SERF Research Agenda conference discussion points for the Medieval period

(In response to contributions to the SERF Medieval resource assessment seminar and relevant thematic seminars in the same series)

A) A number of specific areas of medieval life in the region are clearly under-researched, such as:

- Medieval industry: surrounding workshop areas should be looked for/investigated when any of the following turn up: pottery kiln sites, kilns associated with brick and floor tile manufacture, Iron smelting/smithing, water mills and windmills; the medieval textile industry needs thorough investigation
- Areas given over to such activities also need to be placed in their wider context. For instance, the study of the working areas of industrial sites might tell us much about the processes undertaken by workers, but not much about other aspects of their lives (living in 'shanty' circumstances for example?).
- The same point could equally be applied to an overemphasis on churches or central monastic buildings rather than the wider ecclesiastical landscape. We need more investigation of entire monastic complexes and their hinterlands in order to understand how these communities related to society. If the monastic settlements 'lost' since the Reformation could be traced on the ground they would produce lots of new information.
- Communications: work could be done on the medieval re-use of Roman roads and the siting of medieval fords and bridges; routes used for transporting raw materials or finished products between town and county, the coast and the Weald need to be traced
- This leads on to a consideration of the interaction between town and country. Towns should not be split off from their hinterlands. Rural settlements need the treatment afforded to towns by Extensive Urban Surveys. Maritime landscapes (a priority being the reconstruction of the coastal environments over time) should also be integrated into such work.

B) Developing a more interpretative perspective, we might investigate further aspects of cultural identity as expressed and represented through material culture:

- 'Creolization' of culture in the early Anglo-Norman period? If not, why not? This area of study seems to have received little attention in comparison with cultural fusion in the Romano-British period, for example
- The articulation of more localised identities with the development of broader understandings of group identity (and otherness) in response to government policy, plagues, poll taxes, poverty etc.
- The ways in which these group identities correlate (or not) with social structures.

C) Social structures surely require a good deal more understanding, and the ideologies, lives and experiences of all sectors of society are of interest, as reflected by settlements, buildings, material culture, diet, etiquette, funerary customs etc. This would include:

- The royal and knightly classes
- Merchants
- The socially mobile, who seem to have emerged as a middle class in the latter part of the period (particularly linked to mercantile groups?)
- The general working classes and serfs, both in the rural (agricultural, industrial etc), and increasingly urban setting
- Less mainstream groups such as immigrant communities (e.g. Jewish), migrant and itinerant workers, members of religious communities, quarantined groups (e.g. lepers), criminals, etc. Understanding of the roles and experiences of such groups has an impact on our understanding of more mainstream/dominant groups
- Comparisons between urban and rural, coastal and in-land communities
- The differing roles/experiences of men, women, children, the elderly etc, in all of the above categories.

D) Different world views: uncritical assumptions and interpretations of medieval behaviour, thought and motivation will merely project anachronistic values on to the past, to the detriment of recognising world views that might be alien to us. Mythology and religious thought, in conjunction with cultural identity and social structure, are especially significant. This would include consideration of minority faiths, folk beliefs, superstitions and magic and Christianity (a complex and changing mix of institution, thought and experience). Ideologies and sub-ideologies might be investigated in the following areas, for example:

- Ritual and ceremony, which might be religious (including pilgrimage) and/or related to funerary or other rites of passage
- Festivals, fairs, sport and games
- Taboos: for example relating to diet, or access to and exclusion from certain places
- Public and private spheres and variation of behaviour according to such contexts
- The phenomenology of material culture and landscape
- The influence of travel and experience of other cultures
- Expression and representation through, and influence of the arts.

E) Methodological concerns: in order even to hope to explore such aspects in detail, certain methodological matters need to be addressed:

- Multidisciplinary approaches are plainly called for, but the types of sources used obviously need to be appropriate to the questions asked. Archaeological evidence, for example, is more likely than historical sources to elucidate aspects of medieval life in the region that remain, to all intents and purposes, 'prehistoric'.
- There is a need for more ease of access to and research focussed dissemination of 'grey' literature, Historic Environment Records, Portable Antiquities Scheme data and reports of environmental analyses (and more of the latter are needed generally for comparison)
- Agreed regional typologies for artefacts: for example, the region still lacks a unified form and fabric type series for ceramics, for this and other periods
- Buildings archaeology is a particular area of concern because there are few dedicated researchers in this area and the skills base required for recording and analysis is dwindling

- As well as being largely reactive and not tied to specific research questions, developer funded work involving ground works and/or buildings has tended to be very narrowly focussed in mitigation of impact, providing only snapshots of 'sites'. There has also been a focus on perceived centres of sites rather than their hinterlands, with a commensurate narrowness of understanding of how sites form part of a wider social setting.
- In order to promote a concerted research effort involving all sectors of an archaeological and historical community, there must be effective communication systems in place: the internet has much potential in this area, through data sharing and publication
- "Research" is not a dirty word! It is important that all archaeologists can be assertive that they are indeed engaged in research through data collection, analysis and *interpretation*.