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**'Women in Country Life: evidence from manorial records and other sources c. 1350-1750'**

**Synopsis of Paper delivered at the West of England and South Wales Women's History Network Spring Study Day Study Day 21 March 2015: WOMEN IN WILTSHIRE HISTORY: Sources at the Wiltshire and Swindon History Centre,**

The title 'Women in Country Life' can be taken in two ways. It conjures up those ladies of the manor showing off their stately homes in early 20<sup>th</sup>-century editions of *Country Life*, the magazine which published photographs of their marriageable daughters. It also reminds us of the back-breaking toil of most rural women down the centuries, whose agricultural labour was described to 19<sup>th</sup>-century *Parliamentary Commissions*, and in the *Census*.

In Medieval and Early Modern life women were prized as heiresses, through whom family lands passed to the next generation. The custom of *primogeniture*, the inheritance of family manors and estates by the eldest male heir, became established in the century after the Norman Conquest. Women were the glue in the feudal system, giving birth to the next generation of male heirs for their husbands' families. When their own families died out in the male line, women as co-heiresses – the sisters or daughters of a deceased lord – carried their estates to new families when they married. This was also true for the peasants. By the 16<sup>th</sup> century farms were generally leased out for up to three lives. In the absence of male family members, women's names were added to the lease to transfer the property down the generations. A new life could be added at any time – for a fee – as births, marriages and deaths changed the family structure.

We tend to see the 'deep past' of the Medieval and Early Modern centuries with our own eyes: it is easy to forget that the family was then the basic unit of society, not the individual man or woman who held property or office during their lives. Individual men and women lived within a complex network of obligations to their immediate family, their extended kinship network and other social groups to which they belonged, including the manor and parish. These networks were vital to their survival in a society in which around one third of its people lived on the edge of starvation.

Medieval and Early Modern England was a traditional society, in which activities were strictly apportioned by gender, and by the stage in the life-cycle which a person had reached. Women generally worked until the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when ladies of the upper social classes began to be subjected to enforced leisure, to reflect family status. The women of gentry and peasant families did valuable work managing households, overseeing extended *familia* of children, young girls learning dairying and processing agricultural products, young boys learning farming skills, and older servants. The lives of Medieval abbesses and nuns in convents and hospitals were not dissimilar. All households had to produce and process almost all of what was to be eaten, worn or used in the course of daily life.

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