

Long Ago But Not So Far Away

This year is the two hundredth anniversary of the abolition of the slave trade. We commemorate the efforts of William Wilberforce and others that eventually succeeded in bringing the trade to an end. One aspect of this trade, which is not often mentioned, is the fact that most of the slaves were not captured by the crews of slave ships but were sold by other Africans. They were of other tribes and brought their captives to the coast and traded them with the masters of the slave ships. The sad state of the relationships between some of the present peoples of Africa indicates that mans inhumanity to man did not cease two hundred years ago.

Slavery is mentioned in the bible. The Romans were quite good at it and carried their slaves about their empire as they themselves travelled. In many parts of the world it was quite common. Slavery has taken many forms. The need for labour was the driving force and in mediaeval times there was established in this country a system of serfdom or bondage, which provided this labour. Ownership of land was the mechanism, which made the system work. Without land, you could grow no food and so you starved. Men bound themselves to a lord who permitted them to occupy some of his land and in return they had to provide work service. This was often several days per week with extra time at hay time and harvest. In addition there were other little impositions such as the obligation for two or three people to bring their own oxen and a plough to plough the lord's fields. Sometimes there were journeys to be made carrying corn or driving cattle to market and all of this labour service had to be carried out at a time to suit the requirements of the lord. In your spare time you cultivated the small plot granted to you and did what you could to grow your own food, find fuel for your fire and so keep body and soul together.

Now in order to show your good will to the lord you had to give voluntary extra days at busy times. For example at harvest you went with your sickle to reap the lords corn. These were Boon days, of which more later.

There was no need for any physical restraint upon the bondmen or serfs because there was nowhere to run to. A serf or bondman could not simply arrive in another town or village and say I have come to stay because he would not be accepted. He had to remain at the place where he was born. His sons and daughters were born into bondage and be-

longed to the lord of the manor and the lord had to give permission for them to marry. The bondmen were essential to enable the agricultural system to operate and they were part of the farm stock in the same way as the farm animals. They were regarded in law as chattels.

It was not only the lords of the manor and wealthy men who owned people in this way. The church also needed labour for lands belonging to it and to the monasteries and the system there operated in the same way. There was one important difference. The bondmen being regarded as chattels, were the property of their owners. A lord could in recognition of some special service or payment grant freedom to his bondman. However in law a chattel could only be sold or given by its owner. The bondmen of the monasteries and the church were the property of the church not the archbishop or the abbot. The archbishops or abbots might wish to grant freedom to a bondman but they could not do so. Only the Pope in Rome could grant freedom to them. When Henry V111 made the break with the Catholic Church the bondmen of the church were still bondmen but the reformation and the dissolution of the monasteries eventually made freemen of many.

Over time less labour was needed to work the lords land and work service was commuted to a money rent. This transferred the obligation from the person to the land that was occupied and gradually the system of tenancy built up. A note of the piece of land and the rent to be paid together with any special impositions and fines (a fine was a registration fee) was written and entered in the Manor Rolls. A copy was made and given to the tenant who was then a Copyholder. The tenant was not always completely free of obligation and in addition to the rent there was sometimes a Boon payment to recognise the old obligation to Boon service.

These Boon payments persisted over many years. In Goxhill in 1775 when the village was enclosed The Corporation of Trinity House was entitled to, "certain out rents distinguished by the name of Sickle Boon Rents", and so a portion of land was allotted to the corporation in lieu of these rents. This finally extinguished the last tenuous link with medieval bond service in Goxhill. Thirty-two years later the bill brought to Parliament by William Wilberforce was passed into law and slavery was abolished throughout the British Empire.

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