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Medieval Everyday: A Creative Microhistory

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Medieval Everydays: A Creative Microhistory

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The author wishes to thank Carey Fleiner, Kate Giles, Simon Sandall, Katy Soar and Keir Waddington for conversation over this piece and concepts, and all of the HS2208 Reading History seminar groups over the years that explored the concepts of microhistory, even though they mostly hated the module.

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Social Bonds, Kinship and Networks

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Edited by
Amy Livingstone and
Charlotte Cartwright

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Medieval Everyday: A Creative Microhistory

Katherine Weikert¹

Abstract: This article explores the medieval “everyday” through archaeological, microhistorical, and creative techniques. Following one day in the lives of a medieval lady of the manor and her family and servants in Facombe Netherton, Hampshire, in 1198, the article uses excavation, material culture, and contemporary texts to find the intersections between the quotidian and the extraordinary. As a result, we see lives of the less well-known in the period and explore the many lived experiences of a manor house. Ultimately the article weaves together the multiplicity of “everyday” experiences and demonstrates the usefulness of embedding creativity and fiction into historical writing.

THE MEDIEVAL “EVERYDAY”—THE SENSE of how people beyond the elite lived their lives—has fascinated historians and archaeologists for decades. Bolstered by works by Judith Bennett, Christopher Dyer, and others, and the incredible wealth of archaeological evidence unearthed since the establishment of the field of medieval archaeology in the mid-1950s, scholars have increasingly turned to the “everyday” to try to further understand medieval life. However, there is often a reticence to move too far from what can be definitively evidenced. To some degree this is sensible: no one writing academic history wants to make stuff up. But this has also limited where we, as scholars, can go when we seem to have reached the exploratory limits of the evidence available to us. In this article, I outline a new approach that calls for a critical move beyond the traditional structures of academic writing to incorporate creativity in our practice via what I call a *creative microhistory*: taking a small or singular locality and its known evidence, and cautiously and sympathetically filling in the gaps of the historical and material record with elements of narrative, creativity, and fiction.

¹ The author wishes to thank Carey Fleiner, Kate Giles, Simon Sandall, Katy Soar, and Keir Waddington for conversation over this piece and concepts, and all of the HS2208 Reading History seminar groups over the years that explored the concepts of microhistory, even though they mostly hated the module.

A creative microhistory can crucially illuminate the understudied and under-evidenced people of medieval worlds, who we may only see as a part of the “everyday” rather than individuals with agency in specific localities. To see how a creative microhistory both demonstrates theoretical ideas of the “everyday” and shines a light on understudied populations, this article will take a single place—Faccombe Netherton in Hampshire—on a single day in April 1198, and create a microhistory to draw out the multiple experiences of people in the place. Drawing on a wealth of different forms of evidence—its historical records, archaeological materials from its excavation, prosopographical research around its inhabitants, and contemporary texts and material culture—the creative microhistory fashioned from this evidence illuminates a multitude of everyday and lived experiences between people and locality in Anglo-Norman England. This approach is not simply limited to local history, or medieval history, though, as the theory and method can help to illuminate the everyday of the past in a variety of contexts. The reach of this theoretical and methodological approach is boundless by time and place: adding creativity to microhistorical and archaeological biographical theories and approaches can be carefully applied to any time or place that contains multiple areas of evidence and the sensitive knowledge to combine them. Its potential to open new areas of historical research and queries is limitless.

The Everyday, the Mundane, and Creativity

The study of the “everyday” of the past expanded rapidly in the post-World War II Western academy. As history turned towards social and cultural history, greatly influenced by ideas of “history from below,” in parallel, archaeology moved towards post-processualism which linked with “postmodernity’s rejection of meta-narratives.”² As Thomas V. Cohen has noted, “History from below, history from the political Left, was avid to hear the voice and catch the *mentalité* and culture of obscure men and women, of those below high politics, inhabitants of smaller spheres, of villages and of towns’ darker quarters far from its main squares and towering palaces.”³ Concepts of agency came to the fore when studying the

² Tadhg O’Keeffe, “Theory and Medieval Archaeology in Ireland and Beyond: The Narrative Tradition and the Archaeological Imagination,” *The Journal of Irish Archaeology* 27 (2018): 99–116 at 108–9.

³ Thomas V. Cohen, “The Macrohistory of Microhistory,” *Journal of Medieval and*

everyday. István M. Szi­jártó maintains that microhistory, from its start, “insisted on human agency, arguing that people should be seen not as puppets in the hands of underlying social, cultural, or other forces of history, but as active individuals who have goals and possess options and therefore make decisions.”⁴ Agency within structures link the grand metanarratives to the “everyday,” the experience of individuals within the structures of their societies at the local and mundane level of day-to-day life. Thus the everyday offers opportunities to reveal readings of agency and the complexity of lived experiences.

These approaches echo tenets of post-processualism in archaeology. “[B]etter understood as an enabler than a coherent philosophy,”⁵ post-processualism, like microhistory, allows for multiplicities in past narratives. Phenomenology, the concept of exploring the first-person experiences of the past, is sometimes seen as “the quintessence of postprocessualism.”⁶ There is certainly tension between structuralism and phenomenology, but linking the two by finding agencies within structures—those lived experiences—may allow for those empty spaces between evidence about medieval lives to be cautiously filled. Closely linked via postmodernism and poststructuralism, archaeology has also embraced biography as a theoretical approach: biographies of objects or places provide a deep view into the past through multi-scalar means. A biography with a place as the subject can link the past to a locality for a longitudinal study of landscape, people, and materiality, with a particular landscape as the anchor for the focus. Conversely, object biographies examine the long-term lives of material culture and their intersections with place and people as objects move through time and place. Just as with the history of the everyday, agency is an active part of both approaches but not just the agency of people but of objects, as they affect the world around them.⁷ In either biography of place or object, archaeological biography offers “insights into particular places,

Early Modern Studies 47, no. 1 (2017): 53–73 at 57. See this article for an overview of the history of microhistory within twentieth-century historiographical trends.

⁴ István M. Szi­jártó, “Probing the Limits of Microhistory,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 47, no. 1 (2017): 193–98 at 195.

⁵ O’Keeffe, “Theory,” 112.

⁶ O’Keeffe, “Theory,” 110, 112.

⁷ Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

associations and events,”⁸ revealing how the intersections of places, people, objects, buildings, landscapes, and any physical or textual evidences create meaning to those who experienced that space and time.

Individuals illuminated by these approaches should have parts in how historians and archaeologists write the past. Individuals act within the framework of social norms and accepted behaviors whilst being able to engage with the world around them with their own agency.⁹ These connections between individual and society give microhistory and archaeological biography its importance, even urgency, within its immediacy: the laser focus on the small must be linked to the large to understand historical pasts. In fact, the precursor to this journal, *Medieval Prosopography*, was founded under these principles in the flourishing climate of recognizing history from below, and the individual’s place within larger pictures of history.¹⁰

In parallel to microhistory’s and archaeological biography’s examination of the small to understand the large, interest in the everyday equally seeks a different way to see beyond the big narratives of history. But far from being obvious to understand, the “everyday,” as Henri Lefebvre puts it, is a series of complex interactions: it is both the “most universal,” yet the most unique and individual condition, “the most obvious and the best hidden.”¹¹ To complicate matters, the “everyday” can be explored in time, or in place. It can be considered either through a chronological scale—e.g., a literal day of “everyday”—or through a geographical standpoint—e.g., a single place. In either approach, the networks of medieval society can be seen to have operated differently depending on a variety of factors such as status, age, gender, religious, position, and more. There is no singular “everyday.” The multivocality of the past can be seen across lines of gender, class, age, and more.¹² Even the categorization of an “everyday” life is one that is fraught with readerly and writerly assumptions about what constitutes this “everyday,” often breaching the reader (or researcher’s)

⁸ Harold Mytum, “Ways of Writing in Post-Medieval and Historical Archaeology: Introducing Biography,” *Post-Medieval Archaeology* 44, no. 2 (2010): 237–54 at 242.

⁹ Latour, *Reassembling*.

¹⁰ Joel Rosenthal, “An Editorial Note,” *Medieval Prosopography* 1 (1980), <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/medpros/vol1/iss1/2/>.

¹¹ Henri Lefebvre, “The Everyday and Everydayness,” trans. Christine Levich, *Yale French Studies* 73 (1987): 7–11 at 9.

¹² Mytum, “Ways of Writing,” 239–40.

own experiences of everyday life, or imagined everyday life in the medieval past.¹³ These assumptions, unless thoroughly queried, tend to be based in one's own societal reflections or expectation of gender, status, age, ethnicity, and religion in the present. Without significant understanding of the past, a reflection of the "everyday" medieval runs the risk of being a reflection of the self in the present.

Seeking to examine the "everydays" in the earlier medieval period is particularly important as many levels of society in the period are not well documented or otherwise recorded. The mundane or the quotidian may be recognizable, though, through material and textual means. Art historian George Kubler despaired of the routine as preventative to innovation: "Indeed the cage of routine binds [the Everyman] so closely that it is impossible for him to stumble on an inventive act."¹⁴ But this quotidian routine, this "everyday" of the "Everyman," leaves marks for us to find and to learn from, to see the gaps between our sources in a different light. As Matthew Johnson puts it, "the patterns of meaning . . . were played out not in terms of a written code, but in tenons of everyday life."¹⁵ Within these patterns of meaning we can further seek the experience of different genders, religions, and statuses, which would affect the experience of the "everyday."

Reaching for this level of understanding of the everyday in medieval history comes with many difficulties, including that many things remain unknown, and potentially unknowable by traditional methods of historical research. The "ordinary," "mundane," or "everyday" are usually interpreted in terms of class or status; this often translates to the lives of peasants, who were not well recorded in any medieval period. How then can researchers proceed to fill in those spaces where what we imagine is a routine "everyday" but without the details to examine them in a more meaningfully interpretive way? Multi- and interdisciplinary work, with archaeology particularly taking the lead since the inception of the field

¹³ See Jans Robert Jauss, "The Identity of the Poetic Text in the Changing Horizon of Understanding," in *Reception Study: From Theory to Cultural Studies*, ed. James L. Machor and Philip Goldstein (Abingdon: Psychology Press, 2001), 7–28.

¹⁴ George Kubler, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1962; repr. 2008), 62.

¹⁵ Matthew Johnson, "Rethinking Houses, Rethinking Transitions: Of Vernacular Architecture, Ordinary People and Everyday Culture," in *The Age of Transition: The Archaeology of English Culture 1400–1600*, ed. David Gaimster and Paul Stamper, Society for Medieval Archaeology Monograph 15 (Oxford: Oxbow, 1997), 145–56 at 149.

of medieval archaeology in the mid-twentieth century, has been on the leading edge of this area of study. But perhaps there is still more we can do when we reach the dead ends of available evidence.

Creativity is one way to fill these gaps. The separation between history and fiction, despite the professionalization of the field of history since the nineteenth century, is far from the strict line that empiricists might wish it to be. Indeed, the impact of poststructuralism and how it has encouraged the examination of the multiplicities of pasts and multiple ways to tell them, suggests how examining untruths as well as facts about the past can be seen as valid ways of finding and telling history. One could go so far to say that the only histories which are strictly factual are simply those which are purely empiricist in approach. But unless a strictly empiricist view—a “just the facts, ma’am” approach to history—is taken, then no histories are without their tiny fictions. This is surely not a negative.

The gaps in between the evidence we have about the past are often the spaces where we can find room to move, create, or imagine the details of lives that are often hard to find in historical or archaeological records. This does mean the necessity of dwelling in possibilities and probabilities—indeed this author is generally quite happy to dwell in the gray spaces of preponderance of evidence. “Authorial intention is paramount,” John Hatcher here insists in regard to writing history as fictions.¹⁶ Renditions of medieval lives created by scholars seeking to fill those spaces in between the scant facts of the everyday seek to illuminate the past, not stray from it or to purely entertain. Authorial intention of scholars means that the attempts made at creativity are grounded in research, the known knowns—and known unknowns—of the medieval past in order to try to bring new light to the dark spaces in between the facts of medieval histories of the everyday. Attempting to fill these gaps with creative microhistory allows for our research to stretch further into our known unknowns, and ask new questions of these spaces. Far from fiction, these studies could embed creative histories within them, immersed in knowledge and research in the period; “sympathetic imagination,” as Christopher Dyer said,¹⁷ or even “informed speculation.”¹⁸

¹⁶ John Hatcher, “Fiction as History: The Black Death and Beyond,” *History* 97, no. 1 (2012): 3–23 at 5.

¹⁷ Michael Wood, pers. comm.

¹⁸ Hatcher, “Fiction,” 18.

It is not a new approach, although it is infrequently used, and the boundaries between fact and fiction are sometimes rigorously policed.¹⁹ But it has been a successful technique in many periods of history. James Deetz's classic *Flowerdeew Hundred: The Archaeology of a Virginia Plantation, 1619–1864* combined elements of narrative in the person of the seventeenth-century lady of the manor.²⁰ John Hatcher's 2008 *The Black Death: An Intimate History* combined meticulous historical research about a single village written in a style that was neither fiction nor academic history—a microhistory with embedded fiction in order to flesh out the story of a single medieval village living and dying in 1345–1350.²¹ Multiple articles and shorter works by scholars in history and archaeology also use these approaches; my own work has nudged towards this at times.²²

A creative microhistory is not just the picture of a past in a place; it has much wider theoretical implications for how we can read and interpret evidence from the medieval period to not only communicate the past, but better understand it. My hope is that this can become a recognized way of approaching the past to reveal those deep histories with multiple disciplinary elements, mixed with creativity and thoughtful fictionalizations. This approach, Hatcher reckons, while “unorthodox,” provides the opportunity to expand on times when most people were “illiterate and their rulers and betters were not concerned to write much about them.”²³

What follows is a case study in this approach, a brief creative microhistory of one day in the life at the manor of Faccombe Netherton, Hampshire, in 1198, in order to illustrate the possibilities of inserting fiction into our historical interpretations. Faccombe Netherton wonderfully lends itself to creative microhistory thanks to both its extensive excavation,

¹⁹ Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 253.

²⁰ James Deetz, *Flowerdeew Hundred: The Archaeology of a Virginia Plantation, 1619–1864* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1995).

²¹ John Hatcher, *The Black Death: An Intimate History* (London: Orien, 2008). Annie Gray has also explored performance as a part of object biography: see Gray, “The Greatest Ordeal: Using Biography to Explore the Victorian Dinner,” *Post-Medieval Archaeology* 44, no. 2 (2010): 255–72.

²² Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” *Small Axe* 12:2 (2008), 1–14. Katherine Weikert, “The Biography of a Place: Faccombe Netherton, Hampshire, ca 900–1200,” *Anglo-Norman Studies* 37 (2015): 257–84.

²³ Hatcher, “Fiction,” 9–10, quote from 10.

undertaken in the 1970s and 1980s, and surviving historical record, which stretches from tenth-century charters to high medieval manorial accounts. The material culture of the manor, the cross-Channel Anglo-Norman connections of the people there, and twelfth-century texts about manners and behavior, add color and light to a picture of a day of these lives.

I have made scholarly and authorial decisions about how to best write this creative microhistory within the theoretical and methodological frameworks I use. This piece dwells in what Victoria Robinson terms the “meso-level . . . the site where the mundane and the extraordinary interact . . . a level between structure and agency.”²⁴ The day at Faccombe Netherton I am writing is a day when the lady of the manor is hosting a feast. This creates the meso-level of this creative microhistory, an intersection of the quotidian and mundane with the less ordinary, to enable the examination of multiple experiences at the manor from the elite to the servants. This is a very intentional choice in order to try to illuminate not just those at the top level of society here, but those who worked for the elite, and how the feast would add to their “everyday” from the mundane to the more unusual. This also allows for not only difference in status, but also periods of the day and the passing of time to differentiate the experiences of these everyday.

The most detailed record of Faccombe Netherton in the late twelfth century is from the extensive excavation and its report by J. R. Fairbrother.²⁵ The available historical records of Faccombe Netherton, which in the period approximately 1160 through to 1214 are via administrative rolls, have been utilized to discern the manor’s owners and family members, and prosopographical research of these individuals has helped to establish their personae, their historical positions in connection to the estate, and their wider kinship networks in England and Normandy. The excavation and historical records are the direct evidences of the estate itself. Two texts from the twelfth century which outline manners, behavior, expectations, and materiality of the period have also been drawn into my interpretation: Alexander Neckam’s *De Utensilibus*, a vocabulary which addresses

²⁴ Victoria Robinson, “Reconceptualising the Mundane and the Extraordinary: A Lens through which to Explore Transformation within Women’s Everyday Footwear Practices,” *Sociology* 49, no. 5 (2015): 903–18 at 908, 916.

²⁵ J. R. Fairbrother, *Faccombe Netherton: Excavations of a Saxon and Medieval Manorial Complex*, 2 vols., British Museum Occasional Paper 74 (London: British Museum, 1990).

the needs and objects of a well-stocked elite house, written after 1187, and Daniel of Beccles's *Book of the Civilised Man*, a book of manners written in and around the court of Henry II (r. 1154–1189).

Decisions have also been made about *whom* to portray at this Facombe Netherton. The elite family who owned and occupied the place, the de Solerses, are historical persons and the appropriate records are cited. No records exist of any manorial servants though they would have been a part of the household and thus are written into this creative microhistory. Names have been chosen for them with care and reasons which are further discussed below. Dialogue has been ascribed to these historical people to discuss the day I am portraying. No attempt has been made to make this dialogue specific to the late twelfth century, and I ask an allowance for this in the interest of making the dialogue accessible to the casual reader.

The Morning

Mabel de Solers crossed the courtyard, her soft-soled shoes treading the well-worn path to her chambers. She paused briefly to smile at her younger son Roger, who was just visible over the wooden wall that enclosed the eastern terrace next to the chambers. Normally she would have crossed into the quiet terrace to greet her son, to take advantage of the morning sunlight so long awaited after the long winter, but there was much to do today. The sun was bright for an early April morning, the air slightly cool, and tinged with the smell of the freshly overturned soil of the sown fields. In the distance she could hear the hawing of the stone masons she had commissioned to rebuild the nave of her church after they had finished with her new chamber block. Mabel bustled up the stone steps to that lovely new chamber. "Alice," she called out on entering the outer chamber, "come with me." The servant, who had been tending to the low fire under the newly carved mantelpiece of the fireplace, nodded and followed Mabel into the inner chamber.

Mabel drew the curtain separating the inner room from the outer, almost automatically giving it a slight shake to dislodge the tiny spiders that wanted to emerge this time of year. As she passed by the bed she ran her hand over the green wool coverlet with its badger lining placed over the down mattress. Seating herself in the chair against the wall next to her bedstead, Mabel turned to one of her most prized possessions, the large oaken trunk with iron fittings. Her hands going to the chatelaine hanging from the leather belt at her waist, she found the key by touch and turned it

in the lock. Hefting the heavy lid, her gaze fell to the splendour below: beautifully embroidered wools and linens.

Mabel lifted a couple of layers of the cloth and found what she was looking for, a small, hard thing wrapped securely in layers of soft wool and linen, covered by stiffer leather. Taking it out of the trunk, she handed it to Alice. It was only slightly larger than either of their hands, but heavy. “Take this to the kitchen,” Mabel instructed Alice in the servant’s native English, “then fetch the table linens for the feast. They need cleaning. They must be white and spotless.” Alice nodded and left from the stairs in the back of the room.

Mabel turned her attention back to the precious linens in the trunk, some of which had passed through her second’s husband’s Norman family for generations. When her eldest son William married, he would receive these exquisite textiles. A couple of pieces even had precious gold threads shot through the embroidery which shone in the low light of the chamber coming through the expensive new glazed window. Mabel delicately traced one silken embroidered stag. What should she display for her guests?

Seasons and Time: Identities and Hierarchies

In spring 1198, Faccombe Netherton was held by Mabel de Solers on behalf of her minor son William. The scent of the fields and her plans for the day are apt: sowing, planting, and plowing should happen in March, according to eleventh-century English calendars, and April, in the same sources, was an auspicious time for feasting.²⁶ Mabel is readying the manor for an important visitor, and the feast would be a crucial part of displaying her noble lineage and identity, upholding her place in the world through the materials and the manor itself.²⁷

The feast would be something out of the ordinary, inserting that intersection that creates the meso-level as discussed above: an “extraordinary event . . . temporarily superseded[ing] the limits of the mundane (everyday) world as a way to create and/or validate identities or explanations necessary to imagine the everyday’s coherence.”²⁸ The transformative capacity of the everyday is often overlooked, especially in relation to how

²⁶ British Library, Cotton MS Julius A VI, fol. 4r–v.

²⁷ Katherine Weikert, *Authority, Gender and Space in the Anglo-Norman World, ca. 900–ca. 1200* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2020).

²⁸ Paul Steege, Andrew Stuart Bergerson, Maureen Healy, and Pamela L. Swett, “His-

the extraordinary is both embedded within and in dialogue with the mundane, rather than having a separate and unmediated existence of its own.²⁹ The intersections of the everyday and the extraordinary are reflected here in a number of levels. The servants would have had extra activities and duties added to their day in preparation, as well as in interacting with the guests at the feast itself (of which, more below). The lady of the manor would be overseeing and making decisions about how to best represent her family: their positions within the interconnected Anglo-Norman aristocracy, their wealth, and their status. All of this would be linked to family history but also the shaping of that memory to the appropriate history to present to a guest, controlling the memory of that past for the appropriate presentation of it.³⁰

Mabel's feast would be validating and confirming the family's identities in a manner meant to impress their important guests. In 1198, Mabel's two sons, William and Richard, were close to their majorities by one and two years, respectively.³¹ The guests that Mabel would invite, and seek to impress, would be ones who could build the sons' networks and contacts in the cross-Channel Anglo-Norman realm. The reasons to create these contacts were multitude and multifarious: career and social advancement through placement at ducal or royal courts, or positions with other aristocratic families; Mabel could be seeking marriage arrangements for the same purposes of familial advancement.

At this point in 1198, the manor was new to the family as Mabel had acquired Facombe Netherton from Alan and Cecilia Boterel in 1197, and Mabel had wasted little time in rebuilding the place to suit her needs and her position in society.³² Mabel's natal family was closely connected to

tory of Everyday: A Second Chapter," *Journal of Modern History* 80, no. 2 (2008): 358–78 at 368–69.

²⁹ Robinson, "Reconceptualising," 904.

³⁰ See Andrea Hajek, *Negotiating Memories of Protest in Western Europe: The Case of Italy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 50–51.

³¹ *The Red Book of the Exchequer*, I.149, ed. Hubert Hall (London, 1896); *The Memoranda Roll for the Michaelmas Term of the First Year of the Reign of King John (1199–1200)*, ed. H. G. Richardson (London: Pipe Roll Society, 1943), 45; *The Great Roll of the Pipe for the Second Year of the Reign of King John*, ed. Doris M. Stenton (London: Pipe Roll Society, 1925), 206.

³² *Feet of Fines of the Seventh and Eighth Years of the Reign of Richard I*, no. 76 (London: Pipe Roll Society, 1896), 55–56; Weikert, "Biography," 274–76.

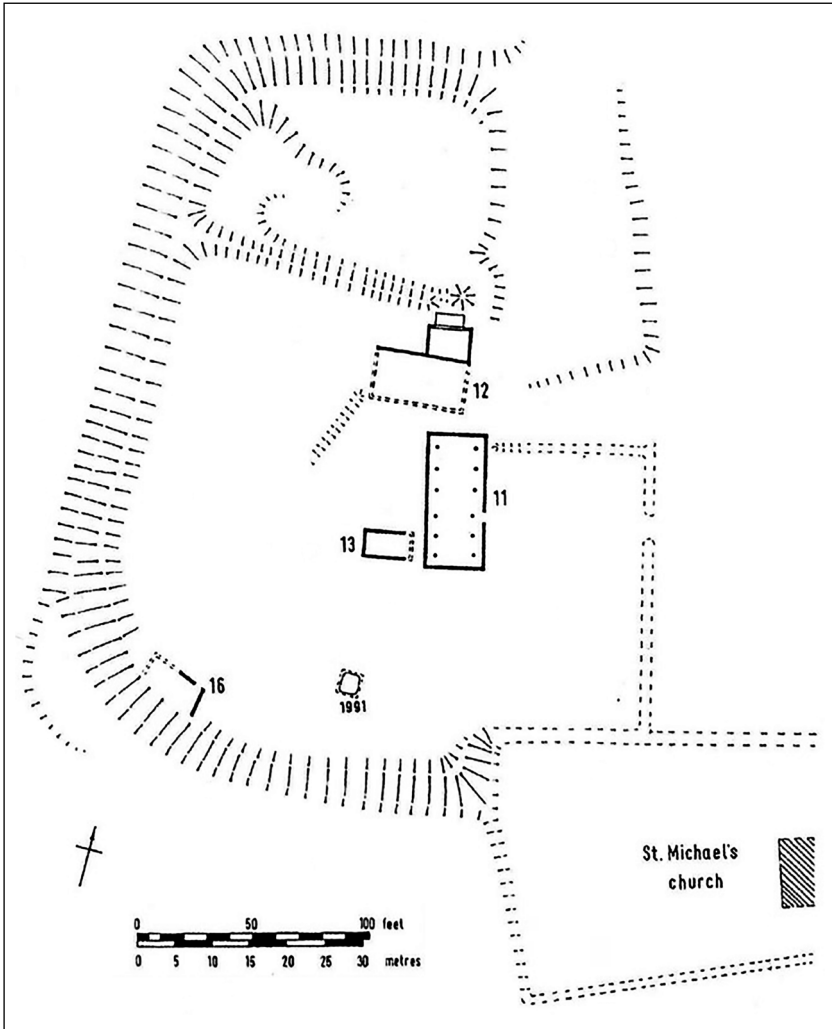


Figure 1. Faccombe Netherton, Hampshire, plan, ca. 1197–1204×1205. After Fairbrother, *Faccombe*, 1:70. Postholes are indicative and not to scale. Building 12 is a two-story chamber block; building 11 is a hall; building 16 is a kitchen.

the earls of Devon and Gloucester. The de Redvers of Devon were themselves descendants of an original family of the Norman conquest, whilst the earls of Gloucester were connected to royalty via an illegitimate son of Henry I. Mabel, with this illustrious lineage, had twice married Norman magnates. By 1198 she was a widow from both her first husband, Jordan

Champernoun, and second, William (I) de Solers.³³ She had adult children from her first marriage, and two sons in their minorities and two daughters, of uncertain ages, from her second. Mabel had been the sole heir of her mother, Hawise de Redvers, and her adult Champernoun sons were already provided for with estates in Dorset, no doubt coming from her mother's inheritance.³⁴

The eldest de Solers child, Philippa, is in this article assumed to be in her majority based on her brothers' ages, and out of her mother's household at this time with her own family. With Mabel's husband deceased sometime in the 1190s before the purchase of Facombe, the youngest daughter Joanna could have been as young as a toddler in 1198, and she is still mentioned as Mabel's youngest daughter as late as 1207.³⁵ For these reasons she too is not a part of this scene. The feast here is focused on Mabel's ambitions for her two sons.

Nothing of the manor remains above the ground now, but Facombe Netherton was rebuilt in the late twelfth century under the de Solerses, likely under Mabel's direction (see fig. 1). A new aisled hall and a two-story detached stone chamber block were added along with a courtyard between and a terrace to the east, outside of the chamber block and facing the village.³⁶ The medieval church of St. Michael at Netherton, portrayed here as being built in the background scenery, has a more tenuous timeline. It has long been assumed to have been founded in the early eleventh century and rebuilt in the twelfth.³⁷ However, little material of it survives

³³ *Charters of the Redvers Family and the Earldom of Devon 1090–1217*, ed. Robert Bearman (Exeter: Devon and Cornwall Record Society, 1994), 11.

³⁴ Bearman, *Charters*, 11.

³⁵ *The Great Roll of the Pipe for the Ninth Year of the Reign of King John*, ed. Agnes Mary Kirkus (London: Pipe Roll Society, 1944).

³⁶ Weikert, "Biography," 274–76.

³⁷ "Parishes: Facombe," in *A History of the County of Hampshire*, vol. 4 [hereafter *VCH Hants*], ed. William Page (London: Victoria County History, 1911), British History Online, <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/hants/vol4/pp314-318>; Nikolaus Pevsner and David Lloyd, *Hampshire and the Isle of Wight* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), 217; W. G. Whiffing, "The Construction of St. Barnabas Church, Facombe 1864–1900," at 45, in *Netherton 1975 Research: An Interim Report of the Research in 1975* by J. R. Fairbrother, 1975, unpublished report, British Museum Archive; J. R. Fairbrother, *Netherton 1977 Research: An Interim Report of the 11th Year of Excavation and Research* at 4, 1977, unpublished report, British Museum Archive; Michael Bullen et al., *Hampshire: Winchester and the North*, Pevsner Architectural Guides: Buildings of England (New Haven, CT: Yale

as it was torn down in 1864–1865 save for its chancel which was used as a mortuary chapel; a new parish church was built up the hill at St. Barnabas, Faccombe (the medieval village of Faccombe Upstrete).³⁸ Although there is no inventory of the physical objects moved from St. Michael's to St. Barnabas save for the memorials and monuments, the medieval font at the Victorian neo-Gothic St. Barnabas is presumed to be from the twelfth century, and from the church at Netherton.³⁹ Although the timeline of St. Michael's is unclear, its rebuilding under Mabel's tenure, as with the manor, fits the picture of an Anglo-Norman noblewoman crafting her position and persona as an elite woman, so it is written here as a part of this process. Updating the manor reflected the reality of young Anglo-Norman men seeking position in the cross-Channel world, and their mother was wise enough to see how best to assist them with estates and connections.

University Press, 2010); Historic England, "Church of St. Barnabas," list entry 1155400, The National Heritage List for England (NHLE), <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1155400>.

³⁸ Hampshire Record Office [henceforth HRO] 65021/M/143F/405–6.

³⁹ Diocese records in 1866 list that the new St. Barnabas had been furnished with "Communion Table Reading desk Pulpit Font and other necessaries fit for the performance of the Divine Service and Worship" but without details about the origins of any of these materials (HRO 65021/M/143F/564). 1911's *VCH* Hants is the first record of the font ascribed both to the twelfth century, and formerly at Netherton. However, Winchester Diocese records list multiple times that "all Tombstones monuments monumental Inscriptions or mural Tablets in such Church [Netherton] is to be taken down shall be carefully preserved . . . and . . . shall be layed [sic] set up in such new Church [Faccombe] as near as circumstances will permit in the relative situations from whence they may be removed" (HRO 65021/M/143F/405–6). Indeed at least three mural tablets from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are at St. Barnabas. Pevsner calls the font Norman (217), which possibly is the source for records after 1967. An unpublished interim excavation report from 1975 calls the font twelfth century (Will Whiffing, "Rectors of Faccombe with Tangle," in "Netherton, Hants: 1975 Research," unpublished report, City of London Archaeological Services, British Museum archive). An undated flier (likely from the 1980s based on its reference to "extensive excavations . . . carried out in recent years") that was distributed to visitors to St. Barnabas (HRO 91M79/PZ9) further calls the font "12th century," probably written in consultation with the excavation team at Netherton. I have seen the font at St. Barnabas in consultation with County Archaeologist Thomas Hayes; although certainly medieval it has no specific indication of a twelfth-century origin. The font has an exaggerated chevron pattern carved throughout the barrel shape with two carved stone hoops around it, as if emulating a bucket. The pedestal was added at a later date. Residents of the village (pers. comm.) mention there are spolia, presumed to be from the deconstruction of the church in the nineteenth century, embedded in gardens throughout the village.

As little as we can know about the historical Mabel de Solers in the historical and archaeological records, there is still much we can determine about her life. Let us take this creative microhistorical approach, then, to turn our eyes to other inhabitants of the estate, who leave less evidence.

The Work

Emerging from the chamber, Alice had to blink to adjust her eyes to the shaded sun. Days were just starting to become warm, and she could feel it tending to the fire upstairs. She took a moment to waft her tunic away from her skin for a touch of air before emerging from the secluded spot behind the chambers. She crossed the courtyard towards the kitchen, taking a moment to greet Isaac, coming in from the forest in the south with a cart of wood. She could see the new walls of the church rising just beyond the manor's embankment and felt a bit of pride over the stone replacing the old, worn-out half-timbered church. Alice was too young to remember the Boterels, but she'd been told they'd left the place in bad shape, having not lived there for years, which meant her lady had commissioned the new manor and repairs to the church. As much as she enjoyed the look of the manor, Alice thought that the new stone church was even nicer, something that reminded her that God was with them, that He had always been and would always be.

Alice was grateful that the kitchen was built into the side of the embankment. The earthen wall helped keep it insulated, and it wouldn't be too hot this time of day. Yet. She ducked her head to enter the low door, and noted how stuffed the kitchen was in preparation for a feast. Pots, pans, and pitchers were hanging on the walls, and the heavy cauldron dangled securely from a tripod over the fire. To one side sat the quern stone, made out of an exotic stone that Alice had never seen before the de Solerses arrived at Faccombe. Nothing like that stone existed in Alice's native Hampshire. Her lady had brought it with her when she came, and it was a matter of pride to use it. Touching it made Alice wonder what it was like in lands over the seas, in Normandy where her lady's husband had been from, or even further, like where that stone had been quarried. Her lady said it was from some place near to where an emperor lived. Alice felt the rough stone under her fingers and thought about how different it was to the smooth, sharp flints in the fields here.

Over by the baking oven, John was scooping shaped dough into the ashes of the fire. Two hens and a goose, plucked with the good feathers

carefully stored away for future mattresses and pillows, hung from iron hooks on the ceiling. Oysters and mussels gaped and bubbled in a large bucket on the floor. The table groaned with even more food to prepare. Herbs and spices lay in lumps and piles: a fragrant bundle of freshly picked wild garlic, small bowls of cumin and mustard seed, all ready to be made into sauces with the mortar and pestle. A pile of early spring onion sat beside earthen bowls of almonds, hazelnuts, walnuts, and the last few wrinkled apples from the end of last season, ready for stewing alongside pots of honey for sweetening. Two wheels of cheese, one new and one mature, had been brought out for slicing. Perch silently stared, opening and closing their mouths, from earthenware platters. Soon they'd be gutted and cooked with a pepper sauce. Alice knew, too, that her lady had ordered a lamb slaughtered and a precious deer brought from the forest.

Alice sat the small bundle on the table and unwrapped first the tough leather, then a layer of wool, and finally linen to reveal a small, glowing oval saltcellar carved from one precious piece of rock crystal, set with a golden frame and legs to stand on. It was one of the most precious things that her lady owned, she knew. Just the feel of it spoke of her lady's wealth, security, and taste.

Alice wondered who was so important, coming to feast.

Manners, Materials, and Meanings

A feast was an opportunity to impress. Every part was planned, from food to service and entertainment to décor, and the whole of the manor played a role in the social performance of the feast. A combination of historical texts and material culture can tell us how the feast might have been enacted. Here, Daniel of Beccles's *The Book of the Civilised Man* becomes a valuable text for the outlined expected and accepted behavior for medieval England, including the behavior expected from lords, guests, and servants at the feast.⁴⁰ In Beccles's *The Book of the Civilised Man* no stones were left unturned: from where you could urinate as a guest in another's hall, to

⁴⁰ Daniel of Beccles, *The Book of the Civilised Man: An English Translation of the Urbanus Magnus of Daniel of Beccles* [hereafter cited as Daniel of Beccles page, line], ed. and trans. Fiona Whelan, Olivia Spencer, and Francesca Petrizzo (London: Routledge, 2019); Servus Gieben, "Robert Grossteste and Medieval Courtesy Books," *Vivarium* 5, no. 1 (1967): 47–74 at 51. For a further discussion of Beccles and the *Urbanus Magnus*, see John Gillingham, "From Civilitas to Civility: Codes of Manners in Medieval and Early Modern England," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 12 (2002): 267–89.

how to serve and what food to serve, the importance of proper behavior for all pervades his text. Many of the foodstuffs discussed in the fiction, and more beyond this, were explored by Daniel of Beccles. The individual manuscripts of his text indicate a wide variety of readership as an influential text in the Anglo-Norman period, though it might be best described as a text that combined elements of manner-books and advanced vocabularies.⁴¹ Addressed to both men and women,⁴² it was a text that spoke of social anxieties rather than “self-assurance”⁴³ during a time of change and a need for the order and hierarchy of medieval English society to be maintained particularly in this period which would be roughly the second- to third-generation post-Conquest, as Mabel and her sons were.

As cultures and hierarchies combined, sometimes violently as in the late eleventh century, maintaining societal order and expectations was a crucial part of the cross-Channel Anglo-Norman nobility. Although Mabel would not have known this, the future of these cross-Channel elites would soon be tested with the wars between King John and King Phillip Augustus, leading to England’s loss of Normandy in 1204–1205. Mabel’s family would play a minor role in this but ultimately, Mabel and her sons would choose Normandy over England and would leave the island (and Faccombe Netherton) by 1207.⁴⁴ But in the Faccombe Netherton in 1198 written here, Mabel was planning for her sons’ futures both in England and Normandy, a local aspect of a transnational body politic.

The creation of the scene of the feast was just as important as the meal itself. This was crucial to upholding the family’s identity, both of who they *were* as well as who they wished to project themselves to be. Mabel, from the ducal house of de Redvers and married into Norman lineage, would have sought to display this intertwined lineage of her sons as a mark of their own place in this hierarchical Anglo-Norman world to both maintain and express their status. The material culture of the estate would have played a key role in this display. Although few objects remain

⁴¹ J. W. Nicholls, *The Matter of Courtesy: Medieval Courtesy Books and the Gawain Poet* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1985), 162–66, 185; Fiona Whelan, “Introduction to *Urbanus magnus*,” in *The Book of the Civilised Man*, ed. and trans Whelan, Spencer and Petrizzo, 16–19.

⁴² Gillingham, “From Civilitas,” 272, 276.

⁴³ Robert Bartlett, *England under the Norman and Angevin Kings: 1075–1225* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 588.

⁴⁴ Weikert, “Truncated Life,” 16–19.

from Faccombe Netherton in this period, we can place items into Mabel's manor between what materials have survived, alongside the texts of Alexander Neckam. Neckam was a scholar born at St. Albans and trained in the schools of Paris before heading the monastic school at Dunstable in the late twelfth century.⁴⁵ His *De Utensilibus* highlighted the means and the materials that were needed to stock every aspect of a proper household—up to and including some of the parts written about above, such as the chair by the side of the bed, and that wall-hangings help keep flies and spiders away.⁴⁶ Some of the material culture in John's kitchen also comes from Alexander Neckam's description of a kitchen, like the mortar and pestle and various cooking utensils.⁴⁷ Daniel of Beccles also writes of a well-stocked house, including pots and cookware, particular spices like pepper, cumin, and salt, trestles, cutlery, and plates, and the need for an oven, a kitchen to cook in, and a place to prepare food.⁴⁸

The material culture in this envisioning of Faccombe Netherton, though, is also from excavation and material remains. A pitcher molded in the shape of a servant girl, for example, was found intact from this period, as well as fragments of a quern stone made of Mayen lava stone.⁴⁹ The pitcher was likely locally made, but the lava stone would have been quarried in southwestern Germany and transported by ship to Southampton, where a craftsman completed its carving before being traded north into rural Hampshire.⁵⁰ Its unusual material itself marked the object as something special, something beyond the everyday despite its mundane use. It would have felt foreign and exotic even in the act of something as mundane as grinding grain. Alice may not have known the exact political geography of where the stone came from across the sea, but the tactile experience of it could summon imaginations of places far away, creating a sense of wonder and curiosity.

⁴⁵ Joseph Goering, "Neckam [Neckham, Nequam], Alexander (1157–1217)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004 [online version]), <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/19839>.

⁴⁶ Alexander Neckam, *De Utensilibus*, ed. Thomas Wright, *A Volume of Vocabularies* (privately printed, 1857), 100.

⁴⁷ Neckam, *De Utensilibus*, 97.

⁴⁸ Daniel of Beccles, 116–17, 2223–28.

⁴⁹ British Museum, Jug, catalogue number 1985,1101.411; Quern, catalogue number 1985,1101.763.

⁵⁰ Meinrad Pohl, "Quernstones and Tuff as Indicators for Medieval European Trade Patterns," *Papers from the Institute of Archaeology* 20 (2010): 148–53.

Much of the preparations for the feast would have been done by the servants of the estate once Mabel had made up her mind about what to display for her guests. Daniel of Beccles, for example, stated that the tablecloth should be spotless white, and he gave examples about the proper and improper use of napkins (wiping a spoon is acceptable; covering your feet, unacceptable).⁵¹ The table linens were stored in a pantry near the kitchen, according to Alexander Neckam.⁵² The servants could wipe them with a damp piece of cloth and hang them to dry—in the sun to help bleach the whites, or in the shade if embroidered or colored to protect the delicate materials. Air-drying would have helped loosen any wrinkles from storage. Should showy silver plate pieces be a part of Mabel’s inventory, Faccombe Netherton’s location on chalk, with ever-present nodules in fields, would have been a boon. A rub-down with charcoal in a wet cloth, followed by a polish with finely ground chalk, removes tarnish from silver, as the twelfth-century writer Theophilus explained.⁵³

There is no evidence of such a rich gold-mounted rock crystal saltcellar at Faccombe Netherton, but pieces such as these existed in the period. I have roughly taken here the model of a mid-thirteenth-century saltcellar in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, a nef made of gold, rock crystal, emeralds, pearls, and rubies, which is possibly the earliest example of such an object known in Europe.⁵⁴ It is not likely that Mabel de Solers was in possession of something quite this grand, as it is similar to those listed in French royal inventories of the period.⁵⁵ Daniel of Beccles notes that salt should be “clean, white, and kept in a cellar” so it is very likely that Faccombe had a saltcellar.⁵⁶ But the saltcellar at Faccombe was more likely made of ceramic, and has not survived the time between

⁵¹ Daniel of Beccles, 126, 2470, 2554.

⁵² Neckam, *De Utensilibus*, 97.

⁵³ J. G. Hawthorne and C. S. Smith, *Theophilus on Diverse Arts* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1979), 158; see also Heidi C. Gearhart, *Theophilus and the Theory and Practice of Medieval Art* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017).

⁵⁴ Metropolitan Museum of Art, Saltcellar, catalogue number 1983.4.34, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/469879>; see also Christina Normore, “Navigating the World of Meaning,” *Gesta* 51, no. 1 (2018): 19–34 at 25. None of the Museum of London, British Museum, or Victoria and Albert Museum contain European salt cellars from the tenth, eleventh, twelfth, or thirteenth centuries in their collections.

⁵⁵ Metropolitan Museum of Art, Saltcellar, 1983.4.34.

⁵⁶ Daniel of Beccles, 130, 2544.

then and now. But allowing for a moment of grandeur, this would be the moment when Mabel would display her most valuable possessions given the importance on this feast for her family, and so here I am putting the focus on a high-status piece of material culture. Rock crystal was treasured for its rarity, and its ability to reflect light; it was often used in ecclesiastic purposes such as in reliquaries as its clarity was thought to symbolize purity, but elite domestic use is in evidence too by objects such as the Met's saltcellar and other contexts.⁵⁷ Having the saltcellar wrapped and stored in such a way has contemporary parallels; Eadmer of Canterbury writes of relics inside crystal ampullae covered in linen and then deer-skin.⁵⁸ The linen would cushion the object, and the leather, a harder and tougher material, would protect it.

Mabel would have set an impressive table with her food and her tableware, and she would have bedecked her newly built hall with wall embroideries with matching cushion covers for the seats. Candelabras would have stood near the hall's door, and more candlesticks would have been provided for the tables and the cupbearers to use as they poured for the guests.⁵⁹

There is no evidence of John, or Alice, or Isaac, or any peasants or servants, at Faccombe Netherton in the late twelfth century. The manor's accounts do not survive for this period. But we can assume the existence of people *like* the three of them, villagers who owed work to the manor. Alice, who carries the weight of the "day in the life" of a servant here, is portrayed as a local villager from Faccombe (as the village was then called; Faccombe "Upstrete," modern Faccombe, had not yet been established.) The name Alice was a popular and common one among English peasants in the late twelfth century, although the records here are from two surveys with limited scope of female names: a 1166×1171 surveyed sixty-eight women at Ramsey with forty-two different names, Alice the second most popular;⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Roberta Gilchrist, *Medieval Life: Archaeology and the Life Course* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2013), 166, 271; Statens Historiska Museer Stockholm, rock crystal pendant, catalogue number SHM 2350:1.

⁵⁸ Eadmer of Canterbury, "De Reliquiis Sancti Audoeni et Quorundam Aliorum Sanctorum Quae Cantuariae in Ecclesia Domini Salvatoris Habentur," ed. André Wilmart, "Edmeri Cantuariensis cantoris nova opuscula de sanctorum veneratione et obsecratione (altera pars)," *Revue des sciences religieuses* 15-3 (1935): 354–79 at 367.

⁵⁹ Daniel of Beccles, 125, 2400–405.

⁶⁰ Matilda was the first; Dave Postles, "Cultures of Peasant Naming in Twelfth-Cen-

and the 1185 Inquest of Templars, where of 154 women, 151 were named, and “Alice” was part of a concentration of the most popular names.⁶¹ “Alice” was also ambiguously insular or Norman French by this period, suggested by Dave Postles’s research that peasant names shifted more slowly in the post-Conquest period, with insular names remaining more common for peasant women for longer than men.⁶²

John is named as the estate’s cook since evidence of manorial cooks, including early medieval wills and manuscript illuminations from the later medieval period such as the Luttrell Psalter, tends to indicate they were men.⁶³ Isaac, a peasant or servant at the estate, was a name chosen with care. Although historiography has maintained that Jewish communities in medieval England were primarily urban, this is of course predicated on remaining historical and archaeological evidence of the Anglo-Jewish population, which almost exclusively comes from urban contexts. The 1253 decree by Henry III that Jews could only live in towns with an established Jewish community, and the 1269 law disallowing Jewish people from holding or inheriting land and property, could imply a rural presence before that. Whilst rural Jewish populations are a drastically under-researched area of twelfth- and thirteenth-century history, the name Isaac was chosen for this man at the manor to indicate the *possibilities* of Jewish communities outside of towns in the late twelfth century, even if there is no known *current* evidence of this.

Mabel would have overseen the overall look, taste, and experience of the feast that was put into place by the men and women of the estate. It was her identity, lineage, and social position on display. But it would be left to those tied to serving the manor who would have buffed the silver, set the tables, and cooked the venison.

ture England,” *Medieval Prosopography* 18 (1997): 25–54 at 41.

⁶¹ Other popular names included Matilda, Beatrice, Cecily, and Juliana: Postles, “Cultures,” 41–42.

⁶² Postles, “Cultures,” 39–40; for all, see also Cecily Clark, “English Personal Names ca 650–1300: Some Prosopographical Bearings,” *Medieval Prosopography* 8 (1987): 31–60 esp. 40–42.

⁶³ The Will of Wynflaed in *Anglo-Saxon Wills*, ed. and trans. Dorothy Whitelock (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1934); British Library MS Add. 42130, fol. 207r.

The Guest

Ralph dismounted at the manor's gate, having passed through the village from the south with his mounted men behind him. It was too small to call this a gatehouse, just posts and a roof, but it was new and lent some sense of separation and importance to the place. He removed from his bags the ornately decorated casket holding a gift for his hostess before handing off his mount to a man waiting to take it to the stables. Removing his hat in preparation to enter the hall, Ralph crossed the courtyard. The new hall gleamed with wooden beams, the oak not old enough to have been weathered to silver. From this vantage, too, he could see the new chambers to the right, as tall as the hall but in stone, and two stories, glassed windows on the first floor and an impressive door at the same level facing the gable end of the hall. He nodded in approval at both buildings. This estate, new, wealthy and ambitious, spoke well of the potential in the Taissons's and de Solerses' strengthened connections.

Ralph entered the hall in the long, late-afternoon light, but the place still glowed with candlesticks in the lofty space. In one glance he took in the glint of pewter on the long table, covered in a spotless cloth and set with napkins, cups, spoons, and dishes, and noticed the light on the gleaming threads in the tapestry displayed on the far wall: a hunting scene. Ralph hoped he'd have the chance to hunt the manor's well-stocked deer park during his visit. With a turn of his head he faced the dais to his right. At a glittering table, set with silver on a pure white tablecloth, a glimmering saltcellar in front of her, his host sat at the center. Mabel rose gracefully, as did her two teenaged sons. Her gilt and garnet jewels glittered to their best advantage in the light as she extended her hands and stepped forward to him, smiling warmly. "Lord Taisson," she said smoothly, in perfect Norman French, "Welcome to my hall. I trust you are in good health? I am honored by your presence, and so are my sons." With one hand she gestured to the eldest, William, who stepped forward to greet the man who had arranged his impending wedding, and would be his brother once the marriage took place.

The Feast

Alice rubbed the small of her back and tucked some stray strands of hair under her veil while she and the others awaited John's orders. She'd had to do a lot of extra work today, while the day got hotter as the sun marched

through the sky. By the time she assisted her lady with cleaning and dressing herself in her finest bliaut, a thin wool overdress with wide, drooping wrists dyed a beautiful and expensive blue, and her gilt garnet jewels, Alice herself was wrinkled and dirty. Her lady had noticed. With a slight grimace, Lady Mabel ordered Alice to wash herself and brush off her tunic. “Wear your other one if it’s clean,” she had instructed. “Lord Taisson must be impressed with my household.”

Alice knew the feast was important for her lady. But it had added so much work to her usual day. The sun was still in the sky, but her feet were already tired. She checked the cleanliness of her hands and nails one more time, and took the platter of perch, making certain to hold it so that their now-unseeing eyes would point straight to her lady and guests when served.

John clapped his tough hands. Some of the young boys and girls from the village, barely eleven or twelve, had been called in to help on this special occasion to serve the important Norman lord and his men, and the younger ones were nervously talking and giggling just outside the kitchen. “Enough!” John called. “Let me get the order of you. Remember. Do not stand between them and the fire unless you are waiting on them. Do not stare at someone’s mouth while they’re eating. Don’t reach for someone’s plate unless you are ordered to. Do not be uncouth. Do not hunt for fleas on yourself. Do not eat in the presence of the guests but if they offer you food, you can take it. Be near the table and attentive to those you are serving. But know your place: do not intrude.”

Connections Created and Lost

John’s final words here are paraphrased from Daniel of Beccles. *The Book of the Civilised Man* was concerned not just with high society, but with the proper behavior of one’s servants as well, including lengthy verses on servants’ behavior and expectations while attending their lords and ladies at a feast. Dishes should be served according to an order; dishes should be set gently rather than tossed on the table. Hair should be neatly cut, and hands and nails clean and ungloved. Servants were instructed to “walk with a straight back and elegant steps.”⁶⁴ In this period, whilst workspaces were meant to be secluded from a visitor’s view, the servants themselves

⁶⁴ Daniel of Beccles, 72–74, 1155–98; quote from 73, 1187.

were as much of the display of the family as were the foodstuffs and material culture of the feast; they too were a part of maintaining hierarchies and the ruling lord's prestige.⁶⁵

Ralph Taisson is a historical person, a Norman magnate who would become seneschal of Normandy by 1201.⁶⁶ His arrival with a gift, and Mabel's greeting to him, echo Daniel of Beccles's writing about both actions.⁶⁷ He also had an intimate connection with the de Solers family going back two generations: his father, Jordain Taisson, had witnessed a charter of William (I) de Solers in 1160, and, in 1198, Ralph Taisson arranged with King Richard I for the marriage of Ralph's sister to William (II) de Solers.⁶⁸ Daniel Power sees this marriage, too, as arranged under "royal pressure,"⁶⁹ giving the de Solers family possibly another route for the boys' careers. Taisson is certainly the sort of man that Mabel would hope to impress for the sake of not only William but also her younger son Richard, and their future careers—a lord from Normandy, who might find positions for her young sons in his household, in the Norman political realm, but also with close links to the combined duke of Normandy and king of England. Ralph Taisson was a man with whom Mabel could have envisioned futures for her sons as cross-Channel barons, but when King John lost the duchy in 1204, all three of the de Solerses fled to Normandy, very possibly to Ralph Taisson, leaving Faccombe Netherton in contested ownership for decades.⁷⁰ This feast, or a feast such as this, would have been crucial for Mabel to establish her sons within the Anglo-Norman elite framework to protect them against catastrophic social upheaval in one, if not both, realms. When they departed for Normandy, a cook like John, if his skills were valued enough by the de Solerses, might have been taken along, but those like Alice and Isaac would probably have been left

⁶⁵ Weikert, *Authority*, 65–147.

⁶⁶ *Magni rotuli Scaccarii Normanniae sub regibus Angliae*, II:cccxix, ed. Thomas Stapleton, 2 vols. (London: Society of Antiquaries, 1844) [hereafter MRSN].

⁶⁷ Daniel of Beccles, 62, 909–11; 80, 1342–43.

⁶⁸ "Anjou: Part 2," 395–420, in *Calendar of Documents Preserved in France, 918–1206*, ed. Horace Round (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1899), <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/cal-state-papers/france/918-1206/pp395-420>; Bearman, *Charters*, 187; MRSN, II:lv.

⁶⁹ Daniel Power, *The Norman Frontier in the Twelfth and Early Thirteenth Centuries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 235.

⁷⁰ Weikert, "Truncated Life."

behind. Their place at that manor, their routines and everyday, would render them bound to stay.

Conclusions

The everyday is both universal and opaque in medieval England, and needs to be approached with sympathetic and sometimes creative multi-disciplined research. “Opaque areas of history have the greatest need for inventive methods,”⁷¹ John Hatcher has maintained, and like Tadhg O’Keeffe, I fully embrace the idea of “an approach that accepts [that] narrative, a profoundly imaginative process when reimagined as storytelling, is inherent in human reality.”⁷² This article and its creative microhistory, short though it is, demonstrates how careful creativity woven into multi-disciplinary evidence can allow us to sometimes better see and illuminate these opaque areas of the past, including communities and populations who may leave little direct historical or archaeological evidence. The reach of this theoretical and methodological approach is unbound by time and place, and can be used beyond medieval everydays to try to see further into the evidential gaps we have in the past.

There is no single “everyday” in a single locality, as Mabel and Alice illuminate here. The meso-level between structures of society and the agency of individuals, the intersection of the extraordinary with the mundane, give us a chance to examine the “everyday” at multiple levels and with multiple frames: social hierarchies, quotidian routines, extraordinary events, experiences of place and time by different people at the same place. Every day contained multiple experiences, multiplicities of times in the same places, the “everydays” seen here in one single day in the lives of the lady and the servants of the manor at Faccombe Netherton.

⁷¹ Hatcher, “Fiction,” 22.

⁷² O’Keeffe, “Theory,” 112.