

Welford and Weston Local History Society

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Newsletter 81 – August 10th, 2022

'Welford & Weston 1300-1550, people coping through hard times'

A talk by Prof Chris Dyer

30 September 2022, at 7:30 pm

The period (1300 -1550) has acquired a very bleak reputation, mainly because of a succession of disasters: famine (1315-17), plagues (1348-9, 1362, and later), the onset of the little ice age (after 1400) the great depression (1430-70), civil war, especially the Wars of the Roses (1455-85), and wars against France and Scotland. And there were longer term miseries of farming with variable soils and unpredictable weather, social inequality, family breakdown, oppression by lords and the difficulties of survival with endemic disease, deprivation, and poor living conditions leading to early death. Some villages were left uninhabited. The historians who depict this period as doom-laden and gloomy forget that people habitually find ways of resisting adversity and making the best of difficult conditions.



This image from Worcester Cathedral, shows Adam & Eve, who are represented as a peasant couple of c.1380.

Welford and Weston people faced all of the problems outlined here and could live with hope and purpose. We know most about them in 1413- 1451 when court records survive. In this talk we see the way they adapted their farming to new conditions, families worked together for the good of the household, and neighbours co-operated to protect common fields from selfish individuals. They organised work on common assets like the parish church, and mended the roads. They took advantage of opportunities to sell produce and buy consumer goods in local markets. The village poor were given some help, but for most of the period, cottagers could gain employment and gain quite high wages. For most of the period, people ate adequately, and were living in well-built houses. Young people moved about, so the villages saw people leaving but they were often replaced by newcomers. Welford was not full of the depressed and demoralised, but by people seeking to make the best of their lives, despite adverse circumstances.

Christopher Dyer (our Society President) was born and brought up in Welford, in a house opposite the school. He attended the primary school, and then King Edward VI Stratford upon Avon. He did history degrees at Birmingham University, and has taught at Birmingham, after a time at the University of Edinburgh (where one of his students was the future prime minister, Gordon Brown). In 2001 he moved to become head of the Centre for English Local History at the University of Leicester. He became involved in archaeological excavations at Alcester in 1956, and has continued ever since to combine archaeological with written evidence. His several books include *Making a Living in the Middle Ages, the People of Britain 850-1520; An Age of Transition?;* and *A Country Merchant*. He has published many articles and contributions to books on social, economic and landscape history, and archaeology. He has edited learned journals, and has served as chairman and president of various historical and archaeological societies. He has written for widely circulated journals such as *History Today*, and has appeared on TV (recently with Michael Wood) and has ambitions to communicate with a non-specialist audience. His new book, *Peasants Making History*, which is about the West Midlands, was published by Oxford University Press in June. Details, including a special offer, are available from Brad Plimmer.

I am very pleased to say that this talk will be available to people attending in person in the village Memorial Hall, as well as available remotely via Zoom. The choice is yours.

You will receive an email from Karen Dickinson, inviting you to join this meeting, about a week before the meeting itself. This email is being sent to all members, whether or not you will be going to the Hall or viewing remotely via Zoom. Please check in your junk folder if you don't receive it. **On the evening** of the talk, you will be able to join the meeting by Zoom from 19:00. The talk itself will start at 19:30. If you are fairly new to Zoom, I would encourage you to join the meeting early, so that if you experience a problem, you'll have time to call Karen Dickinson (on 07970 179821), and get it sorted out before the talk starts at 19:30. If you are going to attend in person, the doors of the Memorial Hall, are open from 19:10. We look forward to welcoming you to what promises to be another great talk.

Kind regards, Brad Plimmer 10th August, 2022.