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Introduction: immigrant England

Between 1300 and 1550, England was a temporary or permanent home to hundreds of thousands of people of foreign birth. These immigrants – male and female, adults and children – came from other parts of the British Isles, from more or less all the regions of continental Europe, and (especially at the end of the period) from the wider world of Africa and Asia. They settled not just in the major cities and towns but also in rural communities, having a documented presence in every county of England. They numbered in their ranks aristocrats, professional people such as scholars, doctors and clergy, prosperous traders and skilled craftspeople, and numerous semi- and unskilled workers involved in commerce, manufacturing and agriculture. Some came as refugees escaping economic, political or religious turmoil in their homelands, and a few may have come as forced labour. Most, though, arrived as a result of self-determination, facilitated by the general openness of borders and encouraged by the perceived opportunities that migration might bring. Their host communities in England occasionally remarked on their difference in terms of language, custom and dress, and gave them identities that either reinforced connections to the homeland (John the Frenchman, Joan Scot) or effectively eradicated it by using occupational surnames (Henry Brewer, William Goldsmith, Alice Spinner). Some were allowed to become subjects of the king and to acquire the status of denizen, equivalent to that of people born in England. Others were subject to severe limitations on their legal rights and ability to work. During periods of national emergency, these incomers could fall under suspicion as infiltrators and spies, and be subjected to head counts, restrictions on movement and repatriation. At other moments of high tension, they could be easy scapegoats for the frustrations both of the elite and of ordinary folk. But they were also acknowledged for their

contribution to the economy, to education, culture and religion, to the defence of the realm and to public service. If immigrants were sometimes seen as a potentially disruptive presence, they were also understood to be a natural and permanent part of the social order.

This book sets out to explore and understand the lives and experiences of these people, and thus to address a notable problem in existing understandings of English history. Conventional histories of immigration to Britain sweep briefly across the Middle Ages, noting the waves of conquerors and settlers from the Romans and the Anglo-Saxons to the Vikings and the Normans. Thereafter, virtually nothing is said until the mid-sixteenth century, with the first arrivals of religious refugees in the form of the French Huguenots and 'Dutch' Protestant dissenters.[1] General political and cultural histories have reinforced this notion by treating England as comparatively isolated from the continent of Europe after the loss of Normandy by King John in 1204 and noting its development over the later medieval period as a sovereign state with a keener, more exclusive sense of nationhood.[2] Only London, supposedly, was an exception: as the national centre both for government and for trade, it continued, in every generation, to attract people from all over Europe and beyond.[3] Otherwise, England in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries is generally perceived as a 'closed' society whose contacts with the outside world were founded not on the presence of immigrants but on a passing acquaintance with foreign envoys, merchants and pilgrims.

Migration involves both 'push' and 'pull' factors: people moved around in medieval Europe because of poor conditions in their natal lands and the perception or reality of better opportunities elsewhere. At first sight, the appalling natural and man-made disasters that hit England during the period look like disincentives to immigration. The onset of a severe famine in 1315–22 and the advent of the Black Death in 1348 took a terrible toll in the fourteenth century, reducing the population from between 4 and 6 million in 1300 to only about 2.75 million in the late 1370s. Plague and other diseases became endemic, so that the population remained virtually static, at around 2 to 2.5 million, until the end of the fifteenth century.[4] From the 1370s, the balance of trade went into long-term deficit, and foreigners coming into England were subjected to higher and higher customs duties and restrictions on their commercial activities and personal movements. In the 1440s, England went into a deep and prolonged economic recession, with a collapse of imports and exports, a major contraction in internal markets and a serious shortage of ready coin; signs of recovery did not become evident until the 1470s.[5]

For much of the period under consideration, furthermore, England was at war. Hostilities with Scotland began in the 1290s as a result of Edward I's attempts to take over the independent northern kingdom as an adjunct of England; although such aims were abandoned under Edward III, war with the Scots continued intermittently into the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. War with France also began in the 1290s and continued into the early Tudor period: although historians use the term 'Hundred Years War' specifically to refer to the phases of hostility between 1337 and 1453, these were really part of a more prolonged series of conflicts lasting intermittently from the reign of Edward I to that of Henry VIII. Such wars, and disputes with other continental powers, created further significant strains on the economy. They pushed up levels of taxation such as to precipitate regular discontent and occasional open defiance, as in the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 and the resistance to the ironically labelled Amicable Grant in 1525. Endemic warfare intensified suspicions of enemy aliens and led to occasional demands for their expulsion. On a local level at least, there were also occasional threats to social order as a result of noble rebellions and civil war, especially in the so-called Wars of the Roses of the later fifteenth century.[6]

Finally, the later Middle Ages witnessed the introduction in England, as in other parts of Europe, of exclusionary policies designed severely to limit racial and religious diversity.[7] Edward I's decision to expel all Jews from England in 1290, and the official upholding of this ordinance until the seventeenth century, meant that England was marked by deep cultural and institutional discrimination against racial minorities. Muslims from southern Europe, North Africa and the Middle East – usually referred to as 'Saracens' in medieval Christendom – were not subject to an official ban, but the presumption was that they, like the Jews, were only officially acknowledged in England if they accepted conversion to Christianity. Historians have long remarked how, in the sixteenth century, the Tudor state bowed to political concerns over the presence of observable ethnic and racial minorities and began an intermittent programme of minority persecution, first against gypsies and later supposedly against people of colour. Such actions sent the very firm message that minorities were not just unwelcome but also effectively outlawed. Under this combination of environmental, economic, institutional and cultural factors, it is easy to suppose why historians have assumed for so long that there were few 'pull' factors encouraging foreign immigrants into late medieval England.

Such a negative picture is significantly modified, however, when we understand the 'push' factors that induced people to move, and the better

conditions and positive attractions that were still available, and under-stood to prevail, in England.[8] Significant numbers of people from other parts of the British Isles, whether the Plantagenet dominions of Ireland and Wales or the enemy state of Scotland, clearly found that the relatively highly urbanised and commercialised economy of England provided opportunities for advancement that were not available at home. The situation was different for people from southern Europe: for the inhabitants of the kingdom of Castile, for example, which recovered rapidly from the Black Death and whose stable agricultural and commercial economy was buoyed up by the exploration and colonisation of the Atlantic and the Indies, England offered palpably few incentives, at least until Jewish converts to Christianity began fleeing religious persecution in Iberia in the sixteenth century.[9] In many parts of north-west Europe, however, an even greater intensity of natural disasters and political turmoil made England seem, in comparison, a relatively stable and conducive destination.[10] The drop in the rural and urban workforce meant that wages and purchasing capacity in England were attractively high, and certainly higher in real terms than in many parts of the continent: the so-called 'golden age of the English labourer' in the fifteenth century, when goods were cheap and wages were high, provided a strong inducement to the movement of labour over both short and long distances.[11] For all the suspicion that immigrants could arouse, moreover, the English state continued at least until the first half of the fifteenth century to offer them a widening range of fiscal and legal incentives. Laws were passed to make it easier for aliens involved in trade to maintain their commercial interests in England; special measures were taken to draw in people with particular skills; and exemptions were readily granted from the periodic threats to expel enemy aliens during times of war.[12] Facilitating all of this was the fact that England's borders generally remained open, at least to those who were not active enemies of the state. The great majority of people who crossed to England were not required to produce and keep identification papers, and often found it relatively easy to disappear into their new host communities.

The absence of, or lack of access to, detailed records about immigrants in the Middle Ages meant the development of various unsupported traditions and myths in post-medieval popular culture. Particularly powerful in the public imagination was (and to some extent still is) the story of the Flemish weavers. There is good documentary evidence, long available, that Edward III encouraged skilled cloth makers from Flanders into England to help develop what was then still a nascent textile industry.[13] Many of the historic centres of woollen cloth production in East Anglia

and Kent have therefore long claimed that Flemish weavers moved there in the fourteenth century, conveniently ignoring the fact that in many cases the real influx came with the much larger numbers of 'Dutch' weavers who arrived among the Protestant refugees reaching England from the 1560s onwards.[14] Not surprisingly given the nineteenth century's interest in all things medieval, the great textile-producing cities of the North that grew to greatness after the Industrial Revolution also began to exercise their historical imagination in claiming the same lineage. In the early 1880s Ford Madox Brown painted a series of historical murals for Manchester Town Hall. One of them, *The Establishment of Flemish Weavers in Manchester, A.D. 1363*, a detail of which appears on the cover of this book, created the attractive fiction that Edward III's wife, Philippa of Hainault, had been patroness of a Flemish settlement in Lancashire and visited its members every springtime.[15] The statue of the Black Prince erected in the centre of Leeds in 1903 made a similar fanciful reference by linking the prince with his father's Flemish ally, James van Artevelde, and thus suggesting that Leeds, too, owed its modern textile industry to the enterprise of fourteenth-century immigrants from Flanders.[16]

In fact, the explosion of record keeping that occurred in England during the thirteenth century allows us, in a way that is not possible before that time, to trace the immigrant presence not just as a general impression or popular tradition but in the highly detailed and personal experiences of named individuals. Two key sources shed light on this matter for the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries: first, grants of special rights by the crown to aliens dwelling within the realm, kept in the records of the royal Chancery; and secondly, the returns to a special series of taxes on foreigners resident in the realm collected at various points between 1440 and 1487, known as the alien subsidies, preserved among the documentation of the king's Exchequer. The archivist Montagu Giuseppi and the economic historian William Cunningham first drew scholarly attention to these records in the 1890s.[17] It was not until after World War II, however, that historians began to make systematic use of these and other records in order to test older notions about the alien presence in later medieval England. In 1954, Clive Parry published an important study that recognised the contribution to the longer history of naturalisation made by the so-called letters of denization: that is, royal grants of denizen equivalence given to aliens in return for their taking oaths of loyalty to the English crown.[18] Legal historians – most notably Keechang Kim – have developed Parry's work into more detailed analyses of the origins of denization and of the status of aliens within the English common law.[19] Meanwhile, in 1957,

Sylvia Thrupp published the first attempt to analyse the alien subsidy material for the first year of the collection of the tax, 1440.[20] She, and later Gervase Rosser and Martha Carlin, made studies of the alien subsidy material as it related to the city of London and its suburbs; and in 1998 J. L. Bolton published a definitive edition of the most complete of the London returns for the tax, those of 1440 and 1483–4.[21] A number of case studies for other regions and towns, including Norfolk, York and Bristol, were also published from the 1960s onwards.[22] However, serious work on both denizations and the alien subsidies was still hampered by the inaccessibility and cumbersome nature of the relevant records. In 2015, W. Mark Ormrod and his research team released the website 'England's Immigrants, 1330–1550', which includes a complete database of the contents of these and certain other relevant archival materials.[23] This resource greatly facilitates further analysis both of the origins of denization and of the immigrant groups who found their way to England in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.[24]

Since the alien subsidy records lie at the heart of the present study, a little more should be said here about the circumstances under which this new tax was introduced in 1440 and perpetuated for nearly a half-century thereafter.[25] The tax was granted by the English Parliament at a moment of particularly high tension in Anglo-French relations when, as a result of a series of disastrous diplomatic and military setbacks, there was a very real risk that England would lose all her remaining possessions in France and suffer direct coastal attacks and even full-scale invasion. Suspicion therefore fell not just upon French-born people living in England but on a wide range of others who might be thought to be sympathetic to the Valois monarchy, especially immigrants from the duke of Burgundy's territories in the Low Countries and those from France's oldest ally, Scotland. For this reason, the tax grant was written in very general terms, with very few exemptions allowed. It was to be collected as a poll tax and levied on all adults over the age of twelve at the rate of 1s. 4d. for householders and 6d. for non-householders. There was little perception of the amount that might be raised by this means, and the householder rate was not fixed so high as to suggest a real attempt to exploit alien wealth. Rather, the original intention of the subsidy was probably two-fold: to top up the income the crown derived from taxation of the population at large; and to provide a very crude form of alien registration so as to give an assurance to sections of the political community that 'something was being done' about the potential security risk posed by the presence of foreigners within the realm.

This new form of security measure was considered useful enough to be repeated regularly in the 1440s, and then turned into an annual process

for the lifetime of Henry VI in 1453. When Henry was deposed in 1461, the new regime of Edward IV ordered the continuation of the 1453 grant, and the levy became a regular and relatively routine event, referred to colloquially as 'aliens' money' or 'aliens' silver'.[26] After 1471, however, Edward IV chose not to renew it, and it was revived briefly on only two subsequent occasions, in 1483 and 1487. The abandonment of the separate alien subsidy thereafter was an acknowledgement that it had long since outlived its useful purpose. The fiscal category of alien was revived under Henry VIII, and in 1512 became part of a new series of comprehensive direct taxes known as the Tudor subsidies, but was included as a matter of completeness rather than because of any particular effort to track foreigners.

In spite of the challenges involved in their analysis and interpretation, the records of the alien subsidies provide an unparalleled resource for studying the numbers, types and conditions of immigrants to late medieval England. Because it was a poll tax with no lower limit of assessment, the subsidy caught in its net many of the 'little people' who normally go unnoticed in other immigrant records, as well as a very significant number of women. From these basic units of information, we can build quite detailed models, developed in chapters 3–7, about overall numbers, about the social and geographical distribution of the alien population, and about the particular contributions that such people made to the economic life of their localities and regions. We can demonstrate that, far from being a solely urban phenomenon, immigration was a regular reality in the small towns and villages of rural England and, in some cases, a significant component in the agricultural economy. By combining the alien subsidy records with other sources – the documentation of central and local government, literary texts and visual imagery – we can also go further and, in chapters 9 and 10, consider some of the non-material aspects of immigrants' lives. In particular, we address there the issues of inclusion and exclusion and question the typicality of the host community's latent or active hostility to incomers and minorities. We therefore aim to work out from the records of the alien subsidies and analyse, both quantitatively and qualitatively, the immigrant presence and experience in England between the expulsion of the Jews in 1290 and the coming of the Huguenots and the 'Dutch' Protestants in the 1560s, and thus to restore a lost and important element of the wider history of immigration.

This vocabulary of 'immigration' used in this book requires some explanation and justification. The English word 'immigrant' has its roots in classical Latin but was not used in the vernacular until as late as the eighteenth century. It literally means a 'comer-in': someone who leaves

one place for another. Although it can apply to local or regional migration, it tends today to denote the crossing of national boundaries, and carries implications of long-term settlement.[27] In the later Middle Ages, the status of immigrant was normally captured by the term 'alien': *alienigenus* in Latin, and hence *alien* in both Anglo-Norman French and, by the later fourteenth century, Middle English usage.[28] In formal terms, an alien was understood as someone who owed no direct allegiance to the sovereign power, the king, and was thus separated off from his direct subjects. It is important to note, however, that 'alien' was just as applicable to visitors as it was to permanent settlers: in general, the law of alienage that emerged from the thirteenth century made no formal distinction between such sub-categories.[29] Consequently, while all immigrants were aliens, not all aliens were immigrants.

The terms 'foreigner' and 'stranger' were also in frequent use in later medieval England: the general Latin forms were *forinsecus* and *extraneus*, while Anglo-Norman used *forein* and *estranger* and Middle English *forein* and *straunger*.[30] Originally, a 'foreigner' was simply an outsider to the town, locality or region concerned: English people were therefore treated as 'foreigners' when they moved to new places within the realm. The term continued to have this meaning through the later Middle Ages and beyond, especially in self-governing cities and towns that distinguished between those who acquired civic freedom by birth and those who had to earn it in other ways.[31] The word 'stranger' originally had much the same sense as 'foreigner', but came more quickly to denote a different nation-ality, and with the development of Middle English as a language of record in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries it was often preferred over the more legalistic 'alien'.[32]

All three words, 'alien', 'foreigner' and 'stranger', are therefore somewhat problematic for a modern readership considering a medieval topic. For the purposes of this book, we have generally dropped the term 'stranger': as with other words used to describe outsiders in the later Middle Ages, like the Middle English adjective *outlandish*, it now carries other connotations, and can be misleading to a modern readership. However, we freely deploy all three of our other key terms – 'immigrant', 'alien' and 'foreigner' – and do so specifically and solely to denote people born outside the borders of England. Our default for long-term settlers, 'immigrant', is ironically the most useful precisely because it was not in usage during the period concerned. In claiming the term, however, we do not seek necessarily to associate ourselves with any of the modern political, social and cultural meanings that attach to it; rather, we are mindful of the fact that 'alien' and

'foreigner' were also heavily freighted with meanings, both positive and negative, during the later Middle Ages and that anachronistic terminology can sometimes convey meanings more appropriate for a modern audience addressing a given time and place in history.

The word 'immigrant', as we noted above, is often today associated with medium- to long-term settlement. Neither today nor in the Middle Ages, however, is the immigrant to be considered automatically as one seeking permanent residence. Apart from those passing through as part of a longer-distance migration, there are always others who seek to live in the adopted place only for a defined period, or for a part of their life; and there is also the phenomenon of reverse migration to be taken into account, in which the individual returns to his or her homeland out of necessity or choice. As chapter 3 makes clear, then, there is much uncertainty over the length of time that those caught in the tax net of the alien subsidies had actually been resident in England, let alone how much longer they continued to remain after the assessment and collection of the tax. Nevertheless, there are strong indications, explored further in the discussion of national groupings in chapters 4 and 5, that the officials responsible for administering the alien subsidy concentrated their efforts, for good reasons, on the more settled members of the incoming population. Furthermore, as we shall see in chapters 6 and 7, while agricultural labourers in particular may have circulated back and forth across national boundaries on a regular basis, there are good reasons to believe that other people, of low as well as high estate, made the move to England for whole stages of their lives, and in a significant number of cases permanently. In spite of the difficulties of tracking specific individuals across time, then, there is sufficient evidence in samples taken from the alien subsidies to indicate that many of the immigrants identified at various points between 1440 and 1487 were indeed settled for some considerable time within the realm.

Finally, it needs to be stressed that the study that follows focuses almost exclusively on *first*-generation immigrants. In modern usage, the term 'immigrant' is sometimes used to describe self-perpetuating cultures in which subsequent generations, although born within the host country and having full rights there, maintain the traditions of the ancestral homeland and identify strongly with it, especially in terms of their ethnicity or race. As we shall see in chapters 8–10, there is comparatively little evidence, even in those places that had relatively high numbers of immigrants from particular countries or linguistic groupings, that the children and grandchildren of incomers to England in the later Middle Ages preserved a

coherent sense of foreignness – or indeed had one imposed upon them. Ultimately, this was because the vast majority of England's immigrants up to the time of the Reformation were born, or absorbed, into the one religion sanctioned by Church, state and society: Catholic Christianity. In identifying the apparently high levels of assimilation and toleration of immigrants found in England during the later Middle Ages, we therefore need also to reflect on the wider cultural and legal forces that saw diversity as a threat and regarded conformity as an absolute.

Notes

1 Among more recent such works, see Miles, *Tribes of Britain*; Conway, *A Nation of Immigrants?*; Windsor, *Bloody Foreigners*.
2 See, for example, Prestwich, *English Politics*; Turville-Petre, *England the Nation*; Harriss, *Shaping the Nation*; Clanchy, *England and its Rulers*.
3 *Alien Communities*.
4 Goldberg, *Medieval England*, pp. 71–87; Rigby, 'Introduction', pp. 1–30.
5 For the significance of the 'great slump', see chapters 2 and 6.
6 Grant, *Independence and Nationhood*; Curry, *Hundred Years War*; Cohn, *Popular Protest*.
7 For further discussion of the points raised in this paragraph, see chapter 8.
8 See further discussion in chapter 6.
9 Mackay, *Spain in the Middle Ages*, pp. 121–42, 168–71.
10 See chapter 6.
11 Dyer, 'A golden age rediscovered'; and see further discussion in chapter 7.
12 See chapter 2.
13 One of the first historians properly to document this process was Lipson, *Economic History of England, I*, pp. 451–2. The first edition of Lipson's book appeared in 1915.
14 For an indicative antiquarian approach to the local presence of Flemish weavers, see Tarbutt, 'Ancient cloth trade of Cranbrook'.
15 Treuherz, *Ford Madox Brown*, pp. 290–1. For Madox Brown's own explanatory notes on the mural, written in c. 1893, see Bendiner, *Art of Ford Madox Brown*, p. 159.
16 Dimes and Mitchell, *Building Stone Heritage of Leeds*, p. 42. The myth was first dispelled, at least for scholarly circles, by Heaton, *Yorkshire Woollen and Worsted Industries*, pp. 8–21. See also, more generally, Gribling, *Image of Edward the Black Prince*, pp. 1–3.
17 Giuseppi, 'Alien merchants'; Cunningham, *Alien Immigrants*, pp. 65–134. Note that Cunningham remained unaware of the alien subsidies.
18 Parry, *British Nationality Law*.
19 Kim, *Aliens in Medieval Law*; Summerson, 'Foreigners and felony'; Jenks, 'Justice for strangers'.
20 Thrupp, 'Survey'. For an earlier case study, see Redstone, 'Alien settlers in Ipswich'.

21 Thrupp, 'Aliens in and around London'; Rosser, *Medieval Westminster*, pp. 182–96: Carlin, *Medieval Southwark*, pp. 157–62; *Alien Communities*.

22 Kerling, 'Aliens in the county of Norfolk'; Dobson, 'Aliens in the city of York'; Dresser and Fleming, *Bristol*.

23 England's Immigrants 1330–1550, www.englandsimmigrants.com (accessed 11 September 2017).

24 Lambert and Ormrod, 'Friendly foreigners', pp. 5–7.

25 For the remainder of this and the next three paragraphs, see Ormrod and Mackman, 'Resident aliens', pp. 8–11.

26 *PROME*, XIII, 298; *CPR 1467–77*, pp. 95, 110.

27 Oxford English Dictionary, www.oed.com, s.v. 'immigrant' (accessed 10 August 2017).

28 Middle English Dictionary, http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/, s.v. 'alien' (accessed 10 August 2017); and see further discussion in chapter 2. Note also the adoption of the word 'alien' into Welsh by the fifteenth century: Lewis, 'Late medieval Welsh praise poetry', p. 124.

29 Pollock and Maitland, *History of English Law*, I, 458–67.

30 Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources, www.dmlbs.ox.ac.uk, s.vv. (accessed 18 January 2018); Anglo-Norman Dictionary, www.anglo-norman.net, s.vv. (accessed 10 August 2017); Middle English Dictionary, http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/, s.vv. (accessed 10 August 2017).

31 See, for example, Masschaele, *Peasants, Merchants, and Markets*, pp. 149–58.

32 Pearsall, 'Strangers'; Pettegree, 'Stranger community'.