. Others arrived by wagon or by boat. 'Consortships' of four to eight men were common, hiring or appropriating the equipment they needed, paying for labour with goods from the ship, and engaging other villagers to keep stashes safe 'that they might not be stolen away'. The records reveal local rivalries as well as solidarities, with residents of Wyke Regis guarding their gear from the men of Abbotsbury, Chickerill husbandmen competing with the stonemasons of Portland, and women assisting as go-betweens. More might be learned about their demography, kinship, and wealth. A network analysis might reveal clusters and connections, if only I knew how to perform it. A map would show the places whence wreckers came, in what numbers, and where they distributed their findings. A composite narrative of their exploits and interactions could animate the drama on the beach, where wreck survivors, local officials, and opportunistic plunderers vied for attention. My work on this, and on similar records from other shipwrecks, is only beginning.

It may pay to pause here to consider what would Roger Schofield do? He would, of course, be curious and helpful, and would warn of the pitfalls and potentials of the evidence. He might well ask, 'what are you trying to find out?' If I answered that I wanted to see how a community behaved in a moment of stressful opportunity, and how that illuminated its social structure, he might then wonder, 'is that an answerable question?'. Next would come suggestions about sources, and the skills, tools, and methods needed to exploit them. Roger was skilled in developing data, aware of its limitations, and always open to fresh questions.

How did coastal villagers behave when a merchantman wrecked on their shore? Did they become a 'barbarous rabble' of 'insolent ruffians', as contemporary commentary would have it? Was crowd behaviour on the shipwreck beach a form of social resistance or redress, an unlicensed contribution to the economy of makeshift, as some eighteenth-century historians suggest? Did a shipwreck precipitate a breakdown of law and authority, a descent into savagery, as the wreck literature sometimes supposes? Or did participants preserve the protocols of hierarchy, deference, and charity that their clergy instilled in them? What were the social, economic, gendered (and indeed, demographic) aspects of wreck recovery? How much wealth changed hands, of what kind, and how was it distributed? What can be learned about community cooperation, neighbourliness, and competition, from these depositions? And what do they reveal of discursive strategies, of language in action, as participants explained themselves to admiralty officials? More questions and suggestions would be welcome.

In December 1641 the *Golden Grape's* cargo of raisins, olive oil, and textiles came ashore by the cartload, and was quickly dispersed to the hinterland. Its sails, ordnance, and anchors were claimed for admiralty officials. Surviving crewmen prioritized the recovery of bullion. Villagers took custody of saleable or consumable commodities, and helped themselves to useful items, tools, ship's fittings, maritime debris, and the former possessions of seamen. One claimed a shirt with a letter in the sleeve, another pair of canvas breeches with a knife still in it, an old red waistcoat, and eighteen rows of buttons. The yeoman Jennings Attwooll took 'a flag belonging to the said ship, an astrolabe, a cross-staff, and a quadrant, which he hath in his custody, as also two jars of oil and a small quantity of wet raisins'.²⁴ Several had accidents in the process.

Richer pickings could be found among the treasure that the ship was carrying in secret to the Netherlands. The husbandman Nicholas Bussell found a bag of Spanish coin 'in which he doth conceive there are about two hundred pieces of eight' (each worth about 4s. 6d.). The fisherman Thomas Evans found 'a little purse of money wherein he conceiveth there were about twenty pieces of foreign money', but said that other scavengers took it from him by force. Pieces of eight washed through the local economy, most of them unaccountable. Susanna Grey, the wife of an alehouse keeper, had 'an old brass kettle, a ladle, and an hundred pieces of eight' from the wreck, which she reckoned her due for lodging some of the survivors. A woolen draper of Melcombe Regis accepted pieces of eight in payment, and brokered their exchange for English money. One hundred and fifty pieces of eight were hidden in one witness's garden, but when he looked there were only 45 left, and where the rest went 'this deponent knoweth not'. It was an ill wind that blew nobody any good, and the *Golden Grape* gave a windfall boost to the local economy.

Cited before Admiralty commissioners, threatened by the law, the witnesses sought to minimise their criminality. Most acknowledged taking goods from the beach, though only for safe keeping, so they said, until lawful authority arrived. Few could remember how items came into their custody, or what subsequently happened to them. One had three barrels of raisins in his house, but could not say how they got there. Another had eight barrels, but 'doth not know who put them there or carried them thence'. Others claimed that items they had saved had since been stolen, 'by who they know not', or sold to 'one whose name he knoweth not'. A cloud of amnesia descended, as the villagers practiced 'calculated deference'.²⁵

The depositions reveal instances of intimidation and theft, but little overt violence, no 'barbarity'. Rather than a disordered frenzy, they depict a determined communal effort to take what the sea offered. Salvagers treated the survivors with courtesy, worked collaboratively with neighbours, and deferred to men in authority. The wrecking was much less

24 TNA, HCA 13/244/149.

25 For 'calculated deference' see J. Walter, 'Public transcripts, popular agency and the politics of subsistence in early modern England' in M.J. Braddick and J. Walter (eds), *Negotiating Power in Early Modern Society: Order, Hierarchy and Subordination in Britain and Ireland* (Cambridge, 2001), p. 131; B. Waddell, *God, Duty and Community in English Economic Life, 1660–1729* (Woodbridge, 2012), pp. 10–11.

confrontational than the literature would lead us to expect. Representatives of the vice-admiral directed some of the salvage, while the lords of the manors of Abbotsbury and Fleet upheld their prescriptive rights. The social order may have been stressed, but was by no means broken. Villagers knew that custom tolerated their scavenging, even if the law did not. They also knew that they would suffer no penalty if they acknowledged having items in their custody, and showed willingness to hand them over if asked. The 'moral economy' of the south Dorset wreckers supplemented their economy of makeshift, but it also underwrote the profits of landlords and governors. Gentlemen droit-holders and admiralty officials always reaped more from shipwrecks than villagers on the shore.

Roger Schofield identified depositions as keys to literacy and social structure, susceptible to quantitative representation. Closer reading of such sources shows not just how local populations were configured but how they behaved. Illuminating a host of community interactions, they reveal some of the social dramas that underlie our tables and graphs. Can the data of local historical demography be similarly energised and enlivened?