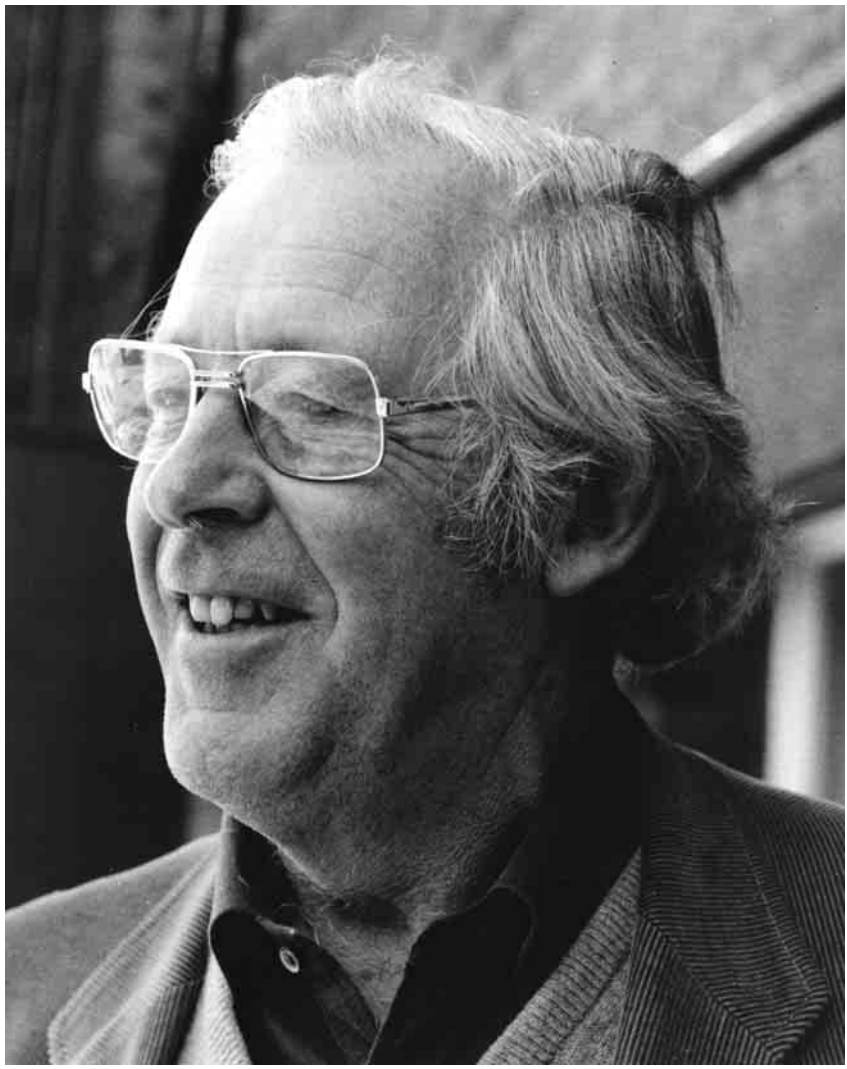

RODNEY HILTON

Rodney Howard Hilton
1916–2002

RODNEY HILTON, born on 17 November 1916, was brought up in Middleton, near Manchester, and throughout his life his speech retained traces of his Lancashire origins. His grandfather had lived in Samuel Bamford's former cottage, and his family believed that their radical heritage went back to Peterloo. His parents, John James Hilton and Anne Howard Hilton, were active in the Independent Labour Party, and their son followed in their path of political dissent. His father had worked as a manager for the local Co-operative Society, but was killed in a road accident when Rodney Hilton was very young; his mother, who took an active part in local civic life, had an especially strong influence on him. Her fondness for her youngest son meant that she much regretted his departure from home, and feared that he would take up 'foreign ideas' in Oxford. He nonetheless excelled at Manchester Grammar School and gained a scholarship to Balliol, Oxford.

As a history undergraduate between 1935 and 1938 he was attracted to the medieval period by the teaching of two outstanding Balliol scholars, Vivian Galbraith and Richard Southern, and he also came into contact with Maurice Powicke. He began a life-long friendship with Christopher Hill, who encouraged his political and intellectual commitment to the Left.[1] His contemporaries as students included Edward Heath, who

[1] The information about his early life is based on Rodney Hilton's and Tim Hilton's reminiscences; T. Hilton, *One More Kilometre and We're in the Showers* (London, 2004), pp. 1–5; E. Lemon (ed.), *The Balliol College Register* (Oxford, 1969), p. 237; R. G. C. Levens (ed.), *Merton College Register 1900–1964* (Oxford, 1964), p. 300; *Interviews with Historians* (a recording of an interview with John Hatcher) (Institute of Historical Research, University of London, 1990).

Proceedings of the British Academy, **130**, 53–77.

recalled in his early days at Oxford making in public an ill-advised historical generalisation. Hilton, overhearing the remark, corrected him forcefully and loudly, and Heath resolved in future to think before speaking.[2] Hilton's circle included Denis Healey, Allan Merson, and Nicholas Myant: all were active in student politics, focused on the Labour Club, coinciding with such exciting events as the Oxford by-election of 1938, and they became caught up in the international anti-fascist campaigns. As a northerner Hilton was acutely aware of the misery of the depression and consequent high levels of unemployment. At Oxford he was indeed influenced by 'foreign ideas' and joined the Communist Party, of which he remained a member for the next two decades. He conceived his future academic life as closely linked to his political convictions, and planned an idealistic programme of research that would begin with a study of late medieval peasants and artisans, and continue with work on the modern working class.

When he came to choose his subject for his D.Phil. thesis, under the supervision of Reginald Lennard, he worked on monastic estates in Leicestershire. The research was based on Charyte's register of the lands of Leicester Abbey which was compiled in 1477, but as well as a detailed rental for that year, the register included earlier documents which allowed changes in the economy, and especially among the peasantry, to be traced back over the previous two centuries. This perfectly suited Hilton's aim of investigating social and economic aspects of the later middle ages which pointed towards the emergence of agrarian capitalism. He researched and wrote the thesis in less than two years: his quick brain, capacity for clear thought, and ability to concentrate on the essential issues enabled him to complete the task, but his mind was also focused by the knowledge that the war would imminently take him away from academic life. When gathering material for his thesis in London he formed a close friendship with a Cambridge research student, then a Marxist, Edward Miller. In this hectic period he was a Senior Scholar at Merton, and found time to write an article for the *English Historical Review* on a late thirteenth-century poem in which a canon of Leicester Abbey gloated over the defeat of the peasants of Stoughton in Leicestershire, after they had brought a law suit

[2] E. Heath, *The Autobiography of Edward Heath. The Course of My Life* (London, 1998), pp. 24–5. The incident must have had a great impact on Heath, who was remembering it sixty years later. The intervention was entirely typical of Hilton later in life, and many students and colleagues have been reproved (usually with good humour) for poorly thought-out statements in similar fashion.

disputing their obligations to their lord, the Abbey.[3] In 1939 he married Margaret Palmer, who had been a student at Somerville. She was also a communist academic, who later became a university lecturer in French. Their son, Tim, was born in 1941.

Writing in 1946, in a striking understatement Hilton referred to his 'absence from England, in circumstances uncongenial to academic studies', from 1940 to 1946.[4] These years, mainly in the Royal Tank Regiment, took him to North Africa, Italy, and the Middle East; he participated in the invasion of Sicily and the landings at Anzio, and at the end of the war was posted to Lebanon, Palestine, and Syria, where he attended staff college, and for a time was attached to a unit of the Indian Army. He could not have been a conventional army officer, as he was able to make contacts with local people who were also communists, to the puzzlement of his superiors when they noticed that he 'knew the same songs'. He acquired an enduring taste for salted peanuts from visits to the bar of Shepherd's Hotel in Cairo, and in an officer's mess in the Middle East he helped to invent a new cocktail, consisting of gin and Owbridge's Lung Tonic. He recalled these lighter moments, but never regarded his time in the army with much nostalgia, and was especially scathing about the empty phrase that described someone as having a 'good war'. Nonetheless he did experience a part of the world that would not normally have been visited by a young historian, and on his return to academic life he taught a course on the history of the Near East.[5] He also (setting aside such miseries as Anzio) benefited from his time in Italy, a country for which he retained a great affection. He learned the Italian version of *Lily Marlene* from young women he met there, and his friends in England remember his rendering, sixty years after he first heard it, of the socialist song, *Bandiera Rossa*.

Hilton returned to England in 1946 and took up a lectureship at the University of Birmingham. He was appointed to the post (while he was on leave) after an interview conducted by R. R. Betts, then the Professor of History, in the bar of the Mitre Hotel in Oxford. He returned to his D.Phil. thesis, and prepared it for publication (it appeared in 1947) in the Oxford Historical Series, under the austere title *The Economic Development of*

[3] 'A Thirteenth-Century Poem on Disputed Labour Services', *English Historical Review*, 56 (1941), 90–7.

[4] *The Economic Development of Some Leicestershire Estates in the 14th and 15th Centuries* (Oxford, 1947), p. iii.

[5] E. Miller,' Introduction', in T. H. Aston, P. R. Coss, C. Dyer, and J. Thirsk (eds.), *Social Relations and Ideas. Essays in Honour of R. H. Hilton* (Cambridge, 1983), p. ix.

Some Leicestershire Estates in the 14th and 15th Centuries. In this book he showed that a small landlord (Owston Abbey) could fare better in the late medieval economic decline than those with large estates. In the Leicestershire villages under the lordship of Owston and Leicester Abbeys larger peasant tenements emerged in the fifteenth century, and wage labour was vital to the economy both of the lords' home farms and the holdings accumulated by the more prosperous yeomen. Here some of the preconditions of agrarian capitalism could be recognised. The book also briefly explored such themes as urban decline and patterns of consumption, prophetically opening discussions which were not taken up generally by historians for another thirty years.

Meetings of the Communist Party's Historians' Group, which had been foreshadowed by pre-war gatherings at Balliol, began in 1946.[6] The encounters with an older generation of Marxist scholars such as Maurice Dobb and Dona Torr, and regular contacts with his contemporaries Christopher Hill, Eric Hobsbawm, and Victor Kiernan, played an important role in his intellectual development. Later the Group was joined by Dorothy and Edward Thompson. The discussions within the Group included a scheme to update and improve A. L. Morton's *A People's History of England*, and it was as part of that programme of extending public understanding that Hilton contributed chapters on the historical background to the 'Peasants' Revolt' of 1381, to a narrative account of the rebellion which had been written by H. Fagan. The joint work was published in 1950 as *The English Rising of 1381* and, though it is now little known, Hilton's chapters give a remarkably lucid and readable introduction to feudal society.[7] The inspiration of the Group of course came from Marxist theory, but Hilton and others were also concerned to emphasise the continuity of an English radical tradition. They traced their intellectual and political lineage through such figures as William Morris, back to the Diggers and Levellers of the English Revolution, and to their precursors among the Lollards and rebels of the middle ages.

A fruitful offshoot of the Historians' Group was the journal *Past and Present,* which was founded in 1952.[8] It originally carried the subtitle 'A journal of scientific history' which signalled its Marxist leanings, but it

[6] E. Hobsbawm, 'The Historians' Group of the Communist Party', in M. Cornforth (ed.), *Rebels and Their Causes* (London, 1978), pp. 21–48; H. J. Kaye, *The British Marxist Historians. An Introductory Analysis* (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 8–17.

[7] (With H. Fagan), *The English Rising of 1381* (London, 1950).

[8] C. Hill, R. H. Hilton, and E. J. Hobsbawm, 'Origins and Early Years', *Past and Present*, 100 (1983), 3–14.

was always intended as a link with historians who were not communists; early issues contained articles by such radical but non-Marxist scholars as W. G. Hoskins, and the editorial board was joined by Geoffrey Barraclough. Hilton supported the journal loyally throughout his life, but made an especially important contribution in its early fragile years, for example by writing for the first number an article which is still widely cited: 'Capitalism—what's in a name?' He was later to be Chairman of the Editorial Board (from 1972), and Vice-President of the Past and Present Society from 1987.[9] Under the editorship of T. H. Aston, who worked closely with Hilton, the journal had become by the mid 1960s the leading historical journal in the English language, enjoying a large readership, and showing the way forward in such fields as social and cultural history, while maintaining the highest scholarly standards. Although the 'scientific history' subtitle was dropped, Marxist history still influenced the journal's approach. *Past and Present* insisted that articles should derive general conclusions from particular studies, and authors were expected to answer well-formulated questions. Contributors were encouraged to write in accessible English for a non-specialist readership. The journal encouraged historical work which was informed by insights from other disciplines, especially the social sciences.

If we survey Hilton's publications in the first ten years after his return to academic work three interrelated themes emerge. First he was researching and writing on the medieval economy in general, and contributing to such conventional subjects as estate management and field systems. His article on Winchcombe Abbey and the manor of Sherborne in Gloucestershire (1949) explored the acquisition of landed wealth by a monastic lord in the Cotswolds, and in particular the methods that it used in the fifteenth century to grow and sell its wool.[10] In his study of the leases issued by Gloucester Abbey he explained that better-off peasants in the thirteenth century took advantage of their lord's need for cash by paying a lump sum for their servile obligations to be converted into money rent.[11] W. G. Hoskins must have encouraged Hilton to write more

[9] P. Coss, 'R. H. Hilton', *Past and Present*, 176 (2002), 7–10.

[10] 'Winchcombe Abbey and the Manor of Sherborne', *University of Birmingham Historical Journal*, 2 (1949), 31–52, repr. in H. P. R. Finberg (ed.), *Gloucestershire Studies* (Leicester, 1957), pp. 89–113, and in *Class Conflict and the Crisis of Feudalism. Essays in Medieval Social History* (London, 1985), pp. 18–35.

[11] 'Gloucester Abbey Leases of the Late Thirteenth Century', *University of Birmingham Historical Journal*, 4 (1953), 1–17, repr. in *The English Peasantry in the Later Middle Ages: the Ford Lectures for 1973 and Related Studies* (Oxford, 1975), pp. 139–60.

about Leicestershire, which bore fruit in an essay about Kibworth Harcourt. Hoskins presumably also commissioned the chapter on medieval agriculture in the *Victoria County History* of Leicestershire, which contained insights, among other things, into the rotation of crops and the network of local markets.[12] This study also revealed the relatively light burden of labour services imposed on the peasantry of the county in the thirteenth century, and the importance of money rent, a generalisation which became a major theme of an incisive Occasional Paper for the Dugdale Society on the social structure of rural Warwickshire.[13] In addition to pursuing his own research, he helped to make available to English-speaking scholars the work of a leading Soviet historian, by editing for publication a translation of E. A. Kosminsky's analysis of the thirteenth-century Hundred Rolls.[14]

Secondly he examined peasant revolts, partly as a means of investigating peasant attitudes and consciousness. More influential than his chapters in the *English Rising* book of 1950 was his 1949 article on 'Peasant movements before 1381', which used local agitations and protests to prove that peasants regularly opposed their feudal lords.[15] Peasants resented the rents and services imposed on them as unfree villeins, and could organise themselves to resist these dues. This article shows that he was conceiving of medieval peasants as a social class. They objected to rents and dues mainly because these payments eroded their incomes, but also because they had a principled objection to the restriction of their freedom. They could be regarded as active participants in a class struggle, and makers of their own history. This was both a contribution to understanding the medieval peasantry, but also shows him acting as an early exponent of the approach later known as 'history from below'.

His third strand of thinking and writing connected with a major concern of the Historians' Group, the periodisation of history and the

[12] 'Kibworth Harcourt: a Merton College Manor in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries', in W. G. Hoskins (ed.), *Studies in Leicestershire Agrarian History* (Leicester, 1949), pp. 17–40, repr. in *Class Conflict*, pp. 1–17; 'Medieval Agrarian History', in *Victoria County History of Leicestershire*, 2 (London, 1954), pp. 145–98.

[13] *Social Structure of Rural Warwickshire in the Middle Ages*, Dugdale Society Occasional Paper, 9 (Stratford-upon-Avon, 1950), repr. in *The English Peasantry*, pp. 113–38.

[14] E. A. Kosminsky, *Studies in the Agrarian History of England in the Thirteenth Century*, trans. R. Kisch (Oxford, 1956).

[15] 'Peasant Movements in England before 1381', *Economic History Review*, 2nd ser., 2 (1949), 117–36, repr. in *The Middle Ages*, Institute of History of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR (Moscow, 1956–7), pp. 92–111, and in E. M. Carus-Wilson (ed.), *Essays in Economic History*, 2 (London, 1962), pp. 73–90, and in *Class Conflict*, pp. 122–38.

transition from feudalism to capitalism (often simply called 'the transition'). His *Past and Present* article in 1952 had proposed a rigorous definition of capitalism, emphasising such characteristics as the investment in enterprises and the use of wage labour, which prevented any claim that late medieval Europe had a capitalist economy.[16] Nevertheless the study of the Leicester estates had revealed how society had changed significantly by the 1470s, with larger units of production in the hands of peasants. But what had propelled economic and social change in this direction? In 1951 he was stimulated to contribute an article to the French journal *Annales ESC* when Edouard Perroy had characterised the late medieval economy as stagnant and mediocre. Hilton's 'Crisis of Feudalism' was an exercise in grand generalisation, typically succinct, in which he argued that feudal society was faced by an economic impasse around 1300, marked particularly by low levels of productivity.[17] The ruling class was extracting too much from the economy, failing to reinvest their profits, and contributing to technological stagnation. Lords turned to war and taxation to keep their revenues flowing, and the demands for money provoked peasant resistance. This ensured that the lords were no longer controlling the economy at the end of the middle ages, and the precursors of capitalist farmers were already active in the countryside. Two years later he contributed to an international debate on 'the transition' in the pages of the American journal *Science and Society*, where one of his purposes was to correct social scientists' misconceptions about the medieval economy.[18] He argued, in a development of his views in the *Annales* article, that the moving force in feudal society was not an external factor such as international trade, but the 'struggle for rent' which lay at the heart of the relationship between lords and peasants, and that the aristocracy suffered a crisis because peasants forced them to scale down their demands.

By 1956 Hilton, in his fortieth year, had established an international reputation as an authority on the medieval economy in general, and in particular had put forward new ideas about social class, conflict, the feudal crisis, and the origins of capitalism which commanded respect,

[16] 'Capitalism—What's in a Name?', *Past and Present*, 1 (1952), 32–43, repr. in R. H. Hilton (ed.), *The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism* (London, 1976), pp. 145–58, and in *Class Conflict*, pp. 268–77.

[17] 'Y eût-il une crise général de la féodalité?', *Annales, Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations*, 6 (1951), 23–30, repr. as 'Was There a General Crisis of Feudalism?', in *Class Conflict*, pp. 239–45.

[18] 'A Comment', *Science and Society* (Fall, 1953), repr. in *The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism: a Symposium* (London, 1954), pp. 65–72, and in *Transition*, pp. 109–17.

both because they were theoretically informed, and because they were supported by empirical research. He was inspired by the writings of Marx, Lenin, and their more recent disciples, and applied their ideas, such as Marx's discussion of the origins of capitalist ground rent in the third volume of *Capital*, to the experiences of the English countryside between the thirteenth and the fifteenth centuries. A notable feature of his work was that he combined these excursions into theory and debates with the preparation of texts for learned societies. He edited a set of ministers' accounts (records of estate finances) for the Warwickshire manors of the earldom of Warwick for the years 1479–80 for the Dugdale Society.[19] An American scholar had begun to edit for the same society a more complex source, the Stoneleigh Leger Book, and Hilton completed the work and provided an introduction which demonstrated the document's significance for understanding the society of the Forest of Arden in the later middle ages.[20]

Hilton's first marriage had ended in divorce, and in 1953 he married Gwyneth Evans, a secondary school teacher; they moved away from Birmingham into Worcestershire, and in 1956 settled at Phoenix Cottage in the village of Fladbury. They had two children, Owen and Ceinwen.

The year 1956 proved a turning point. Communists for years had felt themselves to be under siege. Their candidates gained little support in elections. They had been subject to constant surveillance and discrimination because they were regarded as the agents of a hostile foreign power. Applications from known communists for academic jobs were often unsuccessful. At the same time academics were liable to be criticised by their own Party, with its obsession with discipline and unity, if they expressed a view that was out of line with the current orthodoxy. They were expected to speak up for the government of the Soviet Union (whatever their private doubts), but that position was strained to breaking point when Khrushchev in a secret speech revealed Stalin's crimes, and loyal communists realised that they had been defending the indefensible. Later in 1956 the new Soviet government behaved in the old ruthless fashion by suppressing revolt in Hungary. Members of the Communist Party of Great Britain agitated for both internal reform of the Party structures, and some appropriate response to the events in eastern Europe, and when

[19] *Ministers' Accounts of the Warwickshire Estates of the Duke of Clarence, 1479–80*, Dugdale Society, 21 (Stratford-upon-Avon, 1952). Introduction repr. in *Class Conflict*, pp. 48–62.
[20] *The Stoneleigh Leger Book*, Dugdale Society, 24 (Stratford-upon-Avon, 1960). Introduction repr. in *Class Conflict*, pp. 63–100.

these demands were refused Hilton and many other academics resigned their membership.

Leaving the Party meant giving up a way of life: the Historians' Group meetings in London ceased, but so also did the busy round of meetings and campaigning at local level, the contacts with friends and allies in Britain and abroad, and the constant engagement with communism by reading the appropriate literature. The gap could not be filled by subsequent involvement in the New Left, and a brief period in the Labour Party proved a very poor substitute. Hilton rejoined the Communist Party shortly before it disbanded.

In the late 1940s and 1950s Hilton was participating actively in the life of the History Department of the University of Birmingham. It included on its staff, as did all universities at that time, those who regarded their role primarily as teachers, but Hilton was by no means alone in his enthusiasm for research. He supported the *University of Birmingham Historical Journal*, contributing to an early issue an article on a fifteenth-century household account jointly written with the Professor of Medieval History, H. A. Cronne, and other articles of his own followed.[21] Cronne's character and outlook differed from Hilton's, but he held him in great respect. Hilton enjoyed the company of Douglas Johnson, a lecturer in modern French history, and another medievalist, Shirley Bridges, and together they led a way of life regarded as bohemian in Easy Row, an offshoot of the history department separate from the main university building (which until 1960 was located in the centre of the city). He collaborated also with a later Easy Row resident, a sharp-minded lecturer specialising in early medieval history, Peter Sawyer, and together they wrote a devastating review of Lynn White's book on the history of technology.[22] Hilton got on well with students, and particularly the post-war intake of ex-servicemen who shared his experiences and attitudes. He joined in student social events, and took groups on field-work expeditions, including a 'Cotswold survey' of timber-framed buildings and deserted village sites in Gloucestershire.

A constant theme running through all his work was his commitment to the study of localities. Grand theories about social and economic change could only be demonstrated by meticulous research on particular regions and even individual villages where lords, peasants, and artisans

[21] (With H. A. Cronne), 'The Beauchamp Household Book (an Account of a Journey from London to Warwick in 1432)', *University of Birmingham Historical Journal*, 2 (1950), 208–18.
[22] (With P. H. Sawyer), 'Technical Determinism: the Stirrup and the Plough', *Past and Present*, 14 (1958), 30–44.

lived and worked. He had begun research on Leicestershire, and continued with his interest in that county after his return from the army. But his lectureship in Birmingham encouraged him to become immersed in the history of the west midland region. He was encouraged by two lecturers in the Birmingham department, Philip and Dorothy Styles, and quickly began publishing with the Dugdale Society. A considerable part of his time in the 1950s was spent in the local record offices, and in reading microfilm of monastic cartularies kept in London depositories. He taught courses on west midland history both in the university and to extra-mural students, and encouraged a series of research students in the 1950s and 1960s to work on west midland projects for their MA and Ph.D. theses.[23] When he was living in Worcestershire, as well as reading and analysing its records, he became aware of the moribund state of the Worcestershire Historical Society, and together with colleagues, including Peter Sawyer, revived the organisation in 1960 and began a new series of record publications.[24] From 1959 until 1968, he arranged an annual season of excavations with John Wacher (for one year) and thereafter with Philip Rahtz on a deserted medieval village site in the Cotswolds at Upton near Blockley.[25] This venture combined intellectual curiosity about the contribution that archaeology could make to the understanding of the medieval peasantry, with his enjoyment of the company of the staff and students who volunteered to work on the site.

The culmination of his investigations into the west midland region came in 1966 with the publication of *A Medieval Society*, though typically this local study had an international dimension. He had long been an admirer of the school of French social and economic historians which had been founded by Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch. Bloch's books on monarchy, feudal society, and rural history established new approaches, with their emphasis on geographical context, insights from the social sciences and especially anthropology, and their use of the comparative method. Bloch was killed by the Gestapo in 1944, but the tradition continued with the journal that he had founded, *Annales ESC*, and by the

[23] These included Peter Bill, Jean Birrell, Peter Coss, Ralph Evans, R. K. Field, Catherine Hall, T. H. Lloyd, E. K. Vose, John West, and the author of this memoir. Postgraduates who worked on west midland theses after 1970 included Trevor John, Richard Holt, Mary Hulton, Simon Penn, Kyle Rae, and Zvi Razi.

[24] *Miscellany I*, Worcestershire Historical Society (Worcester, 1960) appeared without any named editor or other bibliographical information, but is now recognised as volume 1 of the society's new series. It included Hilton's edition of the swanimote rolls of Feckenham Forest.

[25] (With P. A. Rahtz), 'Upton, Gloucestershire, 1959–64', *Transactions of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society*, 85 (1966), 70–146.

work of such distinguished scholars as Robert Boutruche, Georges Duby, Guy Fourquin, and Robert Fossier. These historians began their careers with formidable doctoral studies about French regions, and they encouraged their students to follow the same course. Hilton read (and often reviewed) the books that came out of these theses and appreciated their combination of historical geography with institutional, social, and economic history to create a rounded picture of a whole functioning society. Through the study of regions, it was possible to construct *histoire totale*.

Hilton's *A Medieval Society* had no intention of matching the exhaustive detail and monumental scale of the regional works that came from France, but instead he produced a readable survey of the main features of society around the end of the thirteenth century.[26] The chosen territory coincided approximately with the diocese of Worcester, and included the three counties of Gloucestershire, Warwickshire, and Worcestershire. The book focused on the social structure of the region, so there were chapters on the landlords, their estates, peasants, villages, towns, markets, and social controls. The evidence included excavations and standing timber buildings, but most of the information derived from an impressive array of documentary sources. His writing was always made more accessible and attractive by specific examples of individual people and incidents, and *A Medieval Society* has a particularly rich vein of lively human material extracted from the archives. For example the criminal career is recounted of Malcolm Musard, a prominent member of the gentry and lord of the manor of Saintbury in Gloucestershire, who in the early years of the fourteenth century poached, robbed, assaulted, raided, and vandalised his way through the region, only to be rewarded with offices by the crown and the Despenser family. The book also benefited from an eye for the telling detail in an unexpected source, such as the reference in a thirteenth-century boundary description of Alvechurch in Worcestershire to a place 'where the *binlaues* (by-laws) are usually held', revealing the existence of rarely documented meetings between the inhabitants of adjoining villages to settle matters of common concern.[27]

The book was originally designed to set the scene for another work, which would follow through the region's development in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Eventually this was at least partly achieved, as we shall see, in a number of publications about west midlands peasants and towns.

[26] *A Medieval Society: the West Midlands at the End of the Thirteenth Century* (London, 1966); 2nd edn. (Cambridge, 1983).
[27] Ibid., pp. 152, 255–6.

Hilton was not an enthusiast for university administration, but in the 1960s was able to play an important part in taking history at Birmingham through a transition which paved the way for later success. In the early 1960s the head of department did not devote his full attention to the role, as he was accustomed to visiting the university from his Oxford home only on Thursdays. In 1963 major changes were accomplished by establishing a School of History, which brought together in a federation the departments of Medieval, Modern, and American history. The heads of each department would serve in turn as Chairman of the School. At the same time Hilton was appointed to a personal chair of Medieval Social History. He served his time a little later as a successful Chairman of the School, but in 1969 was happy to hand over administrative tasks to others, and returned again to focus on his research and teaching. When the chair of medieval history became vacant in 1970, he was anxious that the post be filled from outside, and Ralph Davis was appointed.

At Birmingham, as at many universities before the 1970s, there was much communication between the disciplines. Hilton's broad-minded approach to scholarship led him to work with those in other departments. He collaborated closely with R. E. F. Smith in the Russian department, a specialist in Russian urban and peasant history, and had some contact with Harry Thorpe, the historical geographer, and a student of his, J. B. Harley. Relations with archaeology were not so close, which resulted in the engagement of outside specialists in the early days of the Upton excavations, and ultimately in the appointment of a Lecturer in Medieval Archaeology in the School of History, a post initially filled by Philip Rahtz.[28] Hilton's interest in social mentality, together with his own avid reading of modern novels, naturally led him to treat literature as historical source material. In the aftermath of 1956 he developed an interest in the Robin Hood ballads, and wrote an article called 'The origins of Robin Hood' offering an interpretation of the woodland bandit as a peasant hero, who expressed popular grievances by flouting forest law and attacking corrupt officials and members of the higher clergy.[29] These ideas sparked an intense debate, and although the original argument has not survived intact, the article stimulated Robin Hood studies which continue into the twenty-first century. His interest in literature was sustained by

[28] P. Rahtz, *Living Archaeology* (Stroud, 2001), pp. 90–1.

[29] 'The Origins of Robin Hood', *Past and Present*, 14 (1958), 30–44, repr. in R. H. Hilton (ed.), *Peasants, Knights and Heretics: Studies in Medieval English Social History* (Cambridge, 1976), pp. 221–35, and in S. Knight (ed.), *Robin Hood. Anthology of Scholarship and Criticism* (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 197–210.

friendly relations with the medieval specialists in the Birmingham English department, and particularly with Geoffrey Shepherd. For much of the 1960s and 1970s Birmingham medieval history postgraduates and their counterparts in English met regularly with Hilton and Shepherd to discuss matters of common interest, and sometimes to be baffled by the very wide divergences in their approaches.

During the 1960s he was still pursuing alongside his west midland studies the hypothesis about the crisis of feudalism that he had sketched briefly in his 1951 *Annales* article. By this time a dominant voice in interpreting the medieval economy was that of M. M. Postan, who made the crisis of the fourteenth century a central episode in his interpretation of the whole period. Like Hilton he saw the late thirteenth century as a period of growth, followed by a downturn in the first half of the fourteenth century. Postan believed that this reversal of trends, however, was precipitated by ecological problems, when under pressure of population growth poor land was taken in for cultivation. As the pastures were ploughed up, the old established fields, starved of manure, suffered a loss of productivity.[30] For Postan, emphasising the weight of numbers and the fertility of the fields, such factors as feudal lordship and serfdom were of secondary significance. His ideas went back to the classical economists, Malthus and Ricardo, rather than to Marx. Postan and Hilton agreed, however, that the crisis of productivity around 1300 did not lead to technical improvements in agriculture, as happened in the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, when expansion in population was accompanied by the introduction of new farming methods. Postan wrote of the other-worldly mentality of medieval intellectuals which prevented them from addressing this problem. For Hilton the technical malaise was embedded in the social structure: the lords extracted so much rent from the peasants (especially the serfs) that they were prevented from making improvements, and the lords themselves spent the rent money and estate profits on high living, war and religion.

Hilton defended his interpretation by investigating the origins of the servile peasantry, and in an article published in 1965 showed that serfdom in a clearly defined form, the villeinage of the common lawyers, had developed quite late, at the end of the twelfth and in the early years of the

[30] M. M. Postan, 'Medieval Agrarian Society in its Prime: England', in M. Postan (ed.), *Cambridge Economic History of Europe*, 1, 2nd edn. (Cambridge, 1966), pp. 548–632. Hilton and Postan, though differing in their historical interpretations, shared some similarities of outlook, and there was a degree of mutual admiration and affection.

thirteenth century.[31] This coincided with a period of inflation, when lords were seeking to increase their revenues, and to exploit their control over the peasants on their estates. This set the origins of this type of serfdom in an economic and social context, as a means of class domination for financial gain, and not as an archaic survival, or a by product of new legal doctrines by the royal lawyers who sought to divide the free and unfree. Hilton was asked by the Economic History Society to consider the decline of serfdom in a pamphlet published in 1969.[32] Again he argued that serfdom was a central feature of lord–tenant relations. In the thirteenth century lords needed, and obtained, profits from serfdom and especially labour services, and the peasants pressed for freedom and therefore lighter services and dues. In the late fourteenth century lords clung to serfdom in spite of the fall in population that in theory strengthened the bargaining power of now scarce tenants.

It was part of the case for a social crisis of feudalism to show that serfdom was a real burden, and that lords extracted more from the peasantry in the thirteenth century. The other crucial point concerned investment, the lack of which prevented technical improvements. In a paper to the International Economic History Conference in 1962 Hilton calculated the percentage of lords' estate income that was invested in such assets as buildings, equipment, livestock, and reclamation or enclosure schemes, and found that the figures in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries often lay around 5 per cent.[33] Such a small expenditure ensured that lords made few innovations or major improvements to the efficiency of farming. Low levels of productivity and technical conservatism among peasants could be associated with their lack of cash and resources for investment after they had paid their rents and taxes.

A weakness in the argument that pressure from landlords played an important part in peasant impoverishment, and therefore precipitated the fourteenth-century crisis, lay in the number of free tenants, and the apparently light burdens on the unfree tenants, at least in terms of labour services, in some regions. Hilton himself had revealed the lack of heavy obligations in Leicestershire and Warwickshire. He had an opportunity to address this point when he was invited to give the Earl Lecture on

[31] 'Freedom and Villeinage in England', *Past and Present*, 31 (1965), 3–19, repr. in *Peasants, Knights and Heretics*, pp. 174–91.

[32] *The Decline of Serfdom in Medieval England*, Studies in Economic History (London, 1969); 2nd edn. (London, 1983).

[33] 'Rent and Capital Formation in Feudal Society', in *Second International Conference of Economic History: Aix-en-Provence*, 2 (Paris, 1965), 33–68, repr. in *English Peasantry*, pp. 174–214.

Staffordshire history at Keele in 1969.[34] Staffordshire was famously a county of relatively free peasants, partly because of its woodland landscape in which settlers were encouraged to clear new land with easy conditions of tenure. Hilton gave a rounded picture of the rural society of the county, depicting its hierarchy of lords, and showing that most peasants were freeholders and the customary or servile tenants rarely did much labour service. He discovered, however, that lords were able to compensate themselves by exploiting the revenues gained from 'the exercise of lordship'. Profits of jurisdiction, death duties, and entry fines allowed lords to make more from their tenants than descriptions of their annual money rents and services would suggest. These extra payments ate into the peasants' surplus, and made them more insecure, as they were nervous of irregular and unexpected charges.

A new urgency and excitement came into social history in the late 1960s, as the young rebelled, and the conventions and conservatism of the post-war world were set aside. In particular students protested that they were given no voice in the government of their universities. Birmingham University became one of the centres of this movement; the students claimed that the institution was being controlled by an oligarchic and secretive management, and they campaigned for change with mass meetings and an occupation of the administrative offices.[35] Hilton, then Chairman of the School of History, was caught up in the events. He naturally sympathised with rebellion and demands for more democratic university government, and one of the academic events of the 'sit-in' was his lecture in the Great Hall of the university on the revolt of the Ciompi in Florence in 1378. His communist past made him suspicious of the students' lack of coherence—not all of their ideas came from the left, and those that did were sometimes rather wild. In the aftermath of the 1968 troubles universities were divided for some years by controversy over the role of students (and to some extent the staff) in their government. At Birmingham the appointment of a lecturer in sociology who had played a leading part in the 1968 sit-in was blocked by the university, and the left opposed this manipulation of the usual procedures. Hilton (who at this time was also active in the Association of University Teachers) led a group who supported the rejected candidate, and out of this agitation a national body, the Council for Academic Freedom and Democracy, was formed.

[34] 'Lord and Peasant in Staffordshire in the Middle Ages', *North Staffordshire Journal of Field Studies*, 10 (1970), 1–20, repr. in *English Peasantry*, pp. 215–43.
[35] E. W. Ives, D. Drummond, and L. Schwarz, *The First Civic University: Birmingham 1880–1980* (Birmingham, 2000), pp. 353–74.

After the 1968 troubles in Britain and other developed countries rebellion did not seem such a remote activity. The much more serious struggles of colonial peoples for independence, and in particular the war in Vietnam, included an element of peasant revolt. Popular rebellions were once more the subject of research, and student interest in them revived.[36] Hilton had made frequent reference to the subject through the 1950s and 1960s, and now wrote a book on European medieval peasant unrest in general, beginning in the ninth century, but with a focus on the English Rising of 1381. *Bond Men Made Free* showed that peasant risings were not an occasional freakish outbreak, concentrated in the fourteenth century, but an integral feature of medieval social history.[37] If the peasants were a conscious class, with interests opposed to those of their lords, they would when possible seek to reduce their obligations or win some freedom. They used the existing channels for pressing their demands, such as the public courts of law. When these avenues were denied them, as only free men had full legal rights, they resorted to direct action, such as refusing labour services, and in some circumstances used violence. To emphasise the centrality of revolt in medieval society, he could identify the rebels of 1381 as a cross section of non-aristocrats, including artisans, lesser clergy, and some quite wealthy peasants. Their programmes were coherent and expressed the ancient aims of the removal of aristocratic privileges and restrictions; in particular they insisted that they should be free. This was not just an adjustment in the social balance between one class and another: if the serfs had been given their freedom, and (following the demand at Smithfield attributed to Wat Tyler) lordship was to be 'divided among all men', the aristocracy would have been removed, and the country would have been ruled by peasant communities under a popular monarchy. Although rebellions could be readily suppressed, and in the case of the 1381 revolt collapsed rapidly under pressure, in the early stages they were quite well organised. Far from being a transient episode, the revolt of 1381 had long-term effects, which strengthened subsequent

[36] A general book covering European peasant revolts was M. Mollat and P. Wolff, *Ongles Bleus, Jacques et Ciompi* (Paris, 1970), but it did not offer adequate explanations for them. A very useful stimulus to new work on the 1381 rising was R. B. Dobson, *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381* (London, 1970). There was of course a growing literature on modern rebellions and discontent. Hilton contributed to a collective volume on peasantries which sought to use history to improve understanding of contemporary problems: 'Peasant Society, Peasant Movements and Feudalism in Medieval Europe', in H. A. Landsberger (ed.), *Rural Protest: Peasant Movements and Social Change* (London, 1974), pp. 67–94.

[37] *Bond Men Made Free: Medieval Peasant Movements and the English Rising of 1381* (London, 1973).

negotiations between peasants and lords. As the title of his book proclaimed, most bond men were made free within a century of the revolt. Hilton's final conclusion was a message for the modern world: '. . . conflict is part of existence and . . . nothing is gained without struggle'.

In the 1970s he attained a high point in his career as a historian, in an environment conducive to academic creativity. In 1971 he married Jean Birrell, also a medieval historian who had been a lecturer at the University of Sheffield and then took up a post in the West Midlands region of the fledgling Open University. She encouraged and stimulated his work. In the School of History younger scholars were being appointed who held him in some awe, but gave him a local audience on which he could try out his ideas. A body of postgraduate students had also gathered at Birmingham to be supervised by him, including Grenville Astill, Peter Coss, Catherine Hall, Richard Holt and Zvi Razi, all of whom later gained chairs.[38]

While *Bond Men Made Free* was being prepared for the press Hilton was invited to give the Ford Lectures at Oxford, a recognition from his old university. His first reaction was to base the lectures on the poll tax records of 1377–81, which showed how he was attracted to cross-sectional studies at a point in time, as he had been able to do earlier for Leicestershire and Warwickshire. Colleagues (including Ralph Davis) suggested that he take the opportunity to produce the study of the west midlands in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries that he had promised in 1966. He decided to follow that course, in part, by devoting the lectures to peasant society in the west midlands. He shifted the definition of the region a little to include Staffordshire (the subject of the Earl Lecture), and concentrated on the period 1350–1480.

The lectures were delivered in 1973 and published two years later as *The English Peasantry in the Later Middle Ages*.[39] The general title was justified by the broad themes pursued. The evidence came from west midland sources, but the questions posed were of universal significance. This was most obvious in the first chapter in which the medieval peasantry was identified as a class, based on comparisons with other societies, both in the past and in more recent times, not just in Continental Europe, but

[38] A number of students came from overseas: from Israel (Razi), Argentina (Maria Moisa), Canada (Kyle Rae and Gabriel Scardellato), Greece (Aglaia Kasdagli). After his retirement students came to Birmingham from China and Turkey, to be supervised by younger academics, but attracted by his presence.

[39] *English Peasantry,* see above, n. 11.

throughout the world. He was anxious to show that the medieval peasantry did not belong to some amorphous 'peasant society', but should be placed in the specific context of west European feudalism, in which they possessed land, lived in families and villages, and had obligations to lords. The rest of the book was concerned with a number of paradoxes, in which Hilton carefully steered the argument between the extremes. Peasant society was clearly stratified, between those with large holdings and those with cottages; some villagers hired workers, and some sought employment. Yet peasant society was still bound together by common interests, and the really profound gulf in medieval society was still that which separated peasants from their lords. Peasants often produced their own food, and depended on family members as their main source of labour. They were also caught up in the market, and sold produce and employed labour for wages, but their way of life was not dominated by commerce.

He devoted his fifth chapter to a novel study of the small towns of the west midlands, which were functionally separated from the surrounding villages by their varied occupations, and which had many points of contact with the local peasants, for example by providing markets where crops and animals could be sold. The final chapter was also a new venture — under the stimulus of the recent development of women's history, he examined the role of peasant women. Again the reader was presented with a paradox: women in the village suffered from many disadvantages, but can be seen acting independently and could sometimes gain a good living.[40]

The book, being based closely on the texts of the lectures, had limited space, but it was typical of his economical style that he could make his essential points with a few deftly chosen words. In preparation for the fifth chapter on small towns he spent many days working through the voluminous court rolls of the borough of Pershore, and then distilled the evidence into three printed pages which summed up the town's government, society and economy, portraying vividly its 'public street', petty traders, prostitutes, and wandering pigs.

In the 1970s and 1980s Hilton was enjoying a peak of international celebrity. His early articles had been translated into Japanese, and his work in the 1950s was well known in the USSR and eastern Europe, but now his Marxism was widely accepted as a valid approach, and indeed had become fashionable in parts of the western academic world. He had

[40] This balanced judgement was criticised by some later practitioners of women's history as too optimistic.

always had close links with French medieval historians, and in particular maintained a friendship with Georges Duby which had begun in the 1950s. For a time he had close contact with Guy Bois. He lectured at the Collège de France in 1981, and was invited to a succession of French conferences—he especially enjoyed the gatherings at Flaran in Gers, where high quality historical discussion was conducted in an idyllic rural setting, in a region with an especially rich gastronomic tradition. A number of books by leading French historians appeared at his instigation in translation in the Cambridge University Press series sponsored by *Past and Present*. He read Italian and addressed conferences there. He was invited to many other countries, including the USA, and in 1974 spent a term as a visiting professor at the Indian university of Aligarh. His work had a particularly strong impact in Spain. After 1975 Spanish historical studies experienced a renaissance, in which left-wing academics were at last free to practise their subject, and to welcome contact with the outside world. Hilton's books were translated, and he was much admired for his combination of political and academic radicalism. One young Spanish academic, asked about Hilton's reputation in his country, compared his status (with no more than a hint of irony) with that of Jesus Christ. Another recalled that for the group of research students to which he belonged it was not enough to read Rodney Hilton, or to write like Rodney Hilton—they aspired to *be* Rodney Hilton. He welcomed Isobel Alfonso from Madrid, who spent a year in Birmingham. He entertained numerous visitors from overseas throughout his life, but particularly at this time, and his generosity to these guests, and willingness to spend time with them, expressed his instinctive internationalism.

Much attention abroad, and in some circles in England, was attracted by the publication in 1976 of a new edition of the *Science and Society* debate on the transition from feudalism to capitalism, which had first appeared in the 1950s, for which Hilton provided a new introduction.[41] This was translated into Spanish and German. The invitations to speak abroad generated a stream of conference papers in which he revisited the themes of earlier writings—peasant revolts and their ideas, feudalism and capitalism, and the medieval social order.[42] Meanwhile the academic

[41] *Transition*, see above, n. 16.

[42] e.g. 'Soziale Programme im englischen Aufstand von 1381', in P. Blickle (ed.), *Revolte und Revolution in Europa* (Munich, 1975), pp. 31–46, repr. as 'Social Concepts in the English Rising of 1381', in *Class Conflict,* pp. 216–26; 'Idéologie et Ordre Social', *L'Arc*, 72 (1978) [special issue in honour of Georges Duby], 32–7, repr. as 'Ideology and Social Order in Late Medieval England', in *Class Conflict*, pp. 246–52.

establishment in his native land recognised his achievement, by belatedly electing him to the fellowship of the British Academy in 1977. He was not very active in this body, and regarded himself still as an outsider. He was more enthusiastic about his role on committees of the Social Science Research Council, and he was encouraged by observing other scholars' use of research grants to apply for funds to employ two researchers to list the best series of manorial court rolls, and to enter on to a computer (long before such methods had become commonplace) the early records of two manors.[43]

A great stimulus for him and his approach to history came in the late 1970s when a young American Marxist, Robert Brenner, put forward a challenging new interpretation of the origins of agrarian capitalism, arguing that the English peasants' lack of secure tenure made them vulnerable to the acquisitive gentry around 1500.[44] Hilton joined in the debate with an article which restated his view of a crisis of feudalism, and which forcibly made the point that peasants had the advantage that their holdings and household units of production could exist without lords, while the lords depended on the rents of peasant tenants, and in the long run lords' power was vulnerable to pressure from peasants.

In his research and thinking he was still breaking new ground in the 1970s. He read social science avidly, finding the works of Weber particularly stimulating, and also more recent writers such as Runciman. This enthusiasm can be seen in the opening chapters of *Bond Men Made Free* and the *English Peasantry*, which both demonstrate that he regarded modern sociology and anthropology as supplementing rather than replacing the ideas of Marx. When he was embracing social science he was also developing a new specialism in the history of towns. He had taken an interest in urban society throughout his academic life. He plotted the sources of goods purchased by Leicestershire monasteries in his thesis, included a full chapter on towns in his west midland book, and contributed an essay to Maurice Dobb's festschrift on the property holdings of late medieval merchants.[45] Medieval urban history had struggled to

[43] A important output from this research project was the list of court rolls: (with J. Cripps and J. Williamson), 'Appendix: a Survey of Medieval Manorial Court Rolls in England', in Z. Razi and R. Smith (eds.), *Medieval Society and the Manor Court* (Oxford, 1996), pp. 569–637.

[44] 'A Crisis of Feudalism', *Past and Present*, 80 (1978), 3–19, repr. in T. H. Aston and C. H. E. Philpin (eds.), *The Brenner Debate. Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe* (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 119–37.

[45] 'Some Problems of Urban Real Property in the Middle Ages', C. H. Feinstein (ed.) *Socialism, Capitalism and Economic Growth: Essays Presented to Maurice Dobb* (Cambridge, 1967), pp. 326–37, repr. in *Class Conflict*, pp. 165–74.

escape from the shadow cast by the constitutional historians in the early twentieth century, who made it seem a very dull subject. Now in the 1970s, with so much stimulating work in modern urban history, and when it was clear that commerce had penetrated into the medieval countryside, it was time to open up the study of medieval towns once more.

He investigated occupational specialisation, and showed in a number of chapters and essays that much could be learned from tax records, especially the returns of the poll taxes in 1379 and 1381.[46] There were numerous craftsmen and traders scattered over the countryside, but towns, including very small towns, stood out because of their concentration of butchers, bakers, shoemakers, tailors, and many other artisans and providers of goods and services. How did towns relate to the rural and feudal society of lords and peasants? One view, still being expressed in the 1970s, regarded the towns as alien and subversive growths, forming islands of capitalism which would eventually take over the economy. Hilton argued the opposite in an article in an obscure American journal published in 1979.[47] Towns were part of the feudal order, as many of them were ruled by lords, and provided lords with rents. The urban traders supplied the aristocratic market with manufactured and imported goods. The social structure of towns resembled in some ways that of the feudal countryside, with the mercantile oligarchy using their power and privilege to exploit the artisans, who like the peasants worked as family units in their own houses. In another paper on popular movements published two years later he pursued the comparison between social structures and rebellion in town and country, and argued that the peasants, not the urban artisans, offered the main threat to the feudal order, as they questioned its very basis, and aimed to remove the aristocracy.[48]

He was following up these ideas with archival research on the small towns which he had first discussed as a special category in the *English Peasantry.* In the early 1980s he pointed the way with a short essay on the urban characteristics of Evesham in Worcestershire, and pursued the subject at more length in three essays, two of which derived much of their

[46] 'Some Social and Economic Evidence in Late Medieval English Tax Returns', in S. Herost (ed.), *Spoleczenstwo, Gospodarka, Kultura: Studies Offered to Marion Malowist* (Warsaw, 1974), pp. 111–28, repr. in *Class Conflict*, pp. 253–67.

[47] 'Towns in English Feudal Society', *Review (Journal of the Fernand Braudel Institute for the Study of Economies, Historical Systems and Civilizations),* 3 (1979), 3–20, repr. in *Class Conflict,* pp. 175–86.

[48] 'Popular Movements in England at the End of the Fourteenth Century', in *Il Tumulto dei Ciompi: un Momento di Storia Fiorentina ed Europa* (Florence, 1981), pp. 223–40, repr. in *Class Conflict*, pp. 152–64.

substance from the borough records of Halesowen in Worcestershire and Thornbury in Gloucestershire.[49] The detail was as rich as in his earlier west midland work, as he portrayed the people who made up the turbulent society of newly established towns, like the family of Mable Walters of Halesowen between 1280 and 1322, who sold ale (and broke the rules), stole corn, and quarrelled fiercely with their neighbours. These small towns were distinguished from nearby villages by their diversity of occupations and the intensity of their social and economic interactions, yet some similarities between town and country are apparent. For example, the townspeople adopted antagonistic attitudes towards their lords, just like the peasants, and the lords attempted to extract money and services from them, and to control their behaviour and trading practices. They were closely connected with the peasantry, as the urban market encouraged 'simple commodity production' among small-scale cultivators.

Hilton's retirement from his chair at Birmingham came in 1982, and in the following year he was honoured with a festschrift contributed by students and friends, appropriately published in the *Past and Present* series, and presented to him at a *Past and Present* party.[50] He continued his connection with Birmingham University, and he became the first Director of the Institute for Advanced Research in the Humanities, which provided a base for those who had achieved distinction outside regular university employment, and for retired academics who were still active in research. He was still writing about towns at this time, and a book on English and French towns appeared in 1992 which marked a further stage in the development of the ideas that he had advanced over the previous fifteen years.[51] Medieval towns, he reiterated, were a dimension of feudal society, and their internal government and social hierarchy shows that they had much in common with the rural world, with their workshops based on family units and elites anxious to control their subordinates through municipal regulation. The urban rulers used taxes to extract

[49] 'The Small Town and Urbanisation—Evesham in the Middle Ages', *Midland History*, 7 (1982), 1–8, repr. in *Class Conflict*, pp. 187–93; 'Lords, Burgesses and Huxters', *Past and Present*, 97 (1982), 3–15, repr. in *Class Conflict*, pp. 194–204; 'Small Town Society in England Before the Black Death', *Past and Present*, 105 (1984), 53–78, repr. in R. Holt and G. Rosser (eds.), *The Medieval Town. A Reader in English Urban History, 1200–1540* (London, 1990), pp. 71–96; 'Medieval Market Towns and Simple Commodity Production', *Past and Present*, 109 (1985), 3–23. A fifth article, probably written in the late 1980s, was not published until a decade later: 'Low-Level Urbanization: the Seigneurial Borough of Thornbury in the Middle Ages', in Razi and Smith (eds.), *Medieval Society*, pp. 482–517.

[50] Aston *et al.* (eds.), *Social Relations and Ideas*, see above, n. 5.

[51] *English and French Towns in Feudal Society. A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, 1992).

money from the townspeople rather as lords took rent from peasants. Urban society was based on classes, and they often came into conflict. A chapter in the book indicates the influence on him of the advance of cultural history, in a survey of the imagery and ceremony of civic life, entitled 'How urban society was imagined'.

This record of scholarship in its historical context gives only the highlights of a life of research and writing. Many essays and papers have been omitted—eleven works by him were published for example between 1985 and 1990, of which only one has been mentioned here. Brief reference can only be made to the dozens of book reviews, or his lectures to student societies, branches of the Historical Association, and many other organisations. He contributed articles to popular journals, and edited collections of essays. He was intensely industrious, reading omnivorously, and while his writing reflects the breadth of his knowledge and understanding, he footnoted only a minimum of the sources that he used.

All of this must give a picture of an earnest and devoted scholar, but for all of the dedication and hard work he also enjoyed life. A memory of the early 1950s recalls him attending gatherings of the unconventional intelligentsia of Birmingham, in the company of surrealist artists and 'freckled young women wearing gypsy dresses'.[52] In later life he was very convivial, and one often encountered him with a group of companions, engaged in bantering, light-hearted conversation. He often visited public houses, and was very fond of wine, warning (ironically) of the danger of drinking water, which might be polluted.[53] He also enjoyed good food, which he often cooked himself, being especially prone to use formidable quantities of garlic. He could break into spontaneous singing.

His most important contribution as a university academic was as a stimulus for more serious and experienced students (in the later phase of his teaching career first-year students found him rather daunting), and above all as a supervisor of postgraduates. He encouraged their research work, and was always aware of the danger of narrow obsession with archival data gathering. When there were enough students to form a seminar, he would organise discussions at which theory and historical literature were discussed, so that no student was unaware of the need to set their discoveries in a broader context. He would encourage reading of books from Continental Europe wherever possible, and when an important new work

[52] From a letter to the author of this memoir from Tim Hilton.

[53] The idea was suggested by a notice seen on one of many visits to France: 'L'eau est pollué; buvez du vin'.

appeared, such as Duby's *Guerriers et Paysans*, he would urge students and colleagues to read it. From about 1969 research students prompted by him held informal seminars on Friday evenings in their houses or flats in rotation, at which papers were read and discussed and much wine consumed. The 'Friday night seminars' attracted scholars from other universities, and even from overseas, and continued long after his retirement. When research students wrote their chapters, they were returned promptly, with pages of unusually thin paper covered with annotations, comments, and suggestions for improvements in a small but very legible hand. If a student came up with a good idea or a significant discovery, he recommended its publication. Outsiders spoke of a 'Birmingham School', but the research students were a very heterogeneous group. Perhaps one can see some common traits among those who were supervised by him, such as a concern for generalisation and context, or a tendency to distrust authority, whether that of medieval lords, ecclesiastics, and governments, or of members of the modern historical establishment.

His strong personality—he was among the few academics to whom the word charismatic can be applied—meant that conversations with him were often memorable. He had a particular intonation, and emphasised key phrases, which became lodged in the minds of those engaged with him. What he said was often apposite, or amusing, or thoughtful, or all three. His opinions were forcefully put, in pithy, colloquial language: 'possibly the most boring book ever written' was said of more than one prestigious work. A mention of historical geography provoked the comment: 'The problem with historical geographers is not what they know, but how they know it.'[54] He was irreverent, delighting in pricking the bubble of any hint at self-importance or complacency. He applied this to himself, and anyone who attempted to flatter or praise him incurred his immediate displeasure. He was capable of making life awkward for those in authority, even when they probably meant well. Students and colleagues wished to please him, and even to draw from him some word of approval, but these were not given very freely, as Philip Rahtz complained rather plaintively.[55]

Setting aside his tendency to mischievous conversation, he could at the appropriate time adopt much more responsible attitudes, taking very seriously the decision making on university committees, and on the board of

[54] Remembered by Howard Clarke, who while he was not a student of Hilton, was much influenced by Hilton in the 1960s. Sally Harvey was similarly drawn into Hilton's circle at this time.

[55] Personal comment by Philip Rahtz.

Past and Present. Whatever happened in 1956, he did not cease to be a communist. He remained loyal to the ideals which he believed had been betrayed by those in power. He always viewed the world in Marxist terms, emphasising class and struggle in everyday life, and analysing events and situations within that framework of ideas. In his historical thinking he could never accord much significance to growth and decline of population, as he regarded the fashionable emphasis on these trends as detracting from the really vital factors such as class conflict. In university or academic life he was always aware of antagonism, or of some impending threat from the right, and he was conscious of struggling against opposing forces. In Britain any hostility tended to be insidious and difficult to pin down, but there was no doubt about the attacks on historians in Czechoslovakia after 1968, or in India in the 1970s, and he was outspoken in defence of their academic freedom.

In his personal contacts, but more widely through his writing, he had a major role in making the subject of medieval economic and social history a lively field of enquiry and debate, which is a legacy that continues into the new century. After his death on 7 June 2002, his friends and students decided that the most appropriate way in which his memory could be honoured was by holding a conference, called 'Rodney Hilton's Middle Ages', to discuss the themes and ideas that he had pioneered. The aim was not to dwell on the past, but to look forward to future developments. It was fitting that papers were given by younger scholars, as well as those who had known him. Historians from twelve countries were present, and in view of the possible pollution of water supplies, much wine was drunk.

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Note. I am very grateful to Jean Birrell, Peter Coss, Ceinwen Hilton, Tim Hilton, Eric Hobsbawm and Chris Wickham for comments, improvements and correction of errors.