

Real Life and Catastrophe in 14th Century Emsay and Eastby

For those studying the late medieval period there is a fascinating source of Emsay and Eastby history. There are a series of documents dating from the year 1286 up to 1325 in the archives of Chatsworth House in Derbyshire, which is where a lot of Emsay and Eastby records can be found. The records were written in medieval Latin on vellum and were transcribed about 20 years ago and made available as a printed book known as the "Bolton Priory Compotus". In medieval times the monastic estate was led by a Prior, so was known as Bolton Priory. The Compotus holds the financial records of the Priory, which give lots of information on the income and expenditure at that time. This is often quite dry, but with perseverance and good luck some interesting information can be gleaned.

For example, Emsay had an annual fair which ran over three days each September. It was held at the time of a feast-day celebrating St Cuthbert, to whom the chapel where Emsay Kirk now stands was dedicated. The fair seems to have been very successful in the early days and well known across the North of England. The Compotus mentioned by name a Patricia de Braferton who visited the fair. She was mentioned because she paid 2 shillings (10 pence) for her horse to be kept in one of the gardens in the village. Braferton is, in all likelihood, the village of the same modern name near to Boroughbridge, so Patricia would have travelled a good 50 miles to Emsay fair. Her husband was not mentioned, so it is likely that she was at the fair doing business for herself.

Whilst women were not as free as their menfolk in business matters, many were able to rent land in their own right. In 1305 in Eastby, Annette Wyldegoose paid the Priory 5 shillings (25p) so that she could take control of some land in Eastby, be able to pay rent for it and farm the land for her own profit. This was the equivalent of about 3 weeks' pay for a labourer. In 1322, the widow of the reeve or overseer of Malham was also able to pay 20 shillings to take control of what must have been a large area of land in Emsay.

At this time, farmers in Emsay and Eastby produced crops of wheat, barley, rye and large quantities of oats. Emsay and Eastby did not have herds of cattle or flocks of sheep. We know this because the Compotus recorded the quantity of tithes given to the Priory. Tithes were a tax where you gave one tenth of your produce to the church. The type and quantity of tithes were recorded and plenty of grain was collected, but no animals or animal products. It is still possible today to see many of the fields where the grain was grown in Emsay: these are the fields where there are wide ridge and furrow marks. Where the medieval fields were in Eastby is less clear as there is no surviving ridge and furrow evidence to be seen.

The Compotus also recorded the bad times, such as when the whole of this area suffered catastrophically in the ten years after 1315. Dreadful famine was compounded by at least two Scottish invasions of Emsay and Eastby.

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