

I attended this year's Harlaxton Symposium as I was finishing my doctoral dissertation on the role of urban groups in the 'political society' of fifteenth-century England, and about to begin a new post-doctoral project examining towns in the later medieval 'British Empire'. The conference proved a perfect bridge between my two research projects, helping me to contextualise the research I've conducted on English urban networks over the past four years while also providing me with an introduction to the thought-provoking issues surrounding the study of medieval 'imperial' history. With regards to the latter, the Symposium's opening papers by David Green, Peter Crooks, and Mark Ormrod were particularly useful; they presented an interpretive survey of the existing historiography on the Plantagenet Empire, as well as identifying how later medieval Britain fits into a wider field of 'imperial' history. After listening to these papers and others at the conference, I have been able to better formulate the questions I wish to address in my upcoming postdoctoral research, and understand their wider significance: to what degree were civic governments, in the words of Mark Ormrod, 'institutions of empire'? how much can empires be re-constructed by tracing networks of communication and exchange, or should 'empire' be viewed as a concept or discourse deployed by interested parties? were empires purely royal and aristocratic enterprises, or were they political formations towards which other social groups consciously contributed?

As a historian of urban society, what I found particularly interesting about this year's Symposium was that so many of the papers used the concept of the 'Plantagenet Empire' as a lens through which to examine (and, in many cases, to challenge) existing models for the interaction between localities and the 'centre' in the later middle ages. This theme was approached not only through analyses of the relationship between local and royal governments, but also with regards to art, literature, ethnicity, discourse, and language. My doctoral dissertation is concerned with how the 'urban' background of civic governments and townspeople coloured their participation in English politics, and I have revised a number of my conclusions on this issue in the light of the papers I heard at Harlaxton.

I am also indebted to Harlaxton for providing a relaxed and friendly atmosphere in which I could meet the leading historians of later medieval England, Ireland, Wales, Scotland, and France. Many provided suggestions for my future research, even drawing my attention to particular books or primary sources. Over the next year, I hope to continue electronically several of the conversations I had with fellow Harlaxton participants while we sipped coffee in the Long Gallery, strolled through the Manor's gardens, or admired the view of Lincolnshire from the top of Tattershall Castle. The Harlaxton Symposium proved a wonderful opportunity for a trainee historian such as myself to expand my intellectual horizons and to discover how my own work fits into the latest trends in research on medieval history.

Eliza Hartrich

Merton College, Oxford

August, 2014