interests in the way the village lands were used. There is no record of the communal organization in the village. As elsewhere in England the ordinary people left no traces of their decisions or of the way they arrived at them. But, whatever system they used, Warin the sheriff, Peter the sheriff and the de Kingeston family who succeeded them as stewards to the de Warenne earls, played a dominant role in it. Indeed, from their standpoint the village system must have presented real advantages: it was a ready-made mechanism for asserting the interests of the lord in a world of villeins whose feudal allegiances were to the grange in the first instance. It was in other words a way of keeping the manorial mess in Kingston in some kind of order. And once de Warenne had enfeoffed his steward in lands made up of the ancient demesnes, the steward came to life. Perhaps the de Warennes saw this as a guarantee that production from their own widely spread demesnes would be properly organized. And, perhaps also, the new church of 1100 became an effective centre for communal organization. Much later on, in the nineteenth century, there were signs that the 'parish meeting' played a central part in the way the village ran itself. The priest and the knightly steward from the nearby castle would have been fully adequate as guardians of law and order – and as insurance that the communal system worked to the lord's as also to the monks' advantage.

For the most part the lords and monks were primarily interested in the supply of labour services free of wages, which the villeins were obliged to supply. It is true, of course, that with the passage of time the feudal organization of labour was transformed. Labour service was 'commuted' into an equivalent rent payment, or one that satisfied the lord. Nevertheless, the supply of labour in exchange for land was to remain a central feature of village life for a long time. As we shall see, it would seem that Kingston villeins were still at work in this way, at least on the grange demesnes, as late as 1330 and after.[1] So, for two or three hundred years after the Norman Conquest, labour service on the demesnes was a dominant imposition on the villagers.

What was it like? How demanding were the feudal masters at the grange and in Iford and Kingston? Sadly, there are few medieval manorial documents for the village and none give an account of what sort of work people had to do. The best we can do is to make inferences from the bits of information that are available about the manors nearby – particularly from the manor of Hamsey a mile or so north of Lewes and only about three miles from Kingston.[2]

William le Byke lived in Hamsey in the 1260s and 1270s. He was a villein owing homage and service to Sir William de Say, lord of the manor. We know a little more about William than this because it happens that he was involved in a prolonged case brought before the Earl de Warenne at the court of the barony and honour of the Rape of Lewes in 1265. William, as he appears from the case, was a contentious, possibly devious man who found himself in a good deal of trouble.

His problems started, by his account, when he stood surety for a lady called Matilda de Wogham (modern Offham, about half a mile from Hamsey) in a debt she owed to one John Snelling, who was probably a Kingston man.[3] Matilda failed to pay the debt and so William was held responsible for it. Unfortunately, though, he could not pay it either and he was made to suffer for it. In January 1265 he brought a case against Matilda and Robert Russel her husband. He complained that he *had* given Matilda the money to pay her debt to Snelling but that she had used it for other purposes. In consequence, he had been excommunicated – no less – until the debt should be settled. Furthermore, Matilda had failed to pay him for goods she had purchased from him, and failed also to pay for ploughing that he had done for her. To crown it all, Matilda and Robert her husband had beaten him up, insulted him publicly in Lewes and damaged his property in Hamsey. William seems to have made his case initially, but not for long. In May 1266, Matilda and Robert brought a case of false witness against him and, to add to the presumably unresolved debt to Snelling, he was fined 12d.

William was still at Hamsey in 1271 when he, together with some members of Matilda's family, the de Woghams, was a witness at the Inquisition postmortem on his lord's manor at Hamsey. It is the Inquisition that gives a picture of what a villein had to supply by way of labour at the time.

William's labour service was based on his 'week works', which he performed in exchange for a virgate of land. First, from 29 September until 1 August the following year he was obliged to work five days a week. These were usually called the 'summer and winter week works'. In William's case they were valued at 2½d a day – which, in view of later evidence, suggests that he worked for half a day for his lord. Then, second, he had 'to find a man', who might presumably be himself, for each day of the eight weeks of autumn – from 1 August until 29 September. These were the autumn week works, especially important because of the harvest. They were valued at 1d a day, implying a full day's work for the lord.

Over and above these regular daily commitments, William had other duties. All the villeins of the manor had to plough one acre for wheat and two for oats – a service valued at 15d. Perhaps it was demesne ploughing done for the de Woghams, who were also villeins, that was in contention between William and Matilda in the manor court.

In addition to ploughing, William had to mow for eight days before autumn (valued at 8d.), and to collect and cart the lord's hay (two cartloads a day for four days valued at 20d.). Over and above this he had to 'find men' to perform other services for the lord: the boon-works (valued 4d.) and a day of work a week over and above his own obligation in the autumn (value 8d). And William paid 14s.6d in rent to the lord at Michaelmas. Since the total value of the works he performed for his lord amounted to about 18s a year, this additional rent of assize was a considerable extra burden. If William had tried to meet it by working elsewhere for wages he would have had to do as much

work again as he was already committed to. In fact, the rent of assize was mostly paid out of sales of produce – hence it being timed for the end of the harvest.

William's virgater colleagues on the manor carried similar obligations. Half-virgaters had just half the obligations. Cottagers carried quite heavy week work obligations (about the same as William even though they had much less land), but they paid smaller rents and had no ploughing, mowing or carrying to do.[4]

These labour services were typical for the period. A. E. Wilson notes that 'Sussex custumals point fairly clearly to a burden of five days a week for every half-hide.'[5] The Wiston Manor custumals of about 1300 indicate approximately this level of labour services,[6] though they also contain instances of much heavier dues. Villeins in 'Iryngham', a part of the manor of Wiston, were obliged to do fully twice as much work on the demesnes as William le Byke. But William's load seems fairly typical. Kingston villeins of the time probably did the same amount.

The total of these labour services amounts to a considerable burden. At a rough estimate, William was responsible to his lord for about 180 man-days of labour – not counting the rent of assize or other smaller rents he owed (including a spring-time payment of '25 eggs and two hens' to the lord at Easter). Supposing that the total of working days in the year was somewhat under 300 days – after allowing for Sabbaths and other religious days – this means that le Byke worked for the lord for about two-thirds of a working year, or alternatively had to find other labourers to make up his total. This plainly was a heavy proportionate load, but even so it is liable to underestimate the effect of labour service on the villein. The problem for an unfree labourer like William le Byke was not just that the lord demanded a substantial overall proportion of his working life, but more important that the lord's demands were naturally concentrated at those times of year that were the most critical – during the autumn harvest months. If the autumn weather was at all variable the immediate availability of labour was, of course, critical to the business of getting the crop in. The lord effectively pre-empted this labour supply from his villeins – reducing the risks of harvest failure for his own crops and passing it on to theirs. From this point of view, the viability of the villein family depended on whether they could muster labour at the crucial times of the year – either from their own ranks or alternatively by buying in wage labour from cottagers to replace the villein on the demesnes or to work on the family land.

But other costs weighed heavily on villeins like William le Byke. The rent of assize of 14s.6d, which he had to pay each Michaelmas, is easy to overlook, but for him it was a heavy fixed cost. And there were other payments to be made too, some regularly, like tithes, others less so, like heriots on the death of the villein holder, entry fines, fines on marriage of children and 'amercements' or fines paid to the manor court for infringements of various kinds.[7]

It is possible by virtue of a number of rather heroic assumptions to illustrate the tenuous grip that villein families like the le Bykes had on subsistence.

Table 4.1: Estimates of William le Byke's net annual income from cultivation and how it depended on yields

Yield per acre (bushels)		*Rent of assize (shillings)*	*Gross income (shillings)*	*Net income wheat equivalent (shillings)*
5	28.5	14.5	14.0	19.0
6	34.2	14.5	19.7	27.0
7	39.9	14.5	25.4	33.0
8	46.6	14.5	32.1	43.0

Table 4.1 gives some very rough estimates of the welfare of the family. It needs some explanation. First, a number of important assumptions are made. Le Byke is assumed to have held about 12 acres of land – a typical size for the local virgate. Second, the yields of grain he could obtain are assumed to vary between five and eight bushels per acre. It is fairly well agreed that demesne yields in the latter thirteenth century were about six to eight bushels per acre and it has been argued that villein yields were lower.[8] Third, it is assumed that wheat prices were about six shillings a quarter (eight bushels) in the 1270s and barley prices some two-thirds of this.[9] And finally, we assume that William le Byke only planted two-thirds of his 12 acres every year – the other third being left fallow – and that, like his lord, he grew twice as much oats as wheat, presumably because of soil conditions.[10]

However, it is not quite fair to measure le Byke's income in monetary units. Like most villeins, he did not sell all his produce but consumed at least a proportion of it directly. The measures of le Byke's income therefore are merely approximate indicators of his welfare. The main reason for using them at all is to get a measure of the incidence of the fixed rent at assize that he had to pay on his family's welfare. Let us note also that the table only gives an estimate of le Byke's income from the product of the arable land. He had other sources of income too, notably poultry, which may have been a crucial source of protein to him and his family, sheep, which were mainly important for their dung and only secondarily for meat and wool, and perhaps some larger animals as well. Nevertheless, this income from arable must have been by far the largest part of the total and there is some overestimation because the charge for tithes and no doubt some other fixed rents are not included.

The main point that shows up in Table 4.1 is the importance of the fixed rent of assize to the family's welfare. The clearest way of indicating how the fixed rent weighed on the le Bykes is to examine the effect of a fall in arable yields from seven bushels per acre (which was probably very high for a villein yardland) in one year to five bushels per acre in the next. This is a fall of 28.5

per cent in land yield. It would result in a proportionately much greater fall in arable income because of the fixed rent: net income would fall from 25.4 shillings to 14 shillings – in other words by 45 per cent. The main effect of the fixed rent was therefore to make the family's well being critically dependent on the land yields it could obtain.

The last column of Table 4.1 converts the net income of the le Byke family into 'wheat equivalents': it is in other words simply a measure of the amount of wheat their net income would buy at the price of six shillings a quarter. The purpose of this is to give an indication of the family's welfare in more absolute terms. It is unavoidably misleading because the le Bykes neither sold all the produce of their land nor spent all the money income they got from the part they did actually sell on the purchase of wheat on the market. Even so, the wheat equivalent measure of income is a plausible guide to the 'real' value of the arable income. Its applications are worked out in Table 4.2, which shows the amount of wheat equivalent available per family member each day, depending on yields of land and size of family.

This table shows up some of the basic problems of subsistence that a villein family faced. First, it shows the same quantitative sensitivity of family well being to land yields that is evident in Table 4.1. Second, it indicates just how important the sensitivity to land yields could be for the family. The availability of food from tillage is very close to the subsistence minimum at all levels. If 1 lb. of wheat yields about 1200 calories, then about 1½ lbs per day represents a minimum requirement for survival and barely leaves any energy over for work. However, since the le Bykes had some other sources of income and since their family, however big it may have been, would probably have included young children with lower calorie requirements, it is probably fair to take 1½ lbs. of wheat equivalent per day per person as a guide to the minimum required. If this is a fair estimate, it is clear that the le Byke family must have been close to the survival line in the best of circumstances.

Third, the table indicates the basic economic problems facing the villein. An increase in the size of the family had contradictory effects. On the one hand, it increased the number of people available to work on the villein virgate – provided of course the larger family was not made up of a disproportionate number of children. Since the villein landholder was expected to provide about two-thirds of a man-year of work to the lord, often at critical times of the year for the yields of his own lands, it was obviously very important to have extra working hands in the family. Land yields, so important to family income, might well depend on the available labour. A family of two adults and a small child, for example, might be unable to cultivate with sufficient intensity to raise their land yields above five bushels per acre. If so, and if they had no recourse to additional hired labour, they would not be 'viable'; *in short, they might all die*.

On the other hand, the larger the family unit, the more people had to be fed off the land. Obviously a great deal depended on the age structure of the

family. A large young family was especially vulnerable – since it might well be that its larger size was not offset by a sufficient increase in intensity of culti-

Table 4.2: Pounds of 'wheat equivalent' available per day per family member, depending on yields and size of the family

Yields per acre (bushels)	*Number of family members on the virgate*		
	5	*4*	*3*
5	0.63	0.78	1.04
6	0.90	1.13	1.50
7	1.10	1.38	1.83
8	1.43	1.79	2.38

vation to make it viable in terms of subsistence. Similarly, as grandparents became too old to work and children left the family unit, the burden of work needed for survival might become too much for two adults to bear. There were plainly many ways in which the family could be at risk even under 'normal' conditions. And they were always at risk if the year was a poor one for agriculture or if a large part of their lands was marginal in the sense of barely providing the additional yield needed to support the additional labour. To put the problem somewhat differently, land yields might rise with the availability of more family labour, but at the same time the vulnerability of everyone in the family to a chance fall in land yields because of poor weather conditions was increased. The margin for survival was never large. The fine of 12d that William le Byke had to pay in 1266 for bearing false witness against his neighbours at Offham looks small enough in today's terms, but in those days it was a lot. In terms of 'wheat equivalent' it might have bought food for a family of four for two weeks or more. In a bad year that might have been enough to make the difference between reasonably healthy survival and malnutrition, disease or possibly death.

In these later years of the thirteenth century, there is reason to suppose that the Kingston villein families faced much the same delicate calculus of survival as their near neighbour in Hamsey – or at least those among them who held a single Sussex virgate. There are debates among historians about earlier times. Some believe they had been easier and that the feudal pressure on the villein increased in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries; others are less certain. The evidence is mixed. What we seem to see in the case of the le Byke family is a fine adjustment to the business of survival; although there is room for debate, it seems likely that for the most part villeins had lived in this precarious balance since the Conquest.

Nevertheless, there might well have been differences between manors that were of some importance to individual families. Even where the formal obligations of villeins appeared to be identical between two manors, it might be

advantageous to be attached to one rather than the other. The villein's obligations, as described in the manor 'extents' or in the Inquisitions postmortem like the one at Hamsey, are in the most general terms:[11] for example, the description of the summer and winter works normally consist of a simple statement of the days owed to the lord. A great deal might depend on how the lord or his officers interpreted the obligations. In short, the intensity of work demanded from villeins could vary from manor to manor.

Broadly speaking, one might expect manorial lords to exert greater pressure on villeins, and others, where they were comparatively few people working in relation to the amount of land to be cultivated. The fewer the villeins, the greater the claims the wage bill would make on the product of the demesnes, and the less the lord's share. So while it was probably always in the interests of the lords to get more labour from the villeins than they might wish to give, it was all the more so where villeins were in short supply.

On this score, the villeins of Hamsey probably had a hard time. There were only eight villein yardlands for about 18 demesne yards: 0.44 villein yardlands per demesne yardland. At Swanborough, by the early years of the twelfth century, the supply was much larger: 1.2 villein yardlands per demesne yardland. It is likely then that Swanborough villeins were less pushed than their counterparts in Hamsey – though they in turn were less well off than the villeins of Falmer, who were very numerous in relation to the size of the demesne they had to cultivate.

It is likely also that the first generation of villeins at Swanborough, the ones who worked the lands in the founding years, were much harder pressed than their successors. They were few in number at first, and the work to be done was considerable. Whatever the trends in the feudal treatment of unfree labourers – whether the general move was towards toughening the demands on them in the later part of the twelfth century or not – the chances are that at Swanborough the Kingston villeins had a harder time in the earlier part of the century than later on.

By any measure then, the community that clustered under the watching eye of the steward-knight at Kingston had a hard time of it in the medieval years, although perhaps not quite as tough a time as the villeins and cottagers at Hamsey endured. It needed little to bring them to the edge of survival. As the centuries passed, the population grew and the pressure on the land increased. Existence became more precarious not less.

By the turn of the thirteenth century and in the early years of the fourteenth, Kingston villagers, as elsewhere in England, must have been at the limits of survival in most years and beyond the limit in any unfavourable season. Perhaps those narrow strips that climb up the steeper westward slopes of the open fields – at the head of Kingston Street – date from this time. Perhaps they commemorate the more desperate years when villagers were driven to cultivate wherever the restrictive technology of the time would let them, at the very margins of possibility. They are long these strips – but so