RICHARD BRITNELL

Richard Hugh Britnell
1944–2013

Richard Britnell was an important figure in the study of the economic and social history of the Middle Ages. He worked mainly on Britain, which for him included Ireland. The originality of his ideas and the comparisons he made with the parallel experiences of continental Europe in the same period generated interest in his work across the world. His greatest contribution was to show how commercialisation acted as a dynamic force in the medieval economy, after a period when changes in levels of population had been thought to have been the decisive factor. Some scholars who play a major part in changing their subject practise some degree of self-advertisement, or they make grand claims for their discoveries. Britnell's manner, however, was quiet and unassuming, and he applied himself to the traditional scholarly pursuits of gathering data from original sources and writing books and articles with modest and even understated titles. His career began with an appointment at Durham, where he remained for the rest of his life.

He was born on 21 April 1944 in Wrexham (his mother, born Edith Manson, was staying with her parents while her husband, Ronald, was engaged in war service), but Richard was brought up in Buckinghamshire, where both of his parents were teachers. Until his early teens the family (now with three children, two sons and a daughter) lived near Slough, where Ronald taught. Richard attended Sir William Borlase's grammar school in Marlow, until 1957 when his father was appointed headmaster of the village primary school at Lavendon, where Buckinghamshire meets

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Bedfordshire and Northamptonshire.[1] Richard spent the rest of his boyhood living in the teacher's house, near the medieval church and the site of the castle, and enjoying the surrounding fields and woods. He acquired a taste for walking and observing the countryside, which persisted throughout his life. His familiarity with rural landscapes stood him in good stead when he came to work on medieval farming. Living in Lavendon stimulated him as a student to write a scholarly history of the place for the local newspaper, and references to the village appear fleetingly in his later publications. His home contained many books and his parents were dedicated to education, providing encouragement which stimulated Richard, and also his brother Bill who became a well-known archaeologist. His mother resumed her career as an English teacher at Wolverton grammar school, which subsequently became a comprehensive. His parents had progressive ideas, read the *News Chronicle* and later the *Guardian*, and supported comprehensive education. Nonetheless, perhaps with some reluctance, they realised that Richard's academic future, in the light of his early promise at the Marlow school, would be best served by his attending Bedford Modern School. He gained a scholarship, and went as a day-boy, and though he was not enamoured of the school's dedication to sport and the cadet force he gained from the educational opportunity, and in 1961, at the age of 17, won an Exhibition to Clare College, Cambridge.

After graduating with upper seconds in both parts of the Historical Tripos Britnell embarked on a doctorate. When choosing a research topic, which would necessarily be rooted in a particular place or region, he considered working on the familiar territory of Buckinghamshire, but found that the sources were not sufficiently abundant. His continued interest in the area was demonstrated by his articles for the county's learned journal on the origins of the medieval town of Stony Stratford and the lost village of Abingdon.[2] He found that Essex made a more rewarding hunting ground, however, with its numerous medieval archives which were well kept in one of the most efficient record offices in the English counties, at Chelmsford. Colchester's records were not so easily accessible, but the town was worth studying as its high-quality documents had not attracted the sustained interest of an economic historian. He embarked on a thesis that was completed in 1970 on the relationship

[1] Information from Bill Britnell.

[2] R. Britnell, 'The origins of Stony Stratford', *Records of Buckinghamshire*, 20 (1977), 451–3; R. Britnell, 'Abingdon: a lost Buckinghamshire village', *Records of Buckinghamshire*, 22 (1980), 48–52.

between Colchester and its rural surroundings in the fourteenth century.[3] The combination of urban and agrarian history, a commonplace on the Continent, had rarely been attempted by historians of England, and from the beginning of his career Britnell needed to investigate such themes as field systems, estate management and the marketing of agricultural produce as well as the economic and civic life of the town.

The thesis was supervised by M. M. Postan and Marjorie Chibnall. Chibnall would have provided good practical advice; she had begun her career working on the records of the English manors of the Norman monastery of Bec, and was engaged upon her monumental edition of the chronicle of Ordericus Vitalis.[4] Postan had become influential by developing ideas about the pre-industrial economy which explained patterns of growth and decline. He had been an editor of the *Economic History Review* until 1960, and in the 1960s was editing the *Cambridge Economic History of Europe*. He served as president of the Economic History Society in 1963–6. His seminar on economic history was an important occasion which reflected the latest developments in the subject.[5]

In 1966, after two years of work on his doctoral thesis, Britnell was appointed at the age of 22 to a lectureship at Durham. In those days university appointments committees, mindful of the growing demand for staff both at the new universities and from the older institutions undergoing expansion, were anxious to recruit bright academics without putting undue emphasis on the candidates' age, experience or formal qualifications. The new lecturers thought themselves fortunate to gain academic employment at an early age, but their situation was not without difficulties, as they had to find time for research while writing lectures, preparing classes, acquiring teaching skills and applying themselves to the routines of marking and administration. Britnell had joined an economic history department which taught a syllabus based on the assumption that economic history was entirely a modern phenomenon, so in his early years he had no opportunity to teach the period about which he was most knowledgeable. He was called on to contribute to courses entitled 'Problems in invention and business activity' and 'Industrial Britain, origins and development'; the second of these required a great deal of staff time as it served as an

[3] R. Britnell, 'Colchester and the Countryside in the Fourteenth Century', Ph.D. thesis (Cambridge, 1970).

[4] D. E. Greenaway, 'Marjorie McCallum Chibnall 1915–2012', *Biographical Memoirs of Fellows of the British Academy*, 13 (2014), pp. 43–62.

[5] E. Miller, 'Michael Moissey Postan 1899–1981', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 69 (1983), pp. 544–57.

introduction to economic history for numerous first-year social science students before they moved on to more specialised degrees. Even up to 1991 Britnell was still teaching a course on the Scottish economy in the eighteenth century.[6] Durham's separate economic history department was merged with the history department in 1985, which was part of a national trend in the 1980s and 1990s. The end of this important historical specialism, the teaching of which went back in Britain to before the Great War, was widely deplored, but in Britnell's case it represented a liberation, as he was at last able to practise that synergy between teaching and research which is one of the strong points of the British university system. He expressed no strong resentment of the mismatch between his research interests and teaching duties between 1966 and 1985, and he may have gained something from the situation, as he demonstrated in his research into the medieval period a sureness of judgement in economic matters that he had gained from his extensive reading about modern industrial societies.

Through this period in the economic history department Britnell was continuing his research into Colchester and its surroundings, and published articles arising from that work. In addition, he was collecting data on markets throughout England, from which would develop his ideas about the growth of commerce.

He had personal contact with Postan from his Cambridge days, and shared with much of the community of economic and social historians the powerful vision of change in the medieval society and economy that Postan generated. Postan had embarked in his early years of research on studies of international trade, but was greatly influenced by the German agrarian historian Abel, who identified cyclical patterns, in which the later Middle Ages was seen as a crisis linked with population decline. Postan also knew of the work of the Russian agricultural economist Chayanov, who saw each peasant farm changing its size and economy in line with the numbers of consumers and producers in the family. Postan applied these ideas to medieval England and identified a period of expansion in the thirteenth century that ended with a burden of high population which had outstripped resources. New lands were colonised, but they were inferior in quality, and the yields of long-cultivated fields deteriorated because they received insufficient manure from an inadequate number of animals. In the crisis of the fourteenth century land was abandoned and population

[6] B. Dodds and C. D. Liddy (eds.), *Commercial Activity, Markets and Entrepreneurs in the Middle Ages* (Woodbridge, 2011), pp. xi–xii. Additional information on his teaching was given on his website.

fell, hastened by the Black Death of 1348–50, and the fifteenth century was a period of low economic performance.[7] Britnell was moving away from Postan's focus on agriculture in taking on the study of relations between town and country. However, he supported Postan's interpretation in his first substantial article in 1966 when he examined the connection between an Essex manor and the market, especially in the sale of grain, and he found that during the fourteenth century poor land was taken into cultivation and produced diminishing returns.[8] He returned to the theme in 1977, and found in the records of another Essex manor evidence that cultivation was extending on to land of inferior quality, but he also noted that after 1400 new methods of cultivation were being practised, an argument that modified Postan's pessimistic characterisation of the fifteenth century.[9]

Britnell's early publications about markets marked the beginning of his interest in the institutional framework within which medieval trade was conducted. He gathered information about the grant of market charters to lords, by which the Crown licensed the market and enabled the lord to collect tolls. Historians are liable to claim too much for the institutions that they study, as if buying and selling were political creations. Britnell was aware of the political and administrative dimension, and showed how markets were founded at the places where hundred courts met and so brought together administrative and trading occasions. His central argument, however, was that the proliferation of markets during the thirteenth century, reaching a peak in the period 1250–75, reflected a real growth in trade. People bought and sold according to their convenience and profit—hence the very different fortunes of the various foundations. Markets did not exercise a monopoly, but competed with one another; so some grew, but others declined and even failed.[10]

Britnell's interest in markets had originated in his investigations of trade and production for sale in Essex, especially around Colchester. More than twenty years after he began work on his doctorate the book on the growth and decline of Colchester between 1300 and 1525 was

[7] M. M. Postan, 'England', in M. M. Postan (ed.), *The Cambridge Economic History of Europe*, vol. 1: *The Agrarian Life of the Middle Ages*, 2nd edn. (Cambridge, 1966), pp. 548–632.

[8] R. Britnell, 'Production for the market on a small fourteenth-century estate', *Economic History Review*, 2nd ser., 19 (1966), 380–7.

[9] R. Britnell, 'Agricultural technology and the margin of cultivation in the fourteenth century', *Economic History Review*, 2nd ser. 30 (1977), 53–66.

[10] R. Britnell, 'English markets and royal administration before 1200', *Economic History Review*, 2nd ser. 31 (1978), 183–96; R. Britnell, 'The proliferation of markets in England, 1200–1349', *Economic History Review*, 2nd ser. 34 (1981), 209–21.

published.[11] It was a thorough, comprehensive and satisfying account of the town's development from a trading centre of modest size in about 1300 to a period of expansion in the late fourteenth century, and then slipping into decline at the end of the Middle Ages. He pointed out the semi-agrarian character of the town's economy at the beginning of his period of investigation, and saw its thorough urbanisation as the result of the growth in the manufacture and marketing of cloth. Colchester specialised in making russet cloth; this was grey in colour and of moderate price, which attracted consumers in great numbers in continental Europe and especially on the shores of the Baltic. Consequently he could see urban growth as a product not of the interaction between town and surrounding countryside as is normally argued, but of long-distance international trade. He demonstrated great skill in tracing changes in the town's population by counting people employed in the food and drink trades, and ingeniously calculated the cost of making a piece of russet cloth. The quality of the research and presentation in the book cannot be doubted, but it was deliberately low key: another author would have made a commotion about the discovery that Colchester was growing in the decades after the Black Death, when the populations of most towns and villages were falling. Around 1400 the town became one of the larger commercial centres in England. Instead, this potential bright light in a rather gloomy period was played down, and the author calculated that in 190 years between 1334 and 1524 Colchester's expansion was confined to only thirty-six years.

After this realistic (or even pessimistic) view of Colchester's changing fortunes, and perhaps gaining in confidence after the completion of his first book, Britnell moved in a more positive direction in his assessment of England's medieval economy. In the mid-1980s he developed an interest in Italy, began to teach Italian history to undergraduates, took a holiday in Tuscany and acquired a knowledge of the language. When the English contemplate medieval Italian towns they are bound to be impressed by the superiority of their material culture compared with their English counterparts. In late fourteenth-century Colchester a modest amount of marble was used to build the steps of the 'moothall' (town hall), and the town spent quite heavily on the walls round the town—but the authorities did not attempt to extend the walled circuit to protect the suburbs. Italian towns invested much more lavishly on their defences, both for practical and symbolic purposes, and each city had a *palazzo publico* and other

[11] R. Britnell, *Growth and Decline in Colchester, 1300–1525* (Cambridge, 1986).

impressive buildings. The private houses in Italy were much more opulent and pretentious than those found in England. Britnell prepared conference papers in the late 1980s, which appeared soon after as journal articles, in which he analysed the differences between the late medieval economies of Italy and England. To his readers' surprise he concluded that the comparison did not suggest that England was a backward country, trapped in a colonial relationship with the more industrial and wealthy towns of the Continent. The economies of England and northern Italy were different, but it would be wrong to use terms such as dependence. Italy was more urbanised and it acted as a hub for flows of international trade, but English agriculture was strong, and the countryside was not restricted by urban regulation.[12]

In the late 1980s and early 1990s Britnell was working towards his second and most important book, on commercialisation. When it appeared in 1993 he was established as a master of economic analysis and as a scholar with a wide knowledge of the sources. The book was divided into three periods between 1000 and 1500, and each period was analysed in three chapters headed 'Markets and rules', 'Trade and specialization' and 'Lordship'. He recognised much evidence for exchange in the eleventh century, but noted the use of payments in kind rather than money. It was in the period 1180–1330 that commercial growth was concentrated, with more markets, more towns, a growth in the use of cash, for example in rent payment, and a greater degree of specialisation in agricultural production. Peasants became drawn into the market for farm produce, and as well as taking their crops to market they were also practising exchange within the village. The smallholders, since they could not be self-sufficient, earned wages and bought food. Although production shrank after 1330, and towns declined, there was no return to the limited exchange system that had prevailed before 1180, and much of the commercial infrastructure survived. Although serfdom disappeared, the decades up to 1500 did not see the rise of a capitalist economy.[13]

[12] R. Britnell, 'England and northern Italy in the early fourteenth century: the economic contrasts', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th ser. 39 (1989), 167–83; R. Britnell, 'The towns of England and northern Italy in the early fourteenth century', *Economic History Review*, 44 (1991), 21–35.

[13] R. Britnell, *The Commercialisation of English Society, 1000–1500* (Cambridge, 1993). The second edition was published in 1996 by Manchester University Press, as he was dissatisfied with the original publishers.

This book marked an important stage in the reinterpretation of medieval economic history in the English-speaking world after the reign of Postan's ideas. There had been much criticism of Postan, beginning in the late 1960s and continuing through the next two decades, and the new emphasis on market forces had been gaining ground since the early 1970s. The idea that the advance of the market could provide an explanatory model to rival and supplant the Postan thesis developed more slowly, and Britnell's 1993 book marked the point when we could talk of two alternative approaches to the period, each commanding respect, but with the commercialising view gaining more attention. Britnell himself remained rather ambivalent about Postan's ideas, to which he had been exposed as a student and research student; he regarded his former supervisor with much respect but also some wry scepticism. If a participant in a seminar discussion of the medieval economy identified yet another flaw in the edifice of evidence and argument that supported Postan, Britnell would break into a smile of affectionate nostalgia, and comment mischievously that if he was still alive Postan would with typical mental agility have fitted the inconvenient new idea into his great scheme.

An allegation has been made that in adopting their positive view of the market medieval historians were responding to the new political climate, especially after 1979, when Margaret Thatcher, Sir Keith Joseph and various supporters of the Conservative government were praising market forces and rediscovering the ideas of Adam Smith. Some historians who sympathised with Thatcher may have been especially pleased to assign a high profile to the medieval market, but the idea was emerging as early as 1973, before the Conservatives were converted to zealous monetarism and the free flow of market forces, and its early advocates included historians on the left who had no truck with neo-liberalism. The emphasis on the dynamic effects of medieval commerce has also persisted into the early twenty-first century, when the power of the market has retreated in the world view of politicians.

Britnell belonged to a general movement to give the medieval market more emphasis, and he played a supporting role in a number of collective research enterprises. His book came in the midst of a group of publications connected to the same theme. He acted as adviser to a project based in the University of London on 'Feeding the City' which investigated the relationship between London and its rural hinterland. It developed the idea that the very large demand for grain from London had the power to determine the choice of crops and the specialisation in cereal production over ten counties, with consequences for land values, prices and the flow

of local trade. The results were published in 1993.[14] A conference at Leicester in 1992 brought together scholars from Australia, the United States, Canada and Switzerland, whose deliberations on such subjects as economic development at the time of Domesday and the commercialisation of agriculture on lords' demesnes were incorporated into a book entitled *A Commercialising Economy* edited by Britnell and Bruce Campbell, which appeared in 1995.[15]

A participant in the Leicester conference, David Farmer from Saskatchewan in Canada, had made a major contribution with his work on prices, wages and the marketing of agricultural produce, and when he died suddenly in 1994 a group of scholars wrote essays in his memory to fill a special issue of the *Canadian Journal of History.* The theme of the volume was mainly markets and market towns, and Britnell's contribution typically explored an institutional problem, showing that prices of grain in market towns were not decided by the free flow of bargaining between buyers and sellers, but from action by the authorities at the opening of trading.[16] Scholars were observing the advanced state of the urban network in about 1300, and believed that the patterns of trading established then could persist into modern times. Britnell sounded a note of caution in his contribution to a book (published in 2000) that emerged from a conference on urban hinterlands, sponsored by the Centre for Metropolitan History, which had hosted the 'Feeding the City' project. He emphasised the fragility of towns and trading systems that had been unstable before 1300 and continued to evolve afterwards.[17] Meanwhile he was advising another Centre for Metropolitan History project, to produce a gazetteer of markets and fairs, which was completed in 2001 and is still serving historians well as a valuable work of reference.[18] In these various ventures Britnell was working closely with Bruce Campbell (of Belfast) and Derek Keene (of London).

[14] B. Campbell, D. Keene, J. Galloway and M. Murphy, *A Medieval Capital and its Grain Supply: Agrarian Production and Distribution in the London Region c.1300* (Historical Geography Research Series, 30, London, 1993).

[15] R. Britnell and B. M. S. Campbell (eds.), *A Commercialising Economy: England 1086–c.1300* (Manchester, 1995).

[16] R. Britnell, 'Price-setting in English borough markets, 1349–1500', *Canadian Journal of History*, 31 (1996), 1–15.

[17] R. Britnell, 'Urban demand in the English economy, 1300–1600', in J. A. Galloway (ed.), *Trade, Hinterlands and Market Integration c.1300–1600* (London, 2000), 1–21.

[18] S. Letters, *Gazetteer of Markets and Fairs in England and Wales to 1516* (List and Index Society, Special Series 32 and 33, 2003) is the hard copy; there is also an electronic version which is updated.

Britnell was not the sort of historian who would take a leading role in a great advance in understanding and then bask contentedly in contemplation of his successes. Having been an advocate of commercialisation in 1993, his subsequent writings express reservations about the freedom of trade and the maturity of the system. A remarkable example of his self-doubt related to the subject of specialisation. In the 1990s he had been showing that commercial growth had fostered specialisation in production. A lord growing grain near a town would sow as many acres as possible with wheat, because that was the corn that the townspeople demanded for their own bread, and which could be sold on to corn-mongers for a high price. Artisans might produce most efficiently and gain the best sales if they perfected their skill and concentrated on one commodity: Britnell found in the thirteenth century people called sieve-makers, grease-sellers and locksmiths. He then had second thoughts, and in an article published in 2001 pointed out that many people pursued a mixture of occupations and that artisans, even in a sizeable town such as Colchester, often kept up an agricultural sideline.[19]

For the rest of his life Britnell continued to publish occasional pieces on aspects of commercialisation and urban history, the themes for which he was best known, in encyclopedia articles, contributions to textbooks, continental conference volumes, 'companions', dictionaries and historical atlases. But he explored many other interests. One that was connected to his work on markets was his curiosity about technical terms, which were avoided by lesser scholars because of their obscurity and complexity. The phrase *avantagium mercatoris* (benefit to the merchant) referred to a custom by which when grain was being measured in bushels for sale, one bushel in eight was heaped, giving the recipient an extra allowance of grain.[20] Another was the prohibition of 'forestalling', which was designed to prevent goods such as grain or fish being intercepted and purchased on their way to the public market. Britnell dug into legislation and court cases to show the complicated development of this offence, which shed much light on the operations of middlemen in the medieval commercial system, and the morality which the authorities sought to impose on traders.[21] He was interested in the technicalities of buying and selling—the

[19] R. Britnell, 'Specialisation of work in England, 1100–1300', *Economic History Review*, 54 (2001), 1–16.
[20] R. Britnell, 'Avantagium mercatoris: a custom in medieval trade', *Nottingham Medieval Studies*, 24 (1980), 37–50.
[21] R. Britnell, 'Forstall, forestalling and the statute of forestallers', *English Historical Review*, 102 (1987), 89–102.

measuring, the bargaining over prices and the methods of payment. He asked 'did merchants travel with their goods?' and found that although they sometimes depended on servants and agents, they did sometimes take ship to foreign ports to sell their cargoes.[22]

Another aspect of his work emerged from collaboration with his wife, to whom he was happily married from 1973 until her death in 2011. Jenny lectured in the French department at Durham, and encouraged his interest in the use of writing in the Middle Ages. He argued that there was a significant growth in 'pragmatic literacy' in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. This movement to make permanent written records of privileges and to keep administrative documents and accounts was connected with the economic expansion of the period. Surplus wealth could be spent on education and the employment of clerks, and the records improved the efficiency of business and government. He invited scholars to contribute to a session at an international conference and edited their papers in a book published in 1997. He subsequently edited with Jenny a collection of essays on vernacular literature and current affairs.[23]

With the merger between the Durham departments of economic history and history Britnell began to teach general English and British history, which included political history. He acted as a joint editor of a series of conference volumes on thirteenth-century England, which contained a majority of articles on political, social, religious and cultural themes. Although his academic interest was focused on the thirteenth century, he became active in editing and writing on the fifteenth. In 1995 he co-edited a conference volume on the legacy of K. B. McFarlane, and in the same year even published an essay in the journal of the society dedicated to rehabilitating the reputation of Richard III. The undergraduate course that he shared with Margaret Harvey included literature and art history and stimulated student interest in the period through film and drama. From 1992 he taught a specialist course on Wolsey, and this led to some research articles about the Cardinal. He subsequently published a general survey of the period between 1471 and 1529, called the *Closing of the Middle Ages*, which combined his fifteenth-century interests with his knowledge of the period of Wolsey's supremacy.[24]

[22] R. Britnell, 'Sedentary long-distance trade and the English merchant class', in P. Coss and S. Lloyd (eds), *Thirteenth Century England*, 5 (Woodbridge, 1995), pp. 129–39.

[23] R. Britnell (ed.), *Pragmatic Literacy, East and West, 1200–1330* (Woodbridge, 1997); R. Britnell and J. Britnell (eds.), *Vernacular Literature and Current Affairs in the Early Sixteenth Century: France, England and Scotland* (Aldershot, 2000).

[24] R. Britnell and A. Pollard (eds.), *The McFarlane Legacy: Studies in Late Medieval Politics and*

In the chapter on the economy in the *Closing*, and in at least four other articles and chapters, Britnell addressed the problem of the state of the economy in the fifteenth century. These thoughts on this difficult period culminated in his last essay on the subject published in 2010, in which he reprised an article published by Postan in 1939. Postan had gloomily concluded that the century was one of recession and failure, and Britnell re-examined his former supervisor's general arguments in the light of subsequent research, which had supplied data and statistics unavailable in 1939. Britnell concluded that the great man had been right, with no more than a few reservations. There was an element of irony in this choice of subject, because the volume in which the article appeared was a Festschrift in honour of a scholar who celebrates signs of growth and innovation in the fifteenth century.[25]

Just as Britnell's interest in political history and the fifteenth century had developed out of his experiences in the Durham history department, so he became a historian of the north of England and especially of Durham. He went to Durham with a personal knowledge of the south Midlands and a strong academic attachment to Colchester and Essex, and the Essex connection necessarily continued as he wrote his thesis and first book. He was aware that the Durham archives, kept in the late twentieth century in the 'Prior's Kitchen' in the complex of medieval buildings around the cathedral, contained a remarkably complete set of records for the priory, and there was also a substantial number of documents from the landed estates of the bishops of Durham in the Public Record Office in London. He had begun to work on this material in the 1980s, when he published an article on the Langley survey, but his first substantial publication came in 1990 when he examined the policy of the bishops and their officials towards their tenants after the Black Death epidemic of 1349. Historians have traditionally talked of a feudal reaction in that period, and this exceptionally powerful lord (the bishop of Durham exercised independent authority in his palatinate) made extreme attempts to suppress the peasant resistance and prevent the fall in revenues that followed the drop in population. Britnell declined to interpret the story as one of

Society (Stroud, 1995); R. Britnell, 'Richard, Duke of Gloucester, and the death of Thomas Fauconberg', *The Ricardian*, 10 (1995), 174–84; R. Britnell, 'Service, loyalty and betrayal in Cavendish's *The Life and Death of Cardinal Wolsey*', *Moreana*, 42 (2005), 3–30; R. Britnell, *The Closing of the Middle Ages? England, 1471–1529* (Oxford, 1997).

[25] R. Britnell, 'Postan's fifteenth century', in R. Goddard, J. Langdon and M. Muller (eds), *Survival and Discord in Medieval Society: Essays in Honour of Christopher Dyer* (Turnhout, 2010), pp. 49–67.

class antagonism, as he found peasants sometimes cooperating with their lord. He argued that by the 1380s the administrators of the estates pragmatically accepted significant victories by the tenants, so they were not blinkered defenders of lordly privilege.[26] In 1996 he contributed an essay to a Festschrift which traced the history of towns in the north from the Norman Conquest until 1300. He argued that some of these urban communities achieved great success, and it was wrong to dismiss the region as backward.[27]

He supported the project by a group of north-eastern universities to come together in researching the history of the region, under the title of NEEHI (North East England Historical Institute), and in 2005 he co-edited a book of essays about the region in the later Middle Ages. He also collaborated with a historical geographer, Brian Roberts, in a research project to exploit the documentary and landscape evidence for the reclamation of the wastes in the uplands of County Durham, the results of which contributed to the wider debate on the use of marginal lands in the high Middle Ages.[28]

He was active in the Surtees Society, which publishes documents relating to the northern counties, and became joint editor with Margaret Harvey of the series in 1999. An officer of a record society is not expected to edit individual volumes, but he applied a great deal of time and skill to publishing the text of the court rolls and books of the borough of Crossgate, part of the city of Durham, in 2008. The edited records were helpful to historians of medieval towns in general, as few borough court records have been properly edited. An unusual feature of Crossgate was that the court records in October each year in 1498–1520 noted the setting of the prices of grain, which connected with Britnell's earlier work on price-setting in borough markets.[29] When he died he had almost completed an edition of the manorial account rolls of Durham Priory of the period 1277–1310, a formidably lengthy volume containing much material relevant to agricultural history and the study of accountancy and administration. The volume appeared thanks to the efforts of three

[26] R. Britnell, 'Feudal reaction after the Black Death in the Palatinate of Durham', *Past and Present*, 128 (1990), 28–47

[27] R. Britnell, 'Boroughs, markets and trade in northern England, 1000–1216', in R. Britnell and J. Hatcher (eds.), *Progress and Problems in Medieval England: Essays in Honour of Edward Miller* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 46–67.

[28] H. M. Dunsford and S. J. Harris, 'Colonisation of the wasteland in County Durham, 1100–1400', *Economic History Review*, 46 (2003), 34–56.

[29] R. Britnell (ed.), *Records of the Borough of Crossgate, Durham, 1312–1531* (Surtees Society, 212, Woodbridge, 2008).

colleagues who finished the proof reading and compiled the index.[30] In addition to his own work on the Durham archives, he realised that they provided a valuable and accessible resource for research students. A number of able students benefited from these materials, and important books were published on the basis of theses on Durham subjects for which Britnell acted as supervisor.[31]

Although best known as a historian of towns and trade, Britnell had begun his career with research into the relations between town and country, and devoted most of his attention in the north-east to rural matters. He had been drawn back into agrarian history in the 1980s by an old Cambridge friend and mentor, Edward Miller, who was editing the third volume (on the period 1348–1500) of the *Agrarian History*, a major enterprise that had been planned in the 1950s and by the 1980s was nearing completion. The volumes were divided into regional sections, and the author who had been originally nominated to deal with eastern England had abandoned the task. Britnell was an ideal replacement as he had worked on Essex in the period, though becoming equally well-informed with the voluminous sources for Suffolk, Norfolk and Lincolnshire would have daunted most historians. He put a great deal of time into the project in the 1980s and wrote some articles about the region on the way. One of these notably compared the information about agriculture in the Paston letters with the evidence from administrative records. The *Agrarian History* volume eventually appeared in 1991 with Britnell's three notable pieces on eastern England.[32]

Between 1995 and 2010 he became involved in a major agrarian project in southern England, because Hampshire County Council was taking an initiative to develop the use of the unique documentary resource in the care of the county record office, the Pipe Rolls of the bishopric of Winchester, which stretched in an almost unbroken series from 1208 into the eighteenth century. The medieval rolls contained detailed accounts for each of more than fifty manors in the largest church estate in medieval England. Britnell served on the steering committee which oversaw the

[30] R. Britnell (ed.), *Durham Priory Manorial Accounts 1277–1310*, Surtees Society, 218 (Woodbridge, 2014).

[31] M. Threlfall-Holmes, *Monks and Markets. Durham Cathedral Priory 1460–1520* (Oxford, 2005); P. L. Larson, *Conflict and Compromise in the Late Medieval Countryside. Lords and Peasants in Durham, 1349–1400* (London, 2006); B. Dodds, *Peasants and Production in the Medieval North-East: the Evidence from Tithes, 1270–1536* (Woodbridge, 2007).

[32] R. Britnell, 'The Pastons and their Norfolk', *Agricultural History Review*, 36 (1988), 32–44; E. Miller (ed.), *The Agrarian History of England and Wales, 3, 1348–1500* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 53–67, 194–210, and 611–24.

editing of two of the pipe rolls, and himself edited a collected volume of essays about various aspects of the Winchester Pipe Rolls.[33] In addition he supported two research projects on the peasant land market based on information in the rolls. After a decade of useful work he assisted one of the researchers to produce a jointly authored book on the peasant land market in the years 1263–1415. Using thousands of pieces of data they depicted the changing pattern of land transfers. In the period before 1349 rural society was dominated by families' attachments to their holdings, but these ties were weakened by the subsequent fall in population, when the distribution of land changed, with some large accumulation of holdings and a decline in the number of cottagers, though experience varied from one manor to another.[34] At the turn of the millennium Britnell took the initiative in planning a conference on the agrarian history of the period 1350–1450. He hosted the event in Durham, and edited the papers with Ben Dodds, his former research student. Three of the chapters came from Britnell himself, so he put the stamp of his own interpretations firmly on the book. He worked out a story of developments in four phases each of two or three decades, which anyone proposing to generalise about the whole period would need to take into account.[35]

Running parallel with Britnell's interpretations of history were Marxist ideas, and in particular the proposal that conflict between classes provided a dynamic force behind social and economic change. Britnell was opposed to analysing society in terms of classes, so this approach did not figure in his writings, except occasionally when he criticised Marxist interpretations. In 1980 he used his knowledge of gentry estates in the fourteenth century to argue that these 'small landowners' did not form a progressive, market-oriented social group, as had been proposed, among others, by the Soviet historian Kosminsky.[36] Britnell's article on the 'feudal reaction' in the period 1349–80 avoided interpreting the conflict between a lord and his peasants in class terms. He was particularly anxious in his general accounts of society and economy to deny that a transition, or the emergence of capitalism, occurred at the end of the Middle Ages. We have

[33] R. Britnell (ed.), *The Winchester Pipe Rolls: Studies in Medieval English Economy and Society* (Woodbridge, 2003).

[34] J. Mullan and R. Britnell, *Land and Family: Trends and Local Variations in the Peasant Land Market on the Winchester Bishopric Estates, 1263–1415* (Hatfield, 2010).

[35] B. Dodds and R. Britnell (eds), *Rural Society and Agriculture after the Black Death: Common Themes and Regional Variations* (Hatfield, 2008).

[36] R. Britnell, 'Minor landlords in England and medieval agrarian capitalism', *Past and Present*, 89 ((1980), pp. 3–22.

seen that he played down any suggestion that the fifteenth century saw significant areas of growth or structural social changes. He faced the Marxist perspective directly in 1993 with an article which advanced the view that the most significant changes had occurred by 1300, and they related to a growth in commerce, not a transformation in social relations.[37] It should be added that he was always courteous and even respectful to scholars who held contrary views, and did not allow academic disagreements to lead to personal animosity.

At the beginning of this century Britnell published two general works which served to sum up his considerable achievements. He contributed two chapters on the economy of towns over the whole period between 600 and 1500 to the *Cambridge Urban History*. He reflected the range of work on the subject with his usual clarity and economy of words, but put his stamp on the generalisations by returning to a favourite theme of the institutional framework that towns imposed on trade, arguing that the regulation of markets, which protected the interests of town dwellers, served to discourage would-be sellers from the countryside, and in the long run damaged the larger towns.[38] Oxford University Press planned to publish a series of textbooks on economic history, and Britnell was an ideal choice for the volume covering the Middle Ages. He rose fully to the challenge of writing British rather than English history by including the medieval economy of Ireland, which was not easy as that country had its own social structure and institutions and lacks both abundant primary sources and a great body of secondary literature on economic history. Although his volume was aimed at students, he provided a general account of Britain and Ireland that would attract expert readers, and interwove all of the themes found in his specialised work—one sees the influence of Postan in his affirmation of a crisis or at least 'a dampening of growth' in *c*.1300, and from Britnell's own interpretations comes an emphasis on commercialisation, a concern for institutions, the significance of literacy, comparison with the continent and a down-beat view of the fifteenth century. The tone is moderate, restrained, authoritative and trustworthy, with a reluctance to exaggerate or adopt dogmatic positions.[39] When he was elected FBA in the same year that this book appeared, in 2003, the nomination justified the honour on the grounds of his advocacy of British

[37] R. Britnell, 'Commerce and capitalism in late medieval England: problems of description and theory', *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 6 (1993), 359–76.
[38] D. Palliser (ed.), *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain*, vol. 1: *600–1540* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 105–26, 313–33.
[39] R. Britnell, *Britain and Ireland 1050–1530: Economy and Society* (Oxford, 2004).

(rather than just English) history, his numerous publications and his interest in literacy. The main grounds for election lay in his bold advocacy of the importance of markets, which had breathed new vigour into an old idea.

Richard Britnell spent his whole academic career at Durham University, for which he had a strong loyalty and affection. He demonstrated his commitment to his colleagues and students by teaching a wide range of subjects, far beyond his immediate research interests. He showed his commitment to interdisciplinary studies by serving as chair of the Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies. He supported his historical colleagues as we have seen by helping with the conference on the thirteenth century, and with the NEEHI activities. He collaborated in a number of schemes with Tony Pollard of Teesside University, including a project to commission a book on the medieval town of Northallerton, and he also participated in a joint venture with Richard Smith of Cambridge on tithes. He held research grants with Durham colleagues, Paul Harvey and Brian Roberts, which yielded fruitful results. He took on a long series of administrative duties, serving on boards and committees in the departments of economic history and history, but he did not see himself occupying more prominent roles, such as head of department. He was promoted to a readership in 1994 and to a chair in 1997. Outside the University he acted as external examiner for a number of doctoral theses and MA courses. He served the profession nationally and internationally particularly by organising conferences. He was a quiet presence at these events, making sure behind the scenes that everything went smoothly, and made those attending the conference feel that they were welcome. He unselfishly encouraged younger researchers, especially in his later years, nurturing some talented research students, looking after his research assistants, and ensuring that contributions by recent postgraduates were included in the conferences that he organised and the volumes of collected essays that he edited. A particularly valuable service to others, involving a great expenditure of time, was to write the annual review of periodical literature for the *Economic History Review* from 1992 to 2003. These overviews did not merely list the publications, but also made brief and carefully worded indications of their significance. By his constructive tone he was raising the morale of other scholars and urging them forwards.

In his last years at Durham Richard was finding the administrative routines increasingly irksome, and he was regretting that the personal element in teaching was reduced by the pressure of larger student numbers. He began to prepare for retirement by making practical plans for continuing research. These plans were hastened in 2003 when he was found to

have a cancer that could not be cured. He retired from his university post, and e-mailed his friends with the bad news. Recovering from the initial shock, he lived with the threat for ten years, and was not visibly affected by it. His method for coping with the illness was to maintain a high level of academic work, and between 2004 and 2013 produced thirty publications and delivered twenty conference and seminar papers. He continued to help others by taking on routine and sometimes difficult tasks, such as editing books of collected papers, and the lengthy and demanding Surtees Society texts. Richard also involved himself in an extraordinary range of voluntary activities, with commitments to the Samaritans, the Macmillan organisation and the Durham Rotary Club. He played the organ at his local church and served as secretary of the parochial church council. He had always been interested in drama, and expanded his role with the local Shakespeare company. In his spare time he learnt New Testament Greek and went on long walks. Two lecturers at Durham edited a Festschrift volume for him, which was published in 2011. It was focused on his central theme of commerce, which helped to give the book a coherence that such volumes sometimes lack. His fellow researchers and admirers were conscious of his courage and the debt that they owed him, and rather than reviving old papers produced new and high-quality work.[40]

He attended a stimulating and enjoyable event in July 2013 in honour of an old friend and ally, Bruce Campbell. Britnell presented a paper on the farm equipment maintained by landed estates in the period 1250–1350. The availability of specialist artisans throughout the countryside confirmed his 'commercialisation' model—but he ended with a typical reservation, that in the period 'there were many limitations to the development of trade'. He left a text which is published in the Festschrift that arose from the conference.[41] Within a few months of this occasion, spent in the company of his many academic friends, he went into a decline and died on 17 December.

Although his illness was widely known, his death still came as a shock. At his funeral those who knew him as an academic learnt new things about him, such as his commitment to voluntary work, or his musical and linguistic accomplishments. He lived a very public life, but also valued his privacy, and his sons found unexpectedly among his papers a collection of

[40] Dodds and Liddy, *Commercial Activity*.

[41] R. Britnell, 'Making or buying? Maintaining farm equipment and buildings, 1250–1350', in M. Kowaleski, J. Langdon and P. Schofield (eds.), *Peasants and Lords in the Medieval English Economy: Essays in Honour of Bruce M. S. Campbell* (Turnhout, 2015), pp. 225–45.

poetry that he had written over a number of years. We were aware that he had been happily married to Jenny, who was also a colleague helping him with his work on literacy, and that they had two sons, John and David, whom we were pleased to meet. Jenny had died in 2011, and Richard had helped her through a harrowing illness. It was not generally known that his mother, Edith, whom he had visited frequently through her last years in Durham, had died at the age of 99 in February 2013. The care he gave both Jenny and Edith, and then their deaths, must have sapped his strength. His stoical spirit and religious faith sustained him in those last difficult years, and enabled him to emerge through all these troubles still as a wise, kind, witty and tolerant man and a creative and committed scholar.

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Note. There is a bibliography of Richard Britnell's publications up to 2010 in B. Dodds and C. D. Liddy (eds.), *Commercial Activity, Markets and Entrepreneurs in the Middle Ages* (Woodbridge, 2011), pp. 249–55. A selection of his essays was published in R. Britnell, *Markets, Trade and Economic Development in England and Europe, 1050–1550* (Farnham, 2009). I am grateful to Bill and John Britnell, and Elaine Ashbee (Richard's sister) for information and advice, and also to Margaret Harvey and Tony Pollard for valuable comments. Marion Paterson and Jacqueline Cox found material in their archives. With typical conscientiousness Richard Britnell kept his website up to date until 2013, and that has been an invaluable source of details about his many academic activities.