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### Deposited in DRO:

03 September 2013

### Version of attached file:

Accepted Version

### Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

### Citation for published item:

Brown, A. T. (2014) 'Estate management and institutional constraints in pre-industrial England : the ecclesiastical estates of Durham, c.1400-1640.', *Economic history review.*, 67 (3). pp. 699-719.

### Further information on publisher's website:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/1468-0289.12036>

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**Estate Management and Institutional Constraints in Pre-Industrial England: the  
Ecclesiastical Estates of Durham, c.1400-1640<sup>1</sup>**

Published in the *Economic History Review*

By A. T. Brown

I

Much ink has been expended investigating the mechanisms of change in pre-industrial societies.<sup>2</sup> At the heart of many of these debates lies the question of whether the transformations of rural society are caused by great sweeping changes in demography, an increase in commercialisation and market penetration, or changes in class relations.<sup>3</sup> In primarily agrarian societies demography is one of the most fundamental dynamics which can have a significant impact on the demand for land, labour, and food, thus influencing, although by no means determining, levels of rent, wages and prices respectively. As such, changes in demography have been seen as vital in producing structural transformations of pre-industrial societies, often as demographic crises push the supply or demand of the above resources to a crisis point. Another factor which has been seen as fundamental in affecting change is the extent of commercialisation, which has received increasing attention in recent decades and has shown that medieval peasants were often responsive to fluctuations in market

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<sup>1</sup> This article has incurred many debts, not least to Ben Dodds, Adrian Green, John Hatcher and Richard Britnell for their comments on various aspects of this research. I would also like to thank the editors and referees of the journal for their helpful and insightful comments. This research was carried out under the auspices of a 1+3 ESRC studentship and EHS Postan fellowship. Please contact the author for any queries regarding the underlying data.

<sup>2</sup> See for example: T. H. Aston and C. H. E. Philpin (eds.), *The Brenner Debate: Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe* (Cambridge, 1985); C. Dyer, P. Coss, and C. Wickham (eds.), *Rodney Hilton's Middle Ages: an Exploration of Historical Themes, Past and Present Supplement 2* (2007).

<sup>3</sup> J. Hatcher and M. Bailey, *Modelling the Middle Ages: the History and Theory of England's Economic Development* (Oxford, 2001), pp.1-20.

opportunities.<sup>4</sup> Increasing market penetration went hand-in-hand with the increasing commercialisation of land, labour, food and services, all of which helped pave the way for the development of agrarian capitalism. However, there are limitations as to how far market penetration can be used as an explanatory factor, not least its circular nature: there were more markets therefore peasants became more market-oriented, which in turn produced more markets and thus a greater market-orientation. Robert Brenner reacted against earlier incarnations of this research and what he deemed to be demographic determinism, instead advocating that class relations were the fundamental explanatory factor of change. He followed in Marx's footsteps in arguing that it is the 'surplus-extraction relationship that defines the fundamental classes in a society', and that it was changes in these relationships which was the key mechanism in producing much broader transformations in society.<sup>5</sup> One of the greatest weaknesses of neo-Marxist interpretations, however, is a tendency to portray pre-industrial societies as a zero-sum game in which lords can only gain at the expense of their peasants and vice versa.

In his influential *Past and Present* article, Brenner compared the countryside of eighteenth-century England with that of France, arguing that the former was composed of rentier landlords, large commercial farms, and hired wage-labourers, whereas the latter was still dominated by small-scale subsistence agriculture. Brenner's thesis has been thoroughly critiqued over the years, but there are two elements which are particularly important for this article. The first of these was the consolidation of land and the appearance of capitalist forms of agriculture amongst the English tenantry after the Black Death. As Richard Hoyle has

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<sup>4</sup> D. Stone, *Decision-Making in Medieval Agriculture* (Oxford, 2005), pp. 3-44; C. Dyer, *Making a Living in the Middle Ages: The People of Britain, 850-1520* (London, 2002), pp. 155-86; R. H. Britnell, *Britain and Ireland, 1050-1530: Economy and Society* (Oxford, 2004), pp. 158-222; B. Dodds, *Peasants and Production in the Medieval North-East: the Evidence from Tithes, 1270-1536* (Woodbridge, 2007), pp. 132-61.

<sup>5</sup> R. Brenner, 'Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe', *Past and Present*, 70 (1976), pp. 34-70.

emphasised, this could, and often did, occur through peasant rather than landlord initiative, which Brenner's argument did not allow for.<sup>6</sup> As will be shown here, landlords could act to create these larger farms directly, but they also had an important role in enabling or constraining the ability of their tenants to do so, as much through benign neglect as through deliberate estate management policies. The second element was the conversion of customary tenures, especially copyholds, into leasehold land. There were numerous types of tenure which evolved from medieval customary tenures: copyholds for life, which were granted to named tenants; copyholds of inheritance, which conveyed an inheritable interest in the land; tenant-right, which was a northern customary tenure that provided some security of tenure if upheld in court; and leasehold land, which could be held for years or lives, but which was generally considered to be the most commercial form of tenure, often with little or no inheritable right. When landowners withdrew from direct demesne farming in the late-fourteenth and early-fifteenth centuries, they often leased out their demesnes in small parcels on short leases to their remaining tenants and sometimes did the same with their customary tenures. After the rapid expansion of leasehold in the last decades of the fourteenth century, Richard Britnell has argued that 'its importance waned; many leaseholds were converted to copyholds, fee-farms, bond fee-farms, or simply rent-paying tenures which no one presumed to define too closely'.<sup>7</sup> It will be shown here how these changes in tenure played out on two neighbouring estates in the fifteenth century and some of the considerable consequences this could have for their successors in the late-sixteenth century.

This article argues that estate management and institutional constraints are vital factors in the transformation of rural societies because they form the mechanism through

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<sup>6</sup> R. W. Hoyle, 'Tenure and the Land Market in Early Modern England: Or a Late Contribution to the Brenner Debate', *Economic History Review*, XLIII (1990), pp. 1-20.

<sup>7</sup> R. H. Britnell, 'Tenant Farming and Tenant Farmers: Eastern England', in E. Miller (ed.), *The Agrarian History of England and Wales, vol. III 1348-1500* (Cambridge, 1991), p. 615.

which many of the traditional explanations of change operate, often creating a path dependency which affects rural society for generations. The bishops of Durham and the monks of Durham Cathedral Priory faced many of the same exogenous challenges in the late-fourteenth and fifteenth centuries but it was the divergent development of their estates which had long-term consequences for their successors and their tenants. This divergent development had a profound impact upon the Durham countryside, not only affecting the tenure and levels of rent upon their lands, but also influencing the potential stratification of holdings; three of the most crucial factors in the development of agrarian capitalism. By the early-seventeenth century, this institutional context was also vital for understanding the living standards, wealth, and social aspirations of Durham tenants. The majority of the Dean and Chapter's tenants were still primarily tenant-farmers, whereas there were groups of yeomen emerging on the estate of the bishops of Durham who were often surpassing the gentry in terms of wealth and social status. It is further advocated here that the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries must be studied in conjunction because often how landowners and their tenants responded to the fifteenth-century recession placed long-term constraints upon their successors' ability to adapt to the inflation of the sixteenth century. The full implications of these transformations have been hindered not only by the division into medieval and early modern specialisms which has produced 'a historical fault line of seismic proportions [lying] at the end of the fifteenth century', but also by the relative paucity of information surrounding the fifteenth and early-sixteenth centuries; 'a murky, ill-documented and under-researched period'.<sup>8</sup> Many of the problems facing rural society in the late-sixteenth century had their

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<sup>8</sup> M. Yates, *Town and Countryside in Western Berkshire, c.1327-c.1600: Social and Economic Change* (Woodbridge, 2007), p. 1; B. M. S. Campbell and M. Overton, 'A New Perspective on Medieval and Early Modern Agriculture: Six Centuries of Norfolk Farming, c. 1250-c.1850', *Past and Present*, 141 (1993), pp. 47-8.

origins in the late-fourteenth century, whilst the seeds of change planted in the earlier period did not reach fruition until the late-sixteenth century.

## II

Durham Cathedral Priory and the bishops of Durham were the largest landowners in the Palatinate of Durham in the north-east of England.<sup>9</sup> The lands of Durham Cathedral were divided into eight obediences, but the most important office was that of the bursar who accounted for around £1,500 out of a total revenue of £2,000 at the start of the fifteenth century. Although these lands were scattered throughout the Palatinate, there were primary concentrations just to the south of the River Tyne and several clusters of land in the fertile regions of the Tees valley. Whilst the bishops of Durham had more land in the Pennine Spurs to the west of the Palatinate, their estate was similarly placed with a concentration of manors on the Tyne coalfields, and much of this land was close or coterminous with that of the Durham monks. The bishops of Durham had an even more substantial endowment than the Cathedral which led Storey to conclude that ‘Bishop Langley was one of the five richest landowners in England’ at the start of the fifteenth century.<sup>10</sup> The bishops of Durham had an estimated income of anywhere between £3,000 and £4,000 at the end of the fourteenth century, of which between £2,500 and £3,000 was accounted for by the receiver-general of the Durham exchequer. This was composed of the rental income from the four wards of the Palatinate, Darlington, Chester, Easington, and Stockton, as well as ancillary income ranging from perquisites of the halmote courts to the Durham mint, and importantly, that of the office of master forester who was responsible for the bishops’ parks and coal mines. This article

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<sup>9</sup> The County Palatine of Durham was an area of northern England ruled by the prince-bishops of Durham who retained both spiritual and temporal jurisdiction there throughout this period.

<sup>10</sup> R. L. Storey, *Thomas Langley and the Bishopric of Durham, 1406-1437* (London, 1961), p. 68.

relies upon the accounts of the bursars of Durham Cathedral Priory and the receiver-generals of the bishops of Durham and so excludes some of their Yorkshire and Northumberland lands, enabling a detailed study of how two geographically compact and often coterminous estates developed under the successive pressures of intensive recession and rapid inflation.

The fifteenth century is typically characterised as a period of economic stagnation or recession, with low prices, low rents, and high wages, providing agricultural producers and landowners with a whole host of difficult decisions.<sup>11</sup> The population of England was reduced from anywhere between 4 and 6 million people on the eve of the Black Death to around 2.5 million by 1377, which stagnated to around 2.1 million by 1500. Mark Bailey recently concluded that the Black Death stands ‘unchallenged as the greatest disaster in documented human history, claiming the lives of up to half the population of Europe’ in just a handful of years.<sup>12</sup> This demographic crisis created problems for landlords centred on the relative abundance of land, with the years from 1430 to 1465 witnessing ‘one of the most sustained and severe agricultural depressions in documented English history’.<sup>13</sup> In exploring the experiences of the bishops of Worcester during the fifteenth century, Chris Dyer concluded that ‘the most convincing argument is that the main economic trends of the early/mid-fifteenth century were against magnates, as rents, which formed the bulk of their revenues, declined’.<sup>14</sup>

Figure 1 confirms the difficulties facing landowners in the fifteenth century. It shows how the overall incomes of these two Durham landowners marched roughly in-step, equally

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<sup>11</sup> M. M. Postan, ‘The Fifteenth Century’, *Economic History Review*, IX (1939), pp. 160-7; J. Hatcher, ‘The Great Slump of the Mid-Fifteenth Century’, in R. H. Britnell and J. Hatcher (eds.), *Progress and Problems in Medieval England: Essays in Honour of Edward Miller* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 237-72.

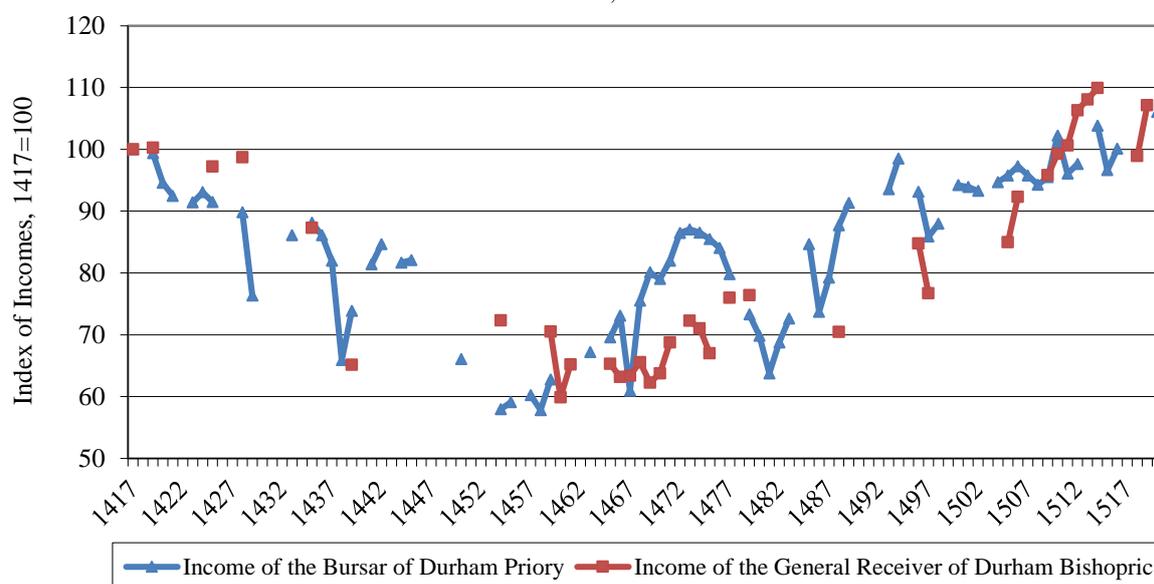
<sup>12</sup> M. Bailey, ‘Introduction’ in M. Bailey and S. H. Rigby (eds.), *Town and Countryside in the Age of the Black Death: Essays in Honour of John Hatcher* (Turnhout, 2012), p. xx.

<sup>13</sup> M. Bailey, ‘Rural Society’, in Rosemary Horrox (ed.), *Fifteenth-Century Attitudes* (Cambridge, 1994), p. 153.

<sup>14</sup> C. Dyer, *Lords and Peasants in a Changing Society: The Estates of the Bishopric of Worcester, 680-1540* (Cambridge, 1980), p. 153.

suffering from the agrarian problems of the 1430s, reaching a nadir in the 1450s and 60s, and recovering from the 1470s onwards before eventually achieving an income at least comparable with that of the early-fifteenth century. Despite the chronological synchronicity of these recoveries, they were in fact achieved through quite different means. The monks of Durham Priory intensified their rent collection process, combatted arrears, waste and decay, whilst their holdings were slowly consolidated into enlarged leasehold farms.<sup>15</sup> By comparison, the bishops of Durham diversified their income, especially relying upon the receipts from their parks, forests and coal mines to bolster their ailing rent rolls. These divergent responses, both rational and successful, were to have long-term consequences, not just for their successors, but also in providing their tenants with a whole host of different challenges and opportunities for centuries to come.

Figure 1: Comparison of the Incomes of Durham Cathedral Priory and the Bishops of Durham, 1417-1520

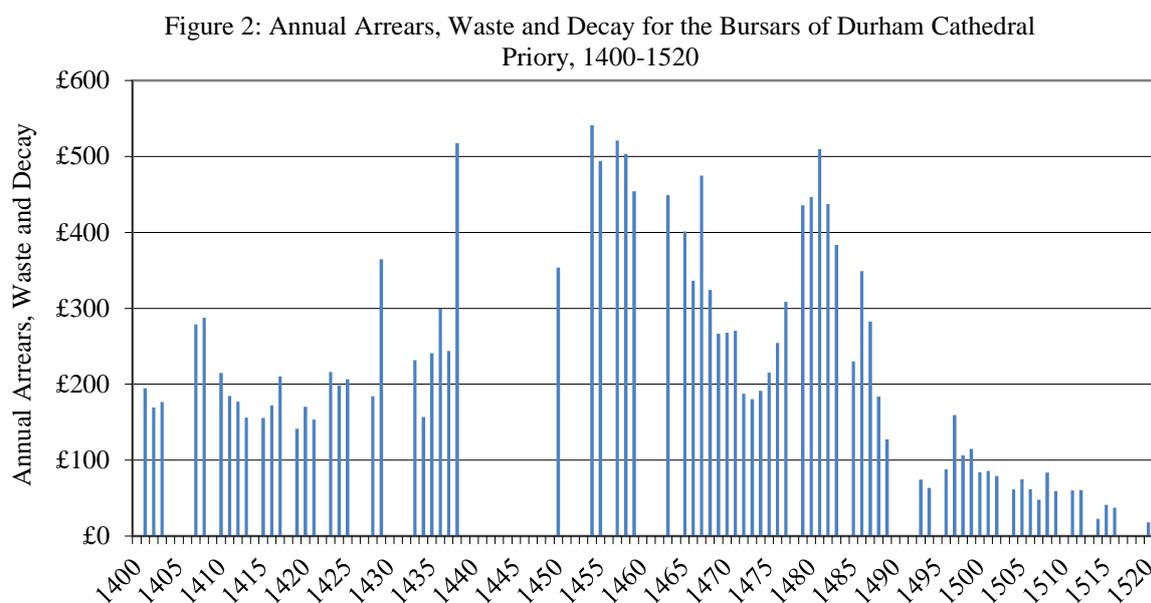


Sources: DCM Bursar's Accounts, 1417/18-1519/20, and Receiver-General's Accounts, 1417/8-1519/20.

The recovery in income achieved by the bursars of Durham Priory noted above did not come from any sudden increase in rents, which in fact fell by over £100 across the

<sup>15</sup> A. T. Brown, 'Surviving the Mid-Fifteenth-Century Recession: Durham Cathedral Priory, 1400-1520', *Northern History*, 47 (2010), pp. 209-231.

century, but instead came from their improved collection of these rents.<sup>16</sup> Figure 2 shows the annual arrears, waste and decay mentioned in the bursars' accounts, which fell from a combined total of £540 in 1453/4 to a meagre £18 by 1519/20, a level which was consistently below that achieved during the early-fifteenth century.<sup>17</sup>



Source: DCM Bursar's Accounts, 1400/1-1519/20.

The monks of Durham Priory tried various financial reforms in an attempt to lower arrears and improve rent collection, adapting their rent-books to better reflect the complexity of rent collection in the fifteenth century and temporarily dividing the responsibilities of the bursars' office. This was not unlike the 'orgy of administrative activity' found by Chris Dyer upon the estates of the bishops of Worcester.<sup>18</sup> A more important change, at least in the long-term development of the estate, was the reorganisation of holdings and their gradual conversion to leasehold tenure. In his study of the structure of Durham Priory's estate, Richard Lomas estimated that prior to the Black Death there were some 825 holdings in the hands of 740

<sup>16</sup> DCM Bursar's Accounts, 1400/1-1519/20.

<sup>17</sup> Brown, 'Surviving the Mid-Fifteenth-Century Recession', pp. 209-231.

<sup>18</sup> Dyer, *Lords and Peasants*, p. 162.

tenants. By 1495 this had been reduced to just 375 holdings in the hands of some 330 tenants, with a concomitant increase in the size of holdings.<sup>19</sup>

It remains unclear from the surviving sources where the agency for this engrossment and conversion of tenure originated. Peter Larson has suggested that, ‘although partly a seigniorial initiative, the tenants had much to gain by this change, as the new leases provided more flexibility in land management’, whilst the monks gained from filling vacant land, making this an ‘excellent example of lord-peasant consensus’.<sup>20</sup> Short leases began to replace grants for life from the 1360s, but as Richard Lomas has shown, they formed little more than 10 per cent of total lettings before 1390; it was only in the following decade that they outnumbered grants for life.<sup>21</sup> Syndicates were then formed on the Priory’s estate whereby all land in the township was leased to groups of men, often the same lessees as previously, ‘each of whom took an equal share in the land and responsibility for an equal portion of the single rent’. These syndicates were created throughout this period, with the first at South Pittington created by 1371 and the last at Cowpen Bewley not created until 1524. Lomas argued that this chronology suggests ‘the adoption of syndicates stemmed from local considerations as much as from central policy’.<sup>22</sup> For example, at Harton there were twenty-one bondlands which were fairly evenly divided amongst the tenants, with each tenant holding either two or three bondlands in the late-fourteenth century. Syndication officially recognised this distribution of land by creating holdings composed of two bondlands amongst each of the

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<sup>19</sup> R. Lomas, ‘Developments in Land Tenure on the Prior of Durham’s Estate in the Later Middle Ages’, *Northern History*, 13 (1977), pp. 27-43.

<sup>20</sup> P. L. Larson, ‘Rural Transformation in Northern England: Village Communities of Durham, 1340-1400’ in B. Dodds and R. H. Britnell (eds.), *Agriculture and Rural Society after the Black Death: Common Themes and Regional Variations* (Hatfield, 2008), p. 213; P. L. Larson, *Conflict and Compromise*, p. 167.

<sup>21</sup> For a comparison see: P. R. Schofield, ‘Tenurial Developments and the Availability of Customary Land in a Later Medieval Community’, *Economic History Review*, XLIX (1996), pp. 250-267, esp. figure 1.

<sup>22</sup> Lomas, ‘Developments in Tenure’, p. 37.

remaining ten tenants.<sup>23</sup> This process of engrossment and conversion of tenure could have been at the behest of tenants, but given that this syndication of holdings slowly took place on all land belonging to Durham Priory, it seems likely that the monks had a guiding hand in these changes. This not only improved the process of rent collection but the relatively even distribution of land created by these syndicates was to have long-term consequences in the sixteenth century when population recovered.

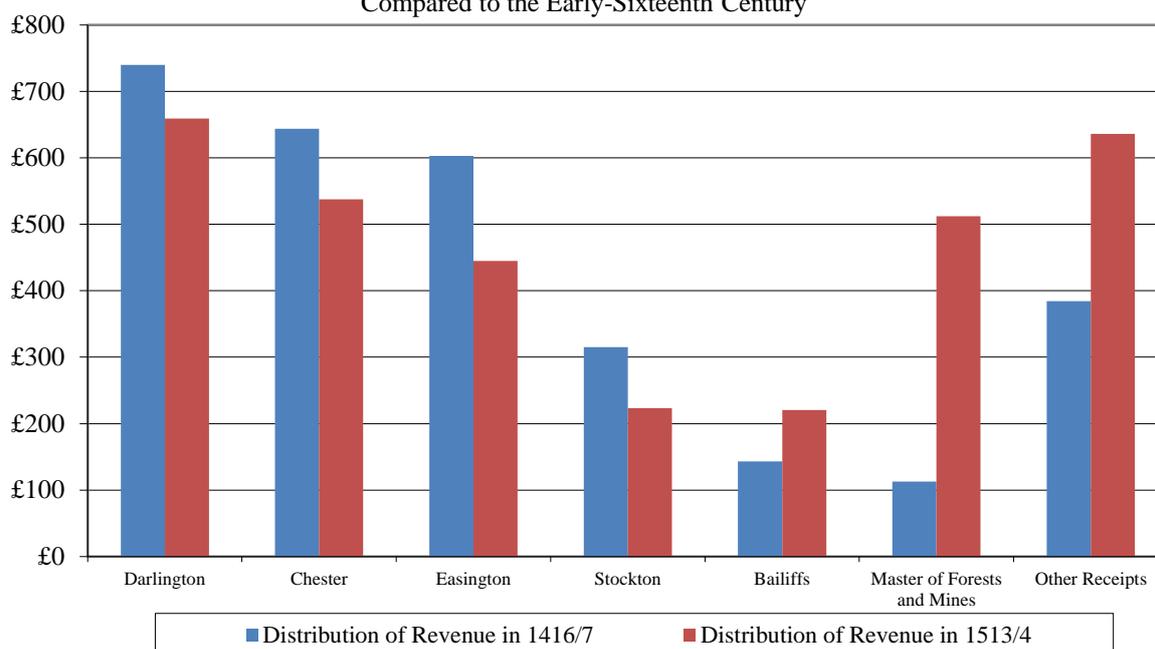
The bishops of Durham achieved similar levels of overall success but, in complete contrast, the bishops' income had undergone a significant transformation across the fifteenth century with rental receipts substantially lower by the end of the century than they had been at the start. Figure 3 shows how this rental income had declined by some £400, but also reveals how the receipts collected by the master forester more than compensated for this deficiency. It was these parks, forests and coal mines which became increasingly important to the bishops of Durham because they were on the rise when their other sources of income were declining, and by the end of the fifteenth century came to form as much as ten per cent of their total revenues.<sup>24</sup> This was not the gross receipts from coal sales but the net revenue from their lessees and so the bishops faced none of the expenses of either winning or transporting coal, both of which could be exorbitantly expensive.

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<sup>23</sup> A. T. Brown, 'Church Leaseholders on the Dean and Chapter's Estates, 1540-1640: The Rise of a Rural Elite?', in A. G. Green and B. Crosbie (eds.), *The Economy and Culture of North-East England, c.1500-1800* (forthcoming, 2014)

<sup>24</sup> General Receiver's Accounts: CCB B/1/1-CCB B/12/139.

Figure 3: The Composition of the Bishops' Income in the Early-Fifteenth Century Compared to the Early-Sixteenth Century



Source: CCB B/1/1 and CCB B/12/139.

Linda Drury has shown how the bishops of Durham slowly leased out land in their upland forests and parks in the fifteenth century as they no longer hunted in Weardale Forest or Stanhope Park. Two meadows were initially let for grazing, with ten houses built after 1406, which fell to individual tenants from the 1440s. By the time of Bishop Booth's translation to York in 1476, the park was 'in the hands of about twenty graziers, some of whom had doubtless begun to till the soil.'<sup>25</sup> Similarly, the improvement in their income from coal mines was not some serendipitous stroke of good fortune for the bishops of Durham: they consciously promoted and protected their coal interests, often through quite aggressive means if necessary. Richard Britnell has shown how the bishop of Durham leased the mines of the Earl of Westmoreland for £22 a year in the 1490s, either to take them out of production or to eliminate price competition. Prior to this, in 1476/7 Richard of Gloucester organised on the bishop's behalf the blocking of a road near Escombe by which the Earl of Westmoreland

<sup>25</sup> L. J. Drury, 'Early settlement in Stanhope Park, Weardale, c. 1406-79', *Archaeologia Aeliana*, 5<sup>th</sup> series, 4 (1976), pp. 139-49.

conveyed coal from one of his pits.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, Robert Galloway attributed the failure of Finchale Priory's coal mine at Softley to the large lease of the bishops' mines at Railey to the Eures, and when the monks tried to reopen this pit in the 1480s the bishops soon agreed to rent it and thus take it out of production again.<sup>27</sup> Given that the coal mines at Railey were landlocked and thus sales were completely dependent upon their monopoly of local demand, Britnell has argued that this aggressive policy was crucial to the success of the bishops' coal mines. Whether this diversification of the bishops' income was part of a strategy implemented by a specific bishop or receiver-general is unclear but there was an increasing reliance on their receipts from coal and the herbage of parks which had clearly begun to affect their decision making. Of course coal was not the sole preserve of the bishops of Durham, and the monks of Durham Priory had several of their own coal mines at Rainton, Fery, and Aldingrange, but these appear to have been kept in hand for long periods and used for the household consumption of the monks. The bursars' accounts contain numerous entries excusing their coal mines because '*pro expensis domus*', whilst the necessary expenses section of their accounts are littered with references to expensive repairs of their mines such as in 1351/2 '*in via aquatica minere de Rainton novo facienda, £39 8s 2.5d*' and again in 1375/6 '*in expensis factis circa aqueductus carbonum de Rainton, £37 7s 2d*'.<sup>28</sup>

John Hare's study of the differences between the demesne agriculture of the bishops of Winchester and Winchester Cathedral Priory similarly found that there were 'subtle variations between the two estates that reflected both individual decisions by estate managers, and the contrasting demands of the two estates for cash or food'.<sup>29</sup> He went on to describe

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<sup>26</sup> R. H. Britnell, 'The Coal Industry in the Later Middle Ages: The Bishop of Durham's Estates', in M. Bailey and S. H. Rigby (eds.), *Town and Countryside in the Age of the Black Death: Essays in Honour of John Hatcher* (Turnhout, 2012), pp. 439-73.

<sup>27</sup> R. L. Galloway, *Annals of Coal Mining and the Coal Trade, vol. 1* (Newton Abbot, 1882), p. 72.

<sup>28</sup> DCM Bursar's Accounts, 1351/2 and 1375/6.

<sup>29</sup> J. N. Hare, 'The Bishop and the Prior: Demesne Agriculture in Medieval Hampshire', *Agricultural History Review*, 54 (2006), pp. 211-2.

how the 'priory's need to feed a static household may have encouraged a more conservative management, as with the later food leases' whereas the 'itinerant nature of the bishopric...probably encouraged a greater emphasis on cash and the market.'<sup>30</sup> The two ecclesiastical estates of Durham had very different approaches to their mineral resources largely based upon their household requirements. The monks of Durham Priory kept their coal mines in hand for long periods, preferring to supply the consumption needs of a large group of monks rather than commercially exploit them. By comparison, the bishops of Durham, who were itinerant both nationally and within the Palatinate, preferred the flexibility of leasing out their coal mines with the provision for purchasing cheap coal from their lessees when it was required. Although the bishops' Tyneside mines were more favourably situated for commercial exploitation it was their landlocked coal mines at Railey which produced this profit in the fifteenth century, proving that the lack of close water transportation was not necessarily a hindrance at this early period. In many ways, therefore, it was the institutional context in which these mineral resources were found which dictated how they were exploited rather than their geographical location, similar to the way the differing household demands of the monks and bishops of Winchester affected their agrarian policies.

The major difference between the ecclesiastical estates of Durham derive from changes made in the late-fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, when the monks of Durham Priory were increasingly leasing out their lands and the bishops were not. As Peter Larson concluded for the late-fourteenth century, 'the major discernible difference between the two estates had to do with the tenure of customary land. On the bishopric, although the steward granted some leases, most holdings were held for life; on the Priory, leases for a short length of time quickly became standard'.<sup>31</sup> It remains unclear why these two neighbouring

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., pp. 211-2.

<sup>31</sup> Larson, *Conflict and Compromise*, p. 235.

landowners, whose primary residences lay within close proximity to each other, took such different views towards estate management. The answer does not lie in any inherent conservatism on the part of the bishops; given the sometimes aggressive management of their coal interests the bishops of Durham were not unconcerned with financial matters in the Palatinate. However, from his study of the Durham halmote records, Larson has shown how the 'bishopric stewards appear somewhat distant, largely content to let the communities regulate themselves', whereas the 'hand of the bursars was felt constantly' from injunctions for repairs to bylaws about stints and ploughing, whilst 'the tone continued to be paternalistic'.<sup>32</sup> Although Bishop Hatfield tried to implement a 'feudal reaction' in the aftermath of the Black Death, using his considerable palatine authority to coerce his tenants into filling tenancies, he quickly backed down in the face of tenant resistance.<sup>33</sup> Later bishops and stewards withdrew from this policy, preferring to use their mineral resources and parks to bolster their ailing rent rolls, whereas the tenurial changes on the Priory's estate were to have long-term consequences for landlord-tenant relationships, especially in the tenant-right dispute of the 1570s.

### III

During the fifteenth century rural society had adapted to a prolonged period of readily available land and a shortage of labour, but the sixteenth century posed entirely different challenges. It is not clear whether the population recovered because of lower mortality or increased fertility but many of the conflicts of the sixteenth century were caused by rapid demographic growth. The population of England rose from some 2.1 million people at the

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., pp. 206-7.

<sup>33</sup> R. H. Britnell, 'Feudal Reaction after the Black Death in the Palatinate of Durham', *Past and Present*, 128 (1990), pp. 28-47; Larson, *Conflict and Compromise*, p. 193.

end of the fifteenth century to 3 million by 1560, and went on to reach 4 million by 1600 and finally 5.3 million by 1650. This rapid population increase led to high levels of inflation which were exacerbated by Henry VIII's debasement of the coinage and the influx of Spanish silver into Europe, so that by the early-seventeenth century grain prices had increased sixfold on their fifteenth-century levels.<sup>34</sup> The question of how far landowners and tenants were able to capitalise on this situation still remains controversial. Peter Bowden, for example, argued 'that the basic premise of landlord embarrassment has been seriously overstated', and that 'if such theories carry great scholarship behind them, they also seem in the light of present evidence to be built on very uncertain foundations'.<sup>35</sup> This debate has centred upon the ability of rentier landlords to increase their rents in the face of inflation and how far their tenants were able to resist such incursions, producing considerable focus upon the strength of customary tenures in the sixteenth century.<sup>36</sup> An equally important question is how far the changes rural society underwent in the fifteenth century affected how landowners and tenants could respond to the new challenges created by inflation. The long-term importance of these tenurial changes can be seen throughout sixteenth-century England as landlords and tenants trawled through manorial records in order to defend not only their possession of land, but also its tenure, rent and inheritability.<sup>37</sup>

The two ecclesiastical landowners of Durham were predominantly rentier landlords and had been since the late-fourteenth century. Both faced a century of struggle with their tenants over who would gain from the unearned increment caused by these inflationary

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<sup>34</sup> W. G. Hoskins, 'Harvest Fluctuations and English Economic History, 1480-1619', *Agricultural History Review*, 12 (1964), p. 31; C. J. Harrison, 'Grain Price Analysis and Harvest Qualities, 1465-1634', *Agricultural History Review*, 19 (1971), pp. 147-51; F. Braudel and F. Spooner, 'Prices in Europe from 1450 to 1750', in E. E. Rich and C. H. Wilson (eds.), *The Cambridge Economic History of Europe, vol. IV: The Economy of Expanding Europe in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Cambridge, 1967), pp. 378-486.

<sup>35</sup> P. J. Bowden, 'Agricultural Prices, Wages, Farm Profits and Rents', in J. Thirsk (ed.), *The Agrarian History of England and Wales, IV, 1500-1640* (Cambridge, 1967), pp. 694-5.

<sup>36</sup> See for example: R. W. Hoyle, 'An Ancient and Laudable Custom: the Definition and Development of Tenant Right in North-Western England in the Sixteenth Century', *Past and Present*, 116 (1987), pp. 24-55.

<sup>37</sup> A. Wood, *The Politics of Social Conflict, The Peak Country, 1520-1770* (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 127-50.

trends. However, they did so from two radically different positions because of the previous development of their estates. On 31 December 1539, the monks of Durham Cathedral Priory surrendered the church to Henry VIII, but within seventeen months the Cathedral Church of Christ and the Blessed Virgin Mary had been founded, with the former Prior Hugh Whitehead as the Dean of the new foundation. Much of the Priory's lands were restored to it and such was the continuity that David Marcombe described the new Cathedral as 'old abbey writ large'.<sup>38</sup> The Dean and Chapter inherited an estate which had seen a steady conversion of land to leasehold tenure in the fifteenth and early-sixteenth centuries and their Henrician foundation statutes reinforced this transition by specifying that all agricultural land was to be held by 21-year leases. Despite this, the Dean and Chapter faced tenant resistance, primarily because the monks of Durham Priory had allowed entry fines to lapse and for these holdings to become as inheritable as freehold land. In the face of rising inflation, the Dean and Chapter sought to increase entry fines, whilst their tenants raised a claim to tenant-right, not only because of their duty to perform border service, but also because of the perceived inheritability of their holdings.<sup>39</sup> The Dean and Chapter implemented a 'lottery system' whereby reversionary leases were granted of sitting tenants' holdings who were thus required to pay a fine in order to retain their lands. Table 1 shows the extremely profitable nature of this expediency and helps to explain why it was such a divisive issue, with entry fines often double or triple their regular levels.

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<sup>38</sup> D. Marcombe, *The Dean and Chapter of Durham, 1558-1603* (Durham Doctoral Thesis, 1973), p. 6.

<sup>39</sup> For a more detailed discussion, see J. Morrin, 'The Transfer to Leasehold on Durham Cathedral Estate, 1541-1626', in J. Whittle (ed.), *Landlords and Tenants in Britain, 1440-1660: Tawney's Agrarian Problem Revisited* (Woodbridge, 2013), pp. 117-132.

Table 1: Income Generated by the Lottery System of the 1570s on the Dean and Chapter's Estate

Position	Dean and Canons	Number of Leases	Valuation of the Lotteries
Dean	William Whittingham	29 leases	£886
First Stall	Robert Swift	11 leases	£411 13s 4d
Second Stall	John Pilkington	11 leases	£527
Third Stall			
Fourth Stall	William Bennet	12 leases	£356 6s 8d
Fifth Stall	Ralph Lever	5 leases	£126 13s 4d
Sixth Stall			
Seventh Stall	Leonard Pilkington	9 leases	£418
Eighth Stall			
Ninth Stall	William Stevenson	15 leases	£394
Tenth Stall	John Rudd	5 leases	£130
Eleventh Stall	Adam Halliday	7 leases	£322
Twelfth Stall	George Cliffe	7 leases	£136
Total		111 leases	£3,687 13s 8d

Source: Longstaffe, W. H. D. and J. Booth (eds.), *Halmota Prioratus Dunelmensis: Containing Extracts from the Halmote Court or Manor Rolls of the Prior and Convent of Durham, 1296-1384*, Surtees Society, 82 (1886)

After much protest which saw arrears accumulate rapidly as tenants refused to pay rents, the issue was brought before the Council of the North in the 1570s, who ruled that they were leaseholders, but also imposed certain restrictions upon the Dean and Chapter. These leaseholds had modest entry fines and low annual rents, not only providing the Dean and Chapter with some cushion against inflation, but also giving security of tenure to their tenants. Many of these tenants had participated in the Rising of the North less than a decade earlier and so this compromise was arranged for the 'ending of which troubles and for a quietness hereafter to be had' on the Dean and Chapter's estate.<sup>40</sup> By the seventeenth century, however, these fines do not appear to have greatly risen, with David Marcombe describing them as 'a pitifully small sum' and there are signs that the prebendaries thought the same, especially Marmaduke Blakiston who reinterpreted the Dean and Chapter's policy

<sup>40</sup> W. H. D. Longstaffe and J. Booth (eds.), *Halmota Prioratus Dunelmensis: Containing Extracts from the Halmote Court or Manor Rolls of the Prior and Convent of Durham, 1296-1384*, Surtees Society, 82 (1889), p. xliii.

of taking three year's ancient rent as an entry fine, with the idea of taking three year's *improved value* as a fine in a Chapter decree of 1626.<sup>41</sup> This marked an 'important turning point in the leasing policy of the Dean and Chapter', for now their entry fines were directly linked to the value of the land rather than the ancient rent and thus took inflation into consideration.<sup>42</sup>

Once again the experience of the bishops of Durham was radically different, primarily because copyhold tenure became entrenched on much of their land, whilst Crown intervention ensured that they could not replicate the success of their predecessors. Unlike the new Dean and Chapter, the bishops of Durham inherited an estate which had a diverse range of tenures, as shown in table 2.

Table 2: Total Rental Value of Different Tenures on the Bishop of Durham's Estate in 1588

	(£)	(%)
Copyhold Rents	£740.85	36.63%
Customary Rents	£83.38	4.12%
Leasehold Rents	£1,176.29	58.15%
(Of which was leased to the Queen)	(£420)	(20.77%)
Freehold Rents	£22.19	1.10%

Source: Survey of Durham Bishopric Estates in County Durham, April 1588, Sede Vacante, P.M. Richard Barnes, ASCRefB1CHU.

On these copyhold lands, rents were fixed by custom at extremely low medieval values, as were entry fines which, from an analysis of the entire estate in the parliamentary surveys, were charged at an average of one year's old rental value.<sup>43</sup> These rents and accompanying entry fines, therefore, became increasingly worthless and difficult to improve. The bishops

<sup>41</sup> D. Marcombe, 'Church Leaseholders: The Decline and Fall of a Rural Elite', in R. O'Day and F. Heal (eds.), *Princes and Paupers in the English Church* (Leicester, 1981), pp. 256-9.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 256-9.

<sup>43</sup> D. A. Kirby (ed.), *Parliamentary Surveys of the Bishopric of Durham, vol.1 and 2*, Surtees Society, 183 and 185 (1971-2).

could not easily convert these copyhold lands to leasehold tenure in the late-sixteenth century because royal courts protected the rights of many customary tenants in Elizabethan England. Royal protection of these customary tenures was unforeseeable in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and so the slow conversion of tenure on the monks' estate was neither great economic foresight on their part nor naivety on the part of their tenants.

Crown intervention only served to compound the problems facing the bishops of Durham in the late-sixteenth century, hindering their ability to respond to inflation still further. In her survey of the resources of the Elizabethan bishops, Felicity Heal concluded that Durham and Winchester were the 'only outstanding cases of income loss during the Elizabethan era'; the bishops of Durham having most of their Yorkshire estates, the ward of Easington, and a variety of scattered properties confiscated by the Crown, which were only returned upon the imposition of a rent charge of £1,020, the approximate total value of these lands.<sup>44</sup> The Crown intervened still further by taking extremely long leases of over a third of all their leasehold property, making it impossible to increase rents or take entry fines from these lands.<sup>45</sup> Table 3 shows the full extent of these long leases, not only in producing a stagnant rental income which had been drastically undermined by inflation across the length of their possession, but also the important restrictions this imposed upon the bishops' patronage. This was particularly detrimental to the bishops of Durham who were expected to become one of the largest landowners in the region overnight; a region which still retained a strong Catholic affinity. Similarly, the Grand Lease of the bishops' coal mines ensured that they could not replicate the success of their fifteenth-century predecessors and use these revenues to bolster their stagnant rents. Despite the take-off of the coal industry, the ensuing

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<sup>44</sup> F. Heal, *Of Prelates and Princes: A Study of the Economic and Social Positions of the Tudor Episcopate* (Cambridge, 1980), pp. 223-7.

<sup>45</sup> General Receiver's Accounts: CCB B/1/1-CCB B/12/139; CCB Registers of Leases and Patents, 1-5, c. 1530-c. 1640

riches found their way into the coffers of Newcastle families like the Andersons and Selbys rather than the bishops of Durham who saw no appreciable increase in rent from their mines throughout this period. In a period of rapid inflation the bishops were treading water.

Table 3: Long Leases granted to Queen Elizabeth by the Bishop of Durham

Property	Former Lease	Queen's Lease	Rent	Estimated Value, 1640s
Midldridge Manor	Thomas Tunstall, 40 year lease, 1558	80 year lease, 1583	£26 9s 8d	£250
Quarrington Grange	Henry and John Ducket, 21 year lease, 1546	80 year lease, 1584	£22 4s 8d	£138 18s
Rectory of Leake	Lord Scrope, 21 year lease, 1547	50 year lease, 1578	£18	
Crayke Manor	Henry Duckett, 21 year lease, 1549	80 year lease, 1586	£29	
	Thomas Cecil, 21 year lease, 1567			
Coundon Grange	William Drury, 21 year lease, 1572	70 year lease, 1585	£24	£106
Howden Manor, land in Howden	Sir Marmaduke Tunstall, 21 year lease, 1547	90 year lease, 1584	£34	
Weelhall Manor	Francis Tunstall, 21 year lease, 1550	80 year lease, 1586	£5 18s 5d	
Morton Grange	Sir Richard Bellasis, 21 year lease, 1581	70 year lease, 1585	£6	£90
Sowerby Grange		80 year lease, 1584		
Wolsingham Park	Anthony Carleton, 21 year lease, 1558	80 year lease, 1584	£6 13s 4d	£30
	William Lord Eure, licence to hunt and hark, 1561			
Norham Fisheries	Various tenants, 21 year lease, 1554	100 year lease, 1577	£82	
Byers Green	Sir George Freville, 21 year lease, 1576	80 year lease, 1585	£8	£38
Bishop Middleham Park		80 year lease, 1585	£18 1s	£88 15s 8d
Darlington and Blackwell Mills	Edward Atkinson and John Grene, 21 year lease, 1547	40 year lease, 1578	£22	£50
	George Kingesmill, 21 year lease, 1576			
Gateshead and Whickham	Anthony Thomlynson	99 year lease, 1578	£117 13s 6d	£2,555 10s

Source: DCM Dean and Chapter Registers, 1-15, 1541-1670; CCB Registers of Leases and Patents, 1-5, c. 1530-c. 1640; Parliamentary Surveys of the Bishopric of Durham, v. I and II, Surtees Society 183 and 185 (1971 and 1972)

It is difficult to trace many of the tenurial developments on the bishops' estate across these centuries, but table 4 shows the importance of changes wrought in the period between the Hatfield survey of 1380s and the Elizabethan survey of the 1580s.<sup>46</sup> There was a clear continuity at Norton, for example, between the Boldon Book of the 1180s and Hatfield's survey of the 1380s which saw villeins become bondmen, leaseholders become malmen, and cottagers remaining there throughout. During the course of the fifteenth century, however, there was a real discontinuity as these diverse tenures were converted into fifty copyholds by the time of the Elizabethan survey. The situation at Newbottle was much more comprehensible if we think of the cottagers becoming bondmen, who in turn developed into copyholders, whilst the demesne land was leased out at some point from the late-fourteenth century. However, this was far from the standard tenurial development on the bishops' estate, revealing the complexity of tenurial changes across this period. At Ryhope, for example, there was a similar composition of demesne land, villeins and cottages which were transformed wholesale into leasehold land during this same period. It was these tenurial developments from the late-fourteenth century which had such significant impacts upon the different experiences of their tenants across the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

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<sup>46</sup> W. Greenwell (ed.), *Boldon Boke, A Survey of the Possessions of the See of Durham*, Surtees Society, 25 (1852); W. Greenwell (ed.), *Bishop Hatfield's Survey: A Record of the Possessions of the See of Durham*, Surtees Society, 32 (1857); ASCRefB1CHU, Survey of Durham Bishopric Estates in County Durham, April 1588, Sede Vacante, P.M. Richard Barnes. These townships included some exchequer land which had been reclaimed from the waste in the intervening periods. These lands have been excluded in order to show the long-term tenurial evolution of the older holdings.

Table 4: Long Term Tenorial Changes on a Selection of the Bishop of Durham's Estate from the Twelfth to the Sixteenth Centuries

VILLAGE	1180s BOLDON BOOK			1380s HATFIELD SURVEY			1580s ELIZABETHAN SURVEY		
	TENURE	ACRES	RENT	TENURE	ACRES	RENT	TENURE	DESCRIPTION	RENT
NORTON	Villeins	30 villeins (900 acres)	3 days' work per week	Bondland	29 bondlands (870 acres)	£20 10s	Copyhold	50 messuages	£36
	Leasehold	20 tenants, 40 bovates (600 acres)	1/2 mark and services	Malmen	40 bovates (600 acres)	£8 2s 2d			
	Cottages	12 cottages	6s, 14 days' work p.a.	Cottages	12 cottages	Blank			
	Further	1 carucate and various holdings	For services rendered						
BISHOP WEARMOUTH	Demesne	At farm and renders with mill	£20	Demesne	150 acres in tenant hands	£14 2s 8d	Copyhold	19 messuages	£39 9s
	Villeins	22 villeins (660 acres)	3 days' work per week	Bondland	20 bovates (300 acres)	£15	Leasehold	A windmill	55s 4d
	Cottages	6 cottages (72 acres)	2 days' work per week	Cottages	10 cottages (90 acres)	£3 15s 6d			
	Further	3 holdings of 12 acres (36 acres)	For services rendered	*Land at Tunstall was included here in 1180s					
CLEADON	Demesne	At farm and renders in grain	50 chalders, 15 marks	Demesne	336 acres in tenant hands	£45 10s	Copyhold	11 messuages	£21 8s
	Villeins	28 villeins (840 acres)	3 days' work per week	Bondland	56 bovates (840 acres)	Blank			
	Cottages	12 cottages (144 acres)	2 days' work per week	Cottages	12 cottages (144 acres)	£9 12s			
	Further	4 holdings (196 acres)	For services rendered						
WHITBURN	Land here accounted for with Cleadon above			Land here accounted for with Cleadon above			Copyhold	24 messuages	£51 1s
NEWBOTTLE	Demesne	4 ploughs, sheep and pasture	In the lord's hand	Demesne	315 acres in tenant hands	£22 12s	Leasehold	5 messuages	£18 9s
	Cottages	19 cottages (210 acres)	2 days' work per week	Bondland	26 bovates (312 acres)	£7 11s	Copyhold	5 messuages	£17 9s
	Further	4 holdings of 12 acres (48 acres)	For services rendered				Copyhold	10 cottages	above
RYHOPE	Demesne	At farm and renders in grain	42 chalders, 6 marks	Demesne	292 acres in tenant hands	£29 15s	Leasehold	19 messuages	£41 7s
	Villeins	27 villeins (810 acres)	3 days' work per week	Bondland	36 bovates (540 acres)	£28 6s			
	Cottages	3 cottages (36 acres)	2 days' work per week						
	Further	3 holdings (72 acres)	For services rendered						
BURDON	Land here accounted for with Ryhope above			Bondland	20 bovates (300 acres)	£15 14s	Leasehold	7 messuages	£11 9s

Source: W. Greenwell (ed.), *Boldon Boke, A Survey of the Possessions of the See of Durham*, Surtees Society, 25 (1852); W. Greenwell (ed.), *Bishop Hatfield's Survey: A Record of the Possessions of the See of Durham*, Surtees Society, 32 (1857); ASCRefB1CHU, Survey of Durham Bishopric Estates in County Durham, April 1588, Sede Vacante, P.M. Richard Barnes

## IV

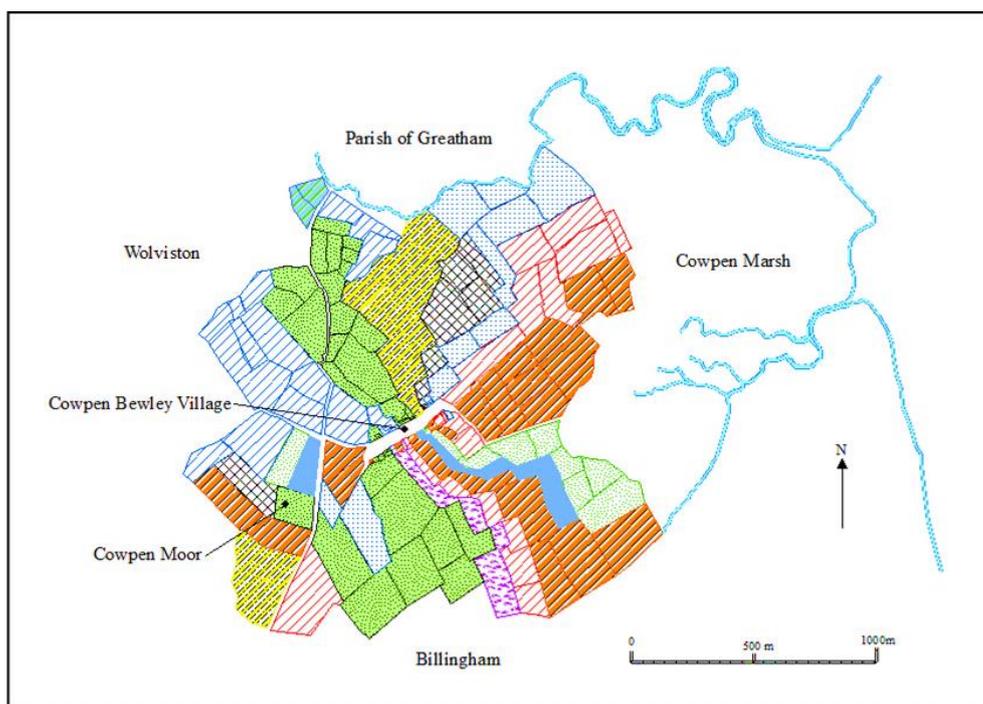
The Dean and Chapter inherited an estate whose lands had been steadily converted to engrossed leaseholds, whereas the bishops of Durham inherited a confused mixture of copyhold, customary, leasehold and freehold tenures. Crown intervention only served to further reinforce these divergent developments with the foundation statutes of the Dean and Chapter confirming the leasehold nature of their land, whilst Elizabeth slowly stripped away much of the bishops' financial and political autonomy. It was this divergence between the two neighbouring ecclesiastical estates in Durham which is vital to understanding the rural economic development of the region because it led to vast differences in the opportunities and challenges their respective tenants faced. The reorganisation of holdings wrought on the estates of Durham Priory during the fifteenth and early-sixteenth centuries gave rise to a group of modestly prosperous tenants who were commercially farming holdings of c.50-150 acres of land. These tenants were characterised by a relative uniformity of experience because of this reorganisation and conversion of tenure, and their holdings show remarkably few signs of either being sublet or engrossed further during the sixteenth and early-seventeenth centuries.<sup>47</sup> Map 1 shows the Dean and Chapter's holdings at Cowpen Bewley in the south-east of the Palatinate in 1774, which reveals that the majority of these holdings were still intact as late as the eighteenth century.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> DCM Dean and Chapter Registers, 1-15, 1541-1670.

<sup>48</sup> DCD/E/9/AA/1-2, Plan and Survey of Cowpen Bewley, 1774

Map 1: Cowpen Bewley in a Survey of 1774



Source: DCD/E/9/AA/1-2, Plan and Survey of Cowpen Bewley, 1774<sup>49</sup>

Despite the tenant-right dispute which raged on their estate in the 1570s there was a remarkably high degree of family inheritance, with many surnames remaining on the eve of the English Civil War from the late-fourteenth century. The surviving probate inventories of these Dean and Chapter tenants show a modest living standard with a mean total valuation of goods between £50 and £180, comprised approximately of £10-£20 worth of household goods, grain primarily composed of wheat and oats worth £40-£50 and around eight oxen, five cows, forty sheep and the usual cacophony of swine and poultry worth altogether some £50-£60.<sup>50</sup> The wills of these tenants rarely show any signs of other economic activity beyond their agricultural pursuits, whilst they are regularly referred to as husbandmen or yeomen in their probate documents. Jean Morrin has shown for the Merrington area of the Dean and Chapter's estate that 'the vast majority of tenants, over eighty per cent, had only

<sup>49</sup> Cross-hatching and fill represent the tenant holdings and field boundaries taken from a survey map of 1774. Each tenant had gained a separate field in the now-enclosed Cowpen Moor to the south-west of the village.

<sup>50</sup> A. T. Brown, 'Church Leaseholders' (forthcoming, 2014)

one farm and in the last sixty years of the sixteenth century ninety-nine per cent of the tenants lived in the township where their landholding was located'.<sup>51</sup> In short, the Dean and Chapter's tenants were primarily agricultural producers who inherited their family's holding, with relatively limited horizons and modest living standards, but whose experiences were broadly similar to those of their neighbours. Certainly they were no longer peasants, but equally they were not partaking in the opportunities for economic and social advancement in the region that other tenants were.

By comparison, there was a much greater degree of stratification of landholding upon the bishops' estate as certain families were able to accumulate significantly larger holdings than their neighbours. This led to two developments which were rare on the Dean and Chapter's lands. Firstly, the appearance of a group of larger tenants who possessed a greater than average personal wealth and evidenced clear social aspirations and, secondly, the survival of a large number of smallholders who were still financially viable because of stagnant copyhold rents. In the late-fourteenth century the composition of their estate was not all that dissimilar to the Priory's, with varying amounts of former demesne and bond land interspersed with freeholds and cottage holdings. Although some engrossment had already occurred by the time of Hatfield's survey in the 1380s, this was but a precursor of what was to happen across the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. On the bishops' manor of Newbottle, for example, the Chilton family came to hold land worth over a third of the total rent, whilst on the neighbouring manor of Bishopwearmouth, John Thompson had accumulated land worth £6 17s 4d, at a time when the average rent was between 6s 8d and

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<sup>51</sup> Morrin, 'Transfer to Leasehold', p. 121.

20s.<sup>52</sup> These larger tenants came to form a rural elite and dominated village life on the bishops' lands.

David Levine and Keith Wrightson found a similar degree of stratification on the bishops' manor of Whickham in the early-seventeenth century which they associated with the impact of more intensive coal mining from the 1620s onwards. They described how the distribution of landholding 'underwent significant change' as the middle-range of holdings of one to three oxgangs 'which had retained their integrity up to 1600 had largely disappeared as separate units and their lands had been redistributed' thus creating a greater degree of stratification on the manor. There was an increasing number of very large accumulations and, by 1647, there were five holdings of more 'than fifty acres, two of them falling in the eighty-hundred acres range and one being no less than 170 acres', some of which had been 'built up by families notable in 1600'.<sup>53</sup> This is very reminiscent of the situation at Newbottle and Bishopwearmouth, and was part of a much larger process of stratification which was happening on the bishops' estate. Indeed, the proximity of the coal trade may well have been an inhibiting factor in this engrossment as the middle-range of copyholders could supplement their incomes with wain carriage and thus better resist the financial pressures exerted by some of their larger neighbours.

In his work on the crown lands, Richard Hoyle highlighted that there have been 'remarkably few recent studies of estates in the century following the dissolution of the monasteries (as opposed to studies of rural communities)'.<sup>54</sup> The above examples show the dangers of removing micro-historical studies from their larger frame of reference, in this

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<sup>52</sup> Survey of Durham Bishopric Estates in County Durham, 1588, ASCRefB1CHU; D. A. Kirby (ed.), *Parliamentary Surveys of the Bishopric of Durham. Vol. I*, Surtees Society, 183 (1966), pp. 15-34.

<sup>53</sup> D. Levine and K. Wrightson, *The Making of an Industrial Society: Whickham, 1560-1765* (Oxford, 1991), pp. 136-40.

<sup>54</sup> R. W. Hoyle, 'Introduction: Aspects of the Crown's Estate, c.1558-1640', in R. W. Hoyle (ed.), *The Estates of the English Crown, 1558-1640* (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 1-58.

case emphasising the need to ground developments in the institutional context of the estate which these villages were a constituent part of. Unlike on the Dean and Chapter's lands, holdings had not become standardised across this period on the bishops' estate, which had long-term consequences for the stratification of land on their manors. It enabled some tenants to accumulate much larger holdings than their neighbours, several of whom were able to engross considerable amounts of land. It was this relative difference in the size of holdings which created a real sense of stratification on the bishops' estate compared to the uniformity on the Dean and Chapter's lands, with these smaller tenants often working as wage labourers on the holdings of their more substantial neighbours. George Shepherdson, for example, was one of the wealthier tenants at Bishopwearmouth with a total inventory of £371 5s 11d, which included an eighth part of a ship worth £20.<sup>55</sup> It is clear that the family were taking advantage of every economic opportunity in the region, not just passively benefiting from the stagnant rents on the bishops' estate but also taking out leases of lime pits and fishing rights in the River Wear and purchasing further agricultural land which they proceeded to enclose and improve. The family were also partners in the colliery at Harraton in the early-seventeenth century, which in John Hatcher's words 'provided the driving force behind its development'.<sup>56</sup> The Shepherdsons went on to have their children educated at the University of Cambridge, whilst a John Shepherdson was recorded as a freeholder with an estate valued at £160 per annum in the seventeenth century. All of this was achieved by a family whose late-fourteenth-century ancestor, Thomas Shepherdson, was not overly dissimilar to the Priory's bond tenants, with ten acres of demesne land, a messuage and two bovates of bondland, and a cottage with twelve acres of land.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> DPRI/1/1635/S6/2-5.

<sup>56</sup> J. Hatcher, *The History of the British Coal Industry, vol. 1, Before 1700: Towards the Age of Coal* (Oxford, 1993), p. 255.

<sup>57</sup> A. T. Brown, 'Church Leaseholders' (forthcoming, 2014)

Although it is unclear if more entrepreneurially-minded tenants naturally gravitated towards the bishops' estate because of the greater opportunities there, it was this increasing social aspiration of their tenants which helped to further the economic dynamism of the region. The tenants of the bishops of Durham were benefiting from paying the same rents on the eve of the English Civil War that their ancestors had paid during the very depth of the mid-fifteenth-century recession and yet were receiving incomes some five or six times larger because of the inflation of agricultural prices in the intervening period. It was this wealth accumulation which allowed some of the bishops' tenants to engage in the commercial opportunities provided by the take-off of the coal industry in the late-sixteenth century and so improve their social and financial standing in society.

## V

The monks of Durham Cathedral Priory responded to the economic problems of the late-fourteenth and fifteenth centuries by improving the efficiency of their rent collection process and by wholesale changes in the tenure and size of holdings on their estate. Their successors inherited an estate composed of consolidated leasehold farms lying between 50 and 150 acres, which did not significantly change in relative size during the population pressures of the sixteenth century. This situation led to the rise of church leaseholders: tenants who came to be recognised as husbandmen and yeomen, but who were still primarily tenant-farmers with a reasonable, if unspectacular, standard of living. By comparison, the bishops of Durham did not make significant inroads into the tenurial structure of their estate in the fifteenth century, preferring to use their extensive mineral and forest resources to bolster their ailing rent rolls. By the early-seventeenth century, the bishops of Durham struggled to improve their income because their copyhold tenants were protected from rent

increases, whilst their leasehold land was not improvable because of Crown intervention. This in turn led to a much greater degree of stratification upon their estate, with a number of tenants forming village elites who made substantial profits from stagnant rents and increasing prices, and whose entrepreneurial participation in the coal industry helped to spur on its development.

It is clear that demographic movements are very important in precipitating change in rural societies, but the nature and direction of that change are far from predictable. There are many other factors which help to produce, direct, accelerate or inhibit change in agrarian societies. Of course, this is widely acknowledged by historical demographers and often embraced by them, but the demographic model has become so pervasive that in many works it seems as though population fluctuations are *the* determinant of change in pre-industrial societies.<sup>58</sup> Estate management and institutional constraints provided structural restrictions upon landowners and tenants in this period which were as real and as important as the weather, soil conditions, market opportunities, or indeed population movements. Micro-histories of rural communities have greatly advanced our knowledge of the actions of peasants and smallholders, revealing their living standards, social ambitions, political interests and economic activities. However, they also have a tendency to strip away the institutional context of the larger estate development. For example, if we were to select a village at random which belonged to the Dean and Chapter of Durham Cathedral in the early-seventeenth century our impression of the Durham countryside would be significantly different than if we had chosen one belonging to the bishops of Durham.

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<sup>58</sup> See surveys of this literature in Hatcher and Bailey, *Modelling*, pp. 21-65, and M. Bailey, 'Demographic Decline in Late Medieval England: Some Thoughts on Recent Research', *Economic History Review*, 49 (1996), pp. 1-19.

The ecclesiastical estates of Durham displayed a high degree of path dependency in this period, with increasing returns rewarding the changes already underway; exogenous and complementary forces encouraging those choices to be sustained; and, above all, closure, as the divergent tenurial development of their estates ultimately proved too difficult to overturn. The monks of Durham Cathedral Priory and the bishops of Durham faced the same demographic crisis in the late-fourteenth century, but how the two institutions reacted differed greatly, creating long-term structural differences between their estates which had significant consequences for their sixteenth-century counterparts. This divergent development of their estates had profound effects upon their tenants, providing them with different opportunities and challenges across these centuries. Many of the problems of the late-sixteenth century may well have been created by rapid population increase but the ability of rural society to respond to these events was heavily affected by the tenurial development of the estate to which their lands belonged. It is all the more surprising, therefore, that there have been relatively few recent institutional studies exploring estate management in this period, especially given that developments at the estate level were often fundamental in shaping the tenure of landholding and consequently the rent and inheritability of holdings. This article must therefore conclude on the unsatisfactory note of a call for future research into the role of estates in the transformation of rural society: how far did the estate provide a real and structural imposition upon the development of rural society. And how far did the restructuring rural society underwent from the late-fourteenth century create a new path dependency which greatly affected the way rural society responded to the inflation of the sixteenth century?

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