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# Chapter 5

## **The fighting men of Essex: service relationships and the poll tax**

*Sam Gibbs*

Essex in the late fourteenth century was a place of change. The Black Death was a primary cause of immense demographic dislocation and accompanying shifts in economic, social and political structures. Experiences were not uniform across England, however, and in many ways Essex stands out as atypical, which make it an interesting area for a case study of the service relationships between the men who served as archers and their retinue captains. The county had a tendency towards violent agrarian unrest (notably its involvement in the Peasants' Revolt of 1381), a high population density in some areas, an unusually developed cloth industry in both urban and rural areas, a large degree of social and economic differentiation and an inclination towards religious nonconformity.<sup>1</sup> Even the Black Death does not appear to have had the effects on landholding that were experienced in other areas of the country.<sup>2</sup> These factors make Essex different from other regions within England and its communities' experiences make it a unique area in which to study the relationships between archers and captains, and the archers' place within society.

Alongside the socio-economic and political changes that were taking place in England during the late medieval period, the English military system was also undergoing a period of flux, which saw a shift from the 'feudal'-style army that was frequently used in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries to one based almost solely on contracts of indenture, a development that changed the basis of recruitment from tenurial landed obligations to contracted paid service.<sup>3</sup> Essex's most renowned medieval soldier, Sir John Hawkwood, is a prime example of an English soldier fighting for financial reward. From his modest background – he was born in Sible Hedingham to a tanner – he rose to become one of the premier mercenary captains in Europe, spending the majority of his lengthy career fighting on the battlefields of Italy.<sup>4</sup> However, his career was exceptional

among English soldiers in that he spent most of it fighting as a mercenary with foreign forces, not in the English armies, and therefore his experience of medieval warfare will not be analysed as a part of this study. Instead, the focus will be upon the experience of the archers who served in the English armies, their socio-economic backgrounds and their service relationships with their social superiors, the retinue captains who recruited them.<sup>5</sup>

Historical research into service relationships has focused on those towards the top of the social scale, which in a military context has meant the men-at-arms. These relationships could encompass a wide variety of different interactions, ranging from the formal obligations that might tie a tenant to a landlord to the informal connections that individuals might make through shared experiences of military service.

Those of lower status are seen only in association with men of gentry rank and above, rather than as a group in their own right. This is one of the unfortunate effects of the bias of surviving sources, which has left the historian with greater volumes of evidence for those of higher socio-economic status, whose activities are better recorded. This trend is also evident when considering the military community of England. The historiography has focused on the upper echelons of society, the men who fought as men-at-arms, rather than on the archers. This study will contribute to correcting this imbalance and will focus on the county of Essex in considering the relationships between the archers and the retinue captains who made contracts, known as indentures, for service with the crown, and who were mostly drawn from the landowning class. Furthermore, the archers' 'civilian' lives will be studied: the lack of a permanent standing army suggests that these men would have needed to find non-military employment when not actively serving if they were to avoid dependence on charity or crime. As a group, the archers will be contrasted with the non-military section of Essex society to determine if there are any differences between the two groups in terms of occupational structure or (using tax paid as an indicator of wealth) economic standing.

### **Sources and method**

There has been little investigation of the men who formed the bulk of the English armies – the archers who, over the period 1369–1417, outnumbered the men-at-arms mustered by a ratio of 2:1.<sup>6</sup> The archers' legendary successes in battle have focused academic attention on the technology used and the strategy and tactics employed by them and their captains. This has come at the expense of research into the men themselves, whose non-military lives have been largely ignored.<sup>7</sup> There are issues with the evidentiary base for a study of archers, not least that they were men of low social status without the wealth or standing to appear frequently in the surviving documents.<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, there

are several sources, notably the residential, occupational and economic data from the three late fourteenth-century poll tax returns and data from military sources, that can be used to undertake a wide-ranging prosopographical study. Using a clearly defined method allows this subject to be approached with confidence, and a correlation between the sources reveals the hitherto murky civilian world of the English archers.

With its focus on the archers in the Essex military community, this study contributes to an area of historiography that has developed greatly since the late twentieth century, leading to a large body of work using relational databases to assist in the analysis of large datasets connected to military service, ranging from Bell's exploration of the 1387 and 1388 English naval expeditions<sup>9</sup> to the comprehensive 'Soldier in Later Medieval England' database, which contains around 250,000 service records, including the muster rolls for 1369–1453.<sup>10</sup> The database formed the basis of an in-depth volume, *The Soldier in Later Medieval England*, which considers what this large data source can reveal about military service.<sup>11</sup> Other examples of the use of relational databases to undertake prosopographical analysis include the work by Ayton and Lambert on the men who served as mariners in the later fourteenth century and the ships and shipping that military expeditions required.<sup>12</sup> Yet, despite this increased interest, there is not yet been a full investigation of the ordinary fighting men, the archers, who have been considered 'unidentifiable' on an individual basis.<sup>13</sup> However, although few archers have left enough evidence to construct a complete biography after the fashion of leading military figures, a prosopographical analysis is a possibility, as demonstrated by the studies noted earlier.

Although the archers are the focus of this study, it is not directly concerned with their military activities. Instead, their motivations for undertaking military service and their socio-economic backgrounds, including their occupations, are considered. To this end, the poll tax returns of 1377, 1379 and 1381 are an ideal source and are something of a rarity for medieval historians – a large nominal dataset. Despite the vast amount of raw data contained within the returns – a total of 264,350 names – until relatively recently its potential has been largely ignored or dismissed by historians. Even studies concerned with demography, such as S.L. Thrupp's *The Merchant Class of Medieval London*, are dismissive of the returns, asserting that 'the schedule is so faulty that it cannot represent anything more than a preliminary survey; if the collectors had proceeded on this basis, they would have touched barely half their final total.'<sup>14</sup> This is typical of the evidentiary criticisms that have been made of the returns. A notable exception, however, is Fenwick's unpublished PhD thesis, 'The English Poll Taxes of 1377, 1379 and 1381'.<sup>15</sup> Of particular interest is the chapter evaluating the returns as a source, examining the weaknesses that had been highlighted by previous historians and to a great extent neutralising them.

Fenwick makes a cautious, yet comprehensive, case for the evidentiary value of the returns as a historical source. For example, a prevalent criticism of the poll tax returns was their demographic deficiencies, primarily the lack of single people, apprentices and, particularly notably, women, which were allegedly caused by corruption or incompetence on the part of the assessors. Fenwick noted that many of these people would be missing because these groups would often lack the wealth required to be liable for the tax.<sup>16</sup>

In addition to Fenwick's crucial analysis, a number of other published works are relevant to the present article. For example, Poos' study of Essex between the late fourteenth and early sixteenth centuries uses a sample of the extant poll tax return data to gain some insight into the demographic and occupational structure of Essex in 1381, as well as considering some of the evidentiary issues in greater depth.<sup>17</sup> Other publications, especially those concerned with women's history, also use the returns, as they are one of the few sources that record much detail about women of the lower social classes. There are also two case studies: the first, dealing with New Romney in Kent, examines the returns as a source for the town's social structure.<sup>18</sup> The second considers the demographic structure of the county of Buckinghamshire at the time of the poll taxes.<sup>19</sup> Of more direct relevance to this present research is Baker's study on the origins of English archers, which goes into some depth in considering the issues that surround the use of the poll tax records, particularly when identifying archers.<sup>20</sup> Nevertheless, despite the importance of the returns, there is no established methodology for employing them within a large relational database.<sup>21</sup>

As well as the poll tax returns, the muster rolls constitute an important source. These were created as a part of the indenture system which by the late fourteenth century had almost wholly replaced previous methods of raising soldiers. Instead of being based on any obligations relating to tenure of land, the indenture system in its simplest form relied on individual captains agreeing to provide a certain number of soldiers, for a certain period of time, in exchange for predetermined wages. The muster rolls are the records kept by Exchequer officials certifying that the retinue captains had indeed arrived at the start of their agreed period of service with the correct number and quality of soldiers. This step in the recruitment process has yielded vast amounts of nominal data concerning individuals who would not often appear in other sources. The musters not only contain the names of those who fought but also record how the army was divided into different retinues and how each retinue was further divided into men-at-arms and archers. They can also provide information on social status, promotions, replacements and mortality rates.<sup>22</sup> This information has already been used to create career profiles of individuals, including one archer, Robert de Fishlake.<sup>23</sup> Fishlake gave testimony in the *Hastings v. Grey*