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**Deposited in DRO:**

06 September 2013

**Version of attached file:**

Accepted Version

**Peer-review status of attached file:**

Peer-reviewed

**Citation for published item:**

Brown, A. T. (2010) 'Surviving the mid-fifteenth-century recession : Durham cathedral priory, 1400-1520.', *Northern history.*, 47 (2). pp. 209-231.

**Further information on publisher's website:**

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1179/007817210X12738429860707>

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# SURVIVING THE MID-FIFTEENTH-CENTURY RECESSION: DURHAM CATHEDRAL PRIORY, 1400-1520

Published in *Northern History*, 47 (2010), 209-231.

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## I

THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY HAS LONG BEEN CHARACTERISED AS ‘an age of recession, arrested economic development and declining national income’.<sup>2</sup> Hatcher aptly summarised the pervading historiographical gloom surrounding this period when ‘tales of falling land rents, of retreating cultivation, of dilapidated holdings, and often also of chronic insolvency, pervade the rural history of the fifteenth century’.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the very terminology historians use to describe the ‘retreat’ from direct demesne farming by landlords is ‘more suited to a tale of decline than of new beginnings’.<sup>4</sup> This transformation of the medieval countryside has often led to a misplaced assumption that landowners retreated into inactivity and inertia in the face of poor economic conditions and pervasive recession. The mid-fifteenth-century recession certainly had a severe impact on agriculture, industry and trade throughout England, but there is still little consensus about the chronology or stimulus for recovery. The ‘1430s was the coldest and harshest decade experienced by England between 1100 and 1700’ which produced an agrarian crisis with three

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<sup>1</sup> My thanks are due to Dr Ben Dodds and Dr Adrian Green for their supervision and helpful comments, and to the staff at 5 The College, Durham.

<sup>2</sup> M. M. Postan, ‘The Fifteenth Century’, *Economic History Review*, IX (1939), 161.

<sup>3</sup> J. Hatcher, *Rural Economy and Society in the Duchy of Cornwall, 1300-1500* (Cambridge, 1970), p. 148.

<sup>4</sup> F. R. H. Du Boulay, ‘A Rentier Economy in the Later Middle Ages: The Archbishopric of Canterbury’, *EcHR*, XVI (1964), 427.

extremely poor harvests in succession.<sup>5</sup> This was only the beginning of a prolonged agricultural recession, the trough of which Hatcher places between c.1440 and c.1470, with a simultaneously catastrophic decline in trade and a shortage of bullion.<sup>6</sup> However, it is still far from clear how this affected landowners and their tenants, or how they adapted to the unique circumstances of a sustained period of low prices, high wages, and relatively abundant land. Dyer has consistently emphasised the role played by demesne lessees and peasant farmers in stimulating the economy through their entrepreneurial roles as producers.<sup>7</sup> Demographic recovery would similarly help to explain how the country came out of recession, but the timing of this is even harder to place, with Helleiner suggesting that 1450 was the turning point for most of Europe, with evidence of sustained population growth by 1500 being ‘overwhelming in all countries’.<sup>8</sup> Phelps-Brown and Hopkins saw an overall shift in prices occurring around 1520, when real wages were in decline and economic recovery underway, whilst Britnell similarly notes this decade as crucial, with a marked tendency for rents to increase after this period.<sup>9</sup>

By comparison, recent studies of the North-East of England have revealed few signs of economic recovery. Newman has found depressed rents for Northallerton throughout the period she studied, with the 1490s as a particularly hard time for the collection of arrears, in direct contrast to some of the evidence from the south of the country.<sup>10</sup> Dodds’s work on production

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<sup>5</sup> J. Hatcher, ‘The Great Slump of the Mid-Fifteenth Century’, in *Progress and Problems in Medieval England: Essays in Honour of Edward Miller*, ed. R. Britnell and J. Hatcher (Cambridge, 1996), p. 246.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 240-46.

<sup>7</sup> C. Dyer, *An Age of Transition?: Economy and Society in England in the Later Middle Ages* (Oxford, 2005), pp. 170-210.

<sup>8</sup> K. F. Helleiner, ‘The Population of Europe from the Black Death to the Eve of the Vital Revolution’, in *The Cambridge Economic History of Europe, Volume 4*, ed. E. E. Rich and C. Wilson (Cambridge, 1967), p. 20.

<sup>9</sup> R. Britnell, *The Closing of the Middle Ages? England, 1471-1529* (Cambridge, 1997), p. 241; E. H. Phelps Brown and S. V. Hopkins, ‘Seven Centuries of the Prices of Consumables, Compared with Builders’ Wage-Rates’, *Economica*, XXIII (1956), 301-04.

<sup>10</sup> C. Newman, *Late Medieval Northallerton: A Small Market Town and its Hinterland, 1470-1540* (Stamford, 1999), pp. 70-80.

levels has found the potential for recovery, but after the 1480s there were few signs of increased output, with levels stagnating right through until the 1530s.<sup>11</sup> Lomas's overall study of Durham Priory's income enhances this picture, with little increase in receipts right through until the Dissolution of the Priory.<sup>12</sup> However, of recent historians to analyse the economy of the region, Pollard's work is the most critical, stating that 'the fifteenth century after 1440 was a bleak era in the economic history of the North-East'.<sup>13</sup> He goes on to explain that 'the North-East was experiencing relative as well as absolute decline' because other regions of the country 'came out of recession earlier than the North-East, and began to enjoy the fruits of sustained economic resurgence from the 1470s'.<sup>14</sup> It is, of course, to be expected that recovery might be sporadic and regional after such a pervasive recession, but current research suggests that the north-eastern economy was particularly slow to recover and that its economic history diverged from other regions of England towards the end of the fifteenth century.

This article contends that successive bursars of Durham Priory were able to achieve a remarkable degree of economic recovery through a flexible approach to rent collection and increased efficiency in the face of continued recession. The income the Priory expected to collect did not radically increase in the late fifteenth century, but through a clever re-organisation of landholdings, prudent investment, and improved efficiency in collecting rents, successive bursars were able to lower arrears, waste and decay to single-figure sums by the end of the fifteenth century. It is often stated that the Priory's receipts stagnated in this period, but this is only what the bursar would expect to receive if he was able to collect all of his rents, rather than actually

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<sup>11</sup> B. Dodds, *Peasants and Production in the Medieval North-East: The Evidence from Tithes, 1270-1536* (Woodbridge, 2007), p. 101.

<sup>12</sup> R. Lomas, 'Durham Cathedral Priory as a Landowner and a Landlord, 1290-1540' (unpub. Ph.D. thesis, Durham Univ. 1973), appendix.

reflecting the income he annually managed to collect. When this vital difference is taken into account, a completely different picture of the vitality of the Priory's fortunes becomes apparent, with much more real fluctuations in income, and more detailed sub-periods of recovery and crisis on their lands. Despite the fact that every economic indicator produced for the North-East shows continued stagnation and recession throughout this period, the Priory experienced genuine recovery, largely because of the financial acumen and adaptability of its managers. The fifteenth century was certainly not one of continued and relentless hardship for the bursar, and, although the mid-century recession nearly collapsed his entire financial apparatus, by the late-1480s recovery was clearly underway. As Hare has argued, the leasing out of demesnes in this period was not necessarily a 'retreat into inertia', and landowners may well have contributed more to the recovery from the mid-fifteenth-century recession than previously thought.<sup>15</sup>

## II

Initially, a brief description of the accounting methods used by Durham Cathedral Priory is necessary. The Priory's wealth was divided between eight obediences: the bursar's office, which was responsible for the general provisioning of the Durham monks, could expect an income of around £1,400, whilst the lesser obedientaries had much smaller incomes to carry out their more specialised roles, approximately as follows: the hostillar £170; the almoner and chamberlain

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<sup>13</sup> A. J. Pollard, *North-East England During the Wars of the Roses: Lay Society, War, and Politics, 1450-1500* (Oxford, 1990), pp. 78-80.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> J. Hare, 'The Monks as Landlords: The Leasing of the Monastic Demesnes in Southern England', in *The Church in Pre-Reformation Society: Essays in Honour of F. R. H. Du Boulay*, ed. C. Barron and C. Harper-Bill (Suffolk, 1985), p. 88.

£100 each; the sacrist £80; the commoner £90; the feretrar £30; and the terrar £20.<sup>16</sup> The bursar was thus financially the most important figure, with an annual income representing approximately three-quarters of the Priory's revenue, and having by far the single largest income of any of the Priory's obedientaries. Given its overwhelming importance to total revenue this article focuses upon the bursar's income, which, although not entirely synonymous with the Priory's total income, provides a good indicator of general trends on their lands. The bursar's accounts have been preserved in remarkably good condition, with many accounts surviving from consecutive years for the late fifteenth century, but unfortunately no full accounts survive after 1520, and so it is not possible to chart the bursar's income through until the Dissolution of the Priory, although evidence of recovery is clearly visible before then.

The bursar collected rents from ninety-seven villages spread across the counties of Durham, Northumberland and Yorkshire, with the majority being between the two rivers, the Tyne and the Tees.<sup>17</sup> The monks possessed a large number of these villages in their entirety, with a high concentration on the River Tyne, such as South Shields and Harton, and a similar concentration of wealthy villages in the fertile lands to the south of the region, like Billingham and Wolviston. The monks of Durham Priory also received income from small individual holdings where they did not own the entire village, often comprising rents worth little more than 1s. per annum, such as Cletlam, Hawthorne, Claxton and Blaxton. Furthermore, the bursar collected rents from several tenements in the local boroughs of Newcastle, Sunderland, Hartlepool and Durham, but these formed a very small proportion of overall receipts, only around 5 per cent of the total.

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<sup>16</sup> R. B. Dobson, *Durham Priory, 1400-1450* (Cambridge, 1973), pp. 253-54.

<sup>17</sup> R. Lomas, 'Studies in the Finances and Organisation of the Durham Priory in the Early-Sixteenth Century' (unpub. M.A. thesis, Durham Univ. 1964), pp. 13-14.

The bursar's potential income was approximately £1,400 in this period. Around £1,000 of this came from the above landed rents, with a further £300 coming from tithe receipts.<sup>18</sup> Tithes were usually leased out during this period and often became quite fossilised so that there was surprisingly little fluctuation in their amounts, except for Billingham which was kept in hand. The remaining income came from pensions, jurisdictions and small sales of produce, such as wool. A rough breakdown of total receipts in 1450 comprised of: £937 from landed rents, £272 from tithe collection, and £65 from other receipts.<sup>19</sup> By 1536 this was as follows: £1,067 from rents for landholdings, £290 from tithe receipts, and £98 from other receipts.<sup>20</sup> There was, therefore, no major redistribution in the bursar's income in this period, whilst the growth in overall receipts seen later in this article was largely driven by the increase in rents for landholdings throughout the region. By the mid fifteenth century the monks of Durham Priory had become rentier landlords, with virtually no direct demesne management except for isolated examples like Elvethall manor, hard by the river Wear, which was used for convenience in supplying the monastery.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, the Priory did not gain or lose any substantial holdings in the fifteenth century: this provides a perfect opportunity to investigate the rental income of a major landowner in the North-East across the worst periods of recession and to chart the process of recovery.

The account rolls of the bursar of Durham Priory thus reflect a wide geographical sample of the North-East, whilst representing the fortunes of the Priory itself; if the bursar was failing to collect rents, then the entire monastic community would feel its effects. In the historiography of

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<sup>18</sup> D(urham) C(athedral) M(uniments), Bursar's Accounts, 1400/1-1519/20.

<sup>19</sup> DCM, Bursar's Account, 1449/50.

<sup>20</sup> DCM, Bursar's Account, 1536/37.

<sup>21</sup> R. Lomas, 'A Northern Farm at the End of the Middle Ages: Elvethall Manor, Durham, 1443/4-1513/4', *Northern History*, XVIII (1982), 26-53.

this period and region it is commonplace to quote an average figure of *c.* £1,400 annual income for the bursar, an income that had not appreciably increased by the early sixteenth century.<sup>22</sup>

Indeed, Figure 1 most adequately represents the general opinion about the Priory's economic vitality: the fifteenth century is characterised as a period of decline and continued stagnation, with limited recovery that did not even allow the Priory's income to reach its early-fifteenth-century levels.

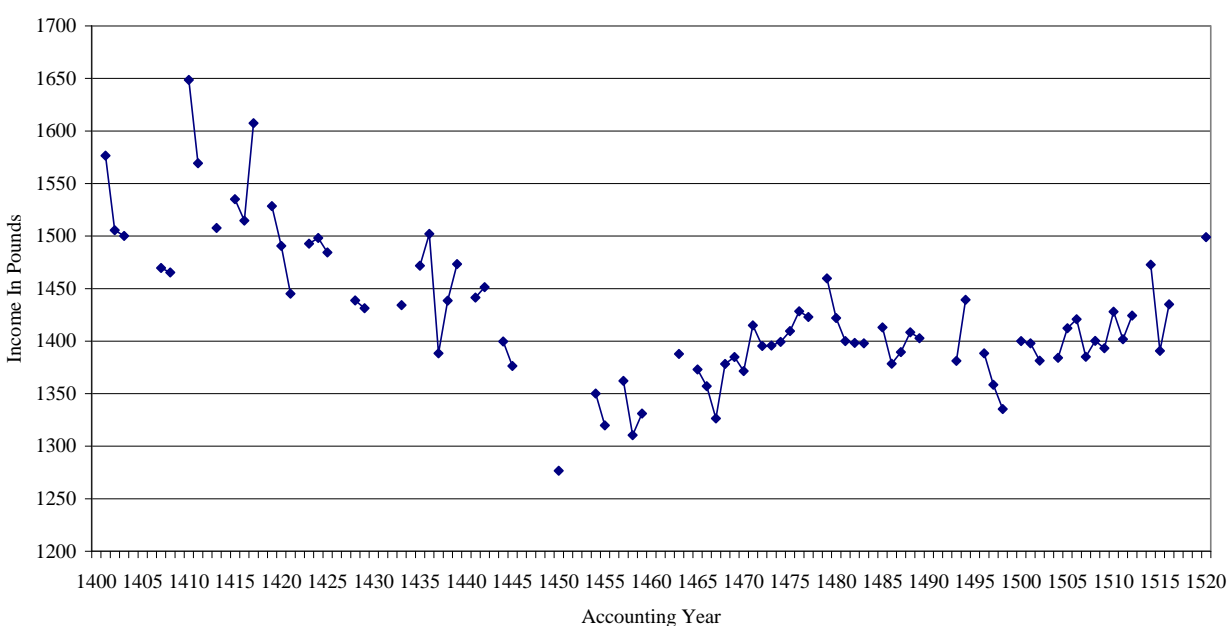


Figure 1: Total Potential Income for the Bursar of Durham Priory, 1400-1520

There is some gradual recovery in even these figures: from a low of £1,276 in 1450, the bursar could expect to collect an annual income of £1,498 by 1520, much of this improvement coming from an increase in land rents, but this still fell woefully short of levels a century earlier.<sup>23</sup>

However, this only tells part of the story of the Priory's economic vitality: these figures represent

<sup>22</sup> E. B. Fryde, *Peasants and Landlords in Later Medieval England, c.1380-c.1525* (Stroud, 1996), p. 154.

<sup>23</sup> DCM, Bursar's Accounts, 1449/50 and 1519/20.



only what the bursar could expect to receive if every single tenant paid their rent on time and in full, a situation unlikely to happen in the fifteenth century. Dyer's advice about manorial accounts is equally relevant for the bursar's account rolls: 'reading fifteenth century accounts is an exercise in distinguishing between theory and reality', as the receipts side of the accounts often stagnated 'presumably because they represented the potential income from the estate'.<sup>24</sup>

The real net income of the bursar is to be found at the end of the account rolls, where arrears, waste and decay are totalled. Waste was the medieval accounting term for lost income because of vacant holdings, whilst decay represented the income lost through temporarily reduced rents but which the bursar hoped would return their full rental value in the future. These were both structural and potentially long-lasting problems for a landowner, whilst a more transient obstacle to fully collecting all rental income was arrears. Whereas waste and decay were potentially permanent reductions in net income, arrears were a temporary problem, reflecting short-term fluctuations in the economy of the region. Figure 2 shows the sum of all these losses, thus representing the income the bursar was unable to collect for each accounting year through permanent reductions and late payments.

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<sup>24</sup> C. Dyer, *Lords and Peasants in a Changing Society: The Estates of the Bishopric of Worcester, 680-1540*

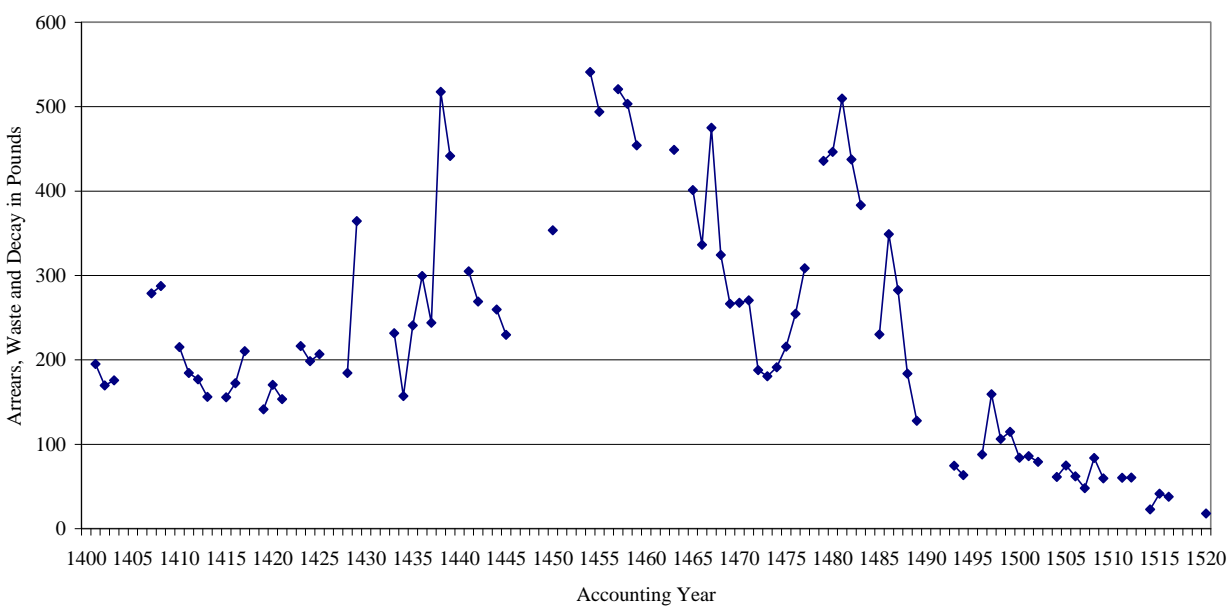


Figure 2: Sum of Arrears, Waste and Decay For the Current Accounting Year for the Bursar of Durham Priory, 1400-1520

As can be seen from the above graph, arrears, waste and decay were not a continual and static problem for the bursar of Durham Priory, but reflect the complex chronology of economic trends in the fifteenth century. Indeed, when these losses through permanent reductions and late payments are taken away from the potential annual income of the bursar of Durham Priory, a radically different image of the fifteenth century is revealed, as shown in Figure 3.

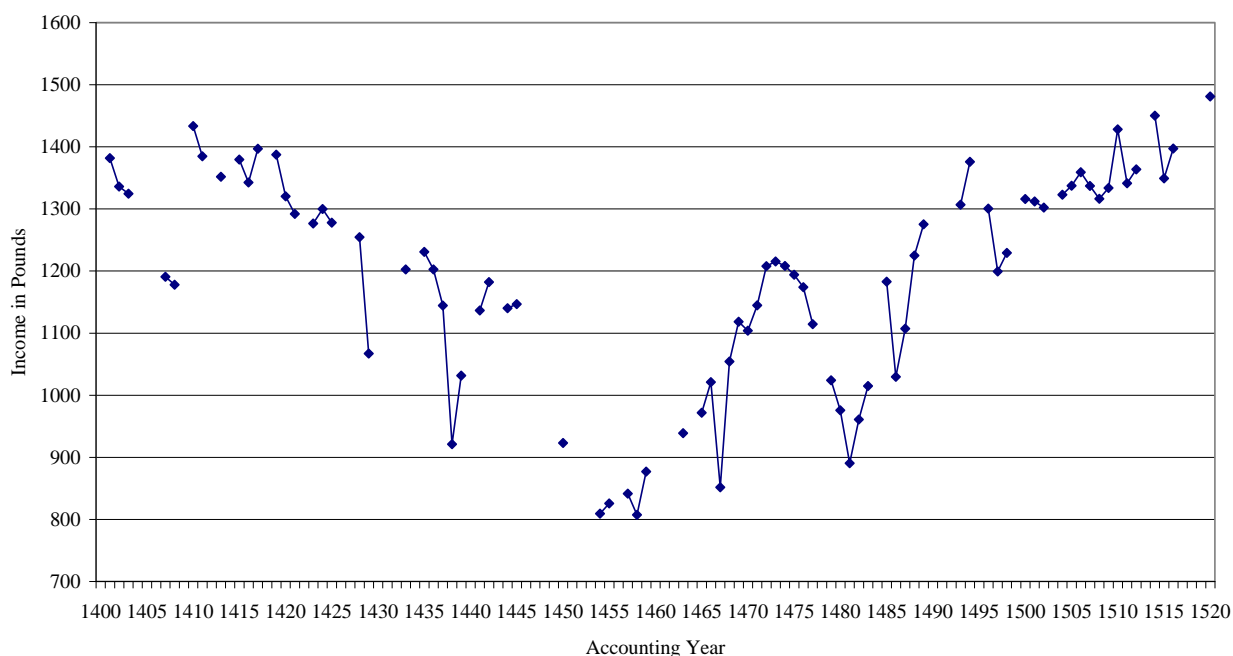


Figure 3: Total Income Less Arrears, Waste and Decay for the Bursar of Durham Priory, 1400-1520

The full depth of the mid-fifteenth-century recession is revealed, as is an initial phase of recovery in the late-1460s and early-1470s, with a renewed crisis in the 1480s, and an eventual recovery to levels even slightly higher than those at the start of the century. Each of these sub-periods will be discussed in further detail below.

The years *c.* 1430 to *c.* 1465 witnessed ‘one of the most sustained and severe agricultural depressions in documented English history’.<sup>25</sup> The economic history of Durham Cathedral Priory certainly confirms this pessimistic impression of the period. In 1432, Prior Wessington appointed the now infamously deficient Thomas Lawson as bursar ‘in the absence of a more suitable candidate’.<sup>26</sup> Pressed by the Prior to provide a proper account of his receipts and expenses, he was alleged to have been on the point of committing suicide.<sup>27</sup> Although he reported lower than usual levels of waste and decay, the level of annual arrears rose from £124 in 1433/34 to £265 in

<sup>25</sup> M. Bailey, ‘Rural Society’, in *Fifteenth-Century Attitudes*, ed. R. Horrox (Cambridge, 1994), p. 153.

<sup>26</sup> Dobson, *Durham Priory*, p. 285.

1435/36, whilst he was later accused of hiding the heavy debts he was incurring and leaving debts worth £1,210 ‘concealed from the prior and convent’.<sup>28</sup> When the rest of the Priory discovered his secret, Lawson was touring the estate, and rather than return to report for his shortcomings he fled into hiding.<sup>29</sup> This led to an administrative experiment, whereby the bursar’s lands and responsibilities were divided into roughly three equal amounts, the first retained by the bursar, the second given to the cellerar, and the third to the granator. However, it is far from clear that this radical new division of labour actually improved the collection of arrears: although the bursar’s income had reduced to approximately £500, he was still experiencing arrears consistently over £100 up until 1445, when the new administrative arrangement came to an end.<sup>30</sup> In 1446, Prior Ebbchester described the state of the monastery as nearing collapse, whilst several of the Priory’s manorial farmers were ruined by the agrarian depression.<sup>31</sup>

The bursar’s rental income certainly supports Ebbchester’s pessimism, with the total expected receipts reaching their lowest in the Priory’s history, a meagre £1,276 in 1449/50.<sup>32</sup> The true depth of the recession, however, is more visible when annual arrears, waste and decay are taken into account. The bursar’s arrears in this period reached some of their highest levels at £444 in 1453/54, whilst waste often reached £40 and decay averaged over £50 for the 1450s.<sup>33</sup> Given that the expected income of the bursar was already at its lowest ever, the position of the Priory was indeed precarious, with the bursar unable to collect well over a third of his income in the year it was due. The trough in this period came in 1453/54 when the bursar was only able to

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 286.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> DCM, Bursar’s Accounts, 1438/9-1444/45.

<sup>31</sup> Dobson, *Durham Priory*, pp. 286-87.

collect £810 of his income in this year.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, bad arrears were accumulating rapidly, so that, although cumulative arrears were only £452 in 1449/50, they reached a colossal £1,949 by 1462/63, most of which the bursar would never be able to recoup.<sup>35</sup> There can be little doubt that the Priory suffered the full force of the mid-fifteenth-century recession, the trough of which hit in the 1450s and early-1460s, with high levels of waste and decay, accumulating high levels of permanent arrears, and the lowest rents the bursar was ever able to ask.

The first signs of recovery from this pervasive recession can be seen in the late-1460s and into the 1470s. Arrears were initially brought under control, so that by 1472/73, they were down to £119, a level still higher than average arrears before Lawson's disastrous occupation of the office of bursar, but much more manageable than arrears two decades before.<sup>36</sup> Decay in the accounts gradually decreased to £45 by 1475/76, a figure nearly half that of 1406/07.<sup>37</sup> However, it is in the waste section of the accounts that the most significant recovery occurs, with levels dropping from their height of the last few decades to a record low of £7 by 1475/76.<sup>38</sup> This was, moreover, a lasting improvement, with future waste levels staying at these low figures and never again rising to their previous heights. The bursar was also able to raise rents slightly so that the total potential income of his office reached £1,414 in 1470/71.<sup>39</sup> All of these factors combined to raise the actual annual income the bursar received in the year it was due from an unprecedented low of £810 in 1453/54 to a new high of £1,215 by 1472/73, a not insignificant degree of recovery from the real financial straits the Priory found itself in during the mid-fifteenth-century

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<sup>32</sup> DCM, Bursar's Account, 1449/50.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 1449/50-1458/59.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 1453/54.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 1449/50-1462/63.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 1472/73.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 1406/7 and 1475/76.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 1475/76.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 1470/71.

recession.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, this was not a bumper account, but a new standard income the bursar could expect to receive, with the five years surrounding this high point all producing a net income of over £1,150.<sup>41</sup>

Unfortunately for the Priory, these high levels were not maintained in the decade to follow, as high mortality and bad harvests were to wreak havoc once more with the bursar's income. After such promising recovery, the successive shock of renewed plague outbreaks in 1479/80, and the second worst harvests of the fifteenth century in 1480-82, reduced the net income of the bursar to a meagre £890 in 1481.<sup>42</sup> It was not that the overall potential income of the bursar's lands changed during this period, but that annual arrears reached their highest levels, so that by 1480/81 they had reached the enormous sum of £454, which was the equivalent of over a third of tenants not paying their rents in the accounting year they were due.<sup>43</sup> Despite this financial nightmare, the bursar's account rolls show the tenacity of a landowner in this period, as waste and decay did not appreciably rise, and so his major concern was with late payment, rather than no payment at all. A more thorough investigation of the payment of arrears will be undertaken below, but the bursar could perhaps take solace in the fact that he had managed to weather a disastrous period in the agricultural history of the region without any appreciable rise in structural problems such as waste and decay.

After the crisis of the early-1480s, the bursar's income recovered quickly and decisively. By 1487/88, the bursar's total potential income less arrears, waste and decay for that accounting year had reached the previously high levels of the early-1470s, at £1,225, and continued to

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 1453/54 -1472/73.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 1468/69-1474/75.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 1478/79-1481/82; Pollard, *North-East England*, p. 47.

<sup>43</sup> DCM, Bursar's Account, 1480/81.

recover so that by 1493/94 this had reached £1,375, equivalent to the bursar's actual income in the early fifteenth century.<sup>44</sup> By 1520, the last full surviving account, this had reached £1,480; the highest amount the bursar actually received in the year it was due for over a century.<sup>45</sup> This recovery was partially because of an increase in the bursar's potential income from £1,378 in 1485/86 to £1,498 by 1520, but was primarily because arrears, waste and decay were reduced to unprecedented low levels.<sup>46</sup> Waste was kept below £10 for much of this period, only increasing in the 1510s to around £20 before it was brought back down to £5 by the time the accounts end.<sup>47</sup> Decay was also decisively handled, albeit at the later date of the 1510s, but here it was finally reduced from its average of around £50 to an insignificant £6 in 1520.<sup>48</sup> The most dramatic fall came in the arrears section of the accounts, going from their high of £454 in 1480/81 to £7 by 1494/5, and, although these rose again to over £100 a few years later, they fell to their lowest ever values of around £5 in the 1510s.<sup>49</sup> This improved collection of rents was significantly better even than the bursar managed in the early fifteenth century, with the sum of all arrears, waste and decay averaging over £150 in the 1410s and 1420s, whereas it never went above £100 in the early sixteenth century.<sup>50</sup>

This is such a large improvement in rent collection that initially it must be wondered how far it reflected reality, or whether it is not either the result of a new accounting method, or another attempt to conceal arrears. There are, however, no signs that the method of accounting for these losses was radically altered: the only major change was that cumulative arrears would be cancelled when a new bursar took the office, which did not affect the method of calculating

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<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 1487/88 and 1493/94.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 1519/20.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 1485/86-1519/20.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 1485/86-1519/20.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 1485/86-1519/20.

annual arrears, waste or decay. There are few surviving lists of arrears, waste or decay for this period, but the 1513/14 account appears to have real lists, with small arrears on freehold land throughout the region, and 18*s. 4d.* in Elvet that the hostillar apparently owed the bursar.<sup>51</sup> The waste was primarily composed of losses from Netherheworth for a mill worth 20*s.*, and South Shields where £4 3*s. 8d.* was lost because of vacancies, whilst the decay came mostly from the manors of Pittington, Hesilden and Ketton.<sup>52</sup> These provide a mixture of expected results, such as mills in disrepair and manors with reduced rents, combined with unanticipated problems, like the vacancies in South Shields, thus suggesting that they were real lists rather than contrived numbers. Furthermore, it is unlikely any bursar would deliberately try to falsify accounts and conceal growing arrears and debts after the scandal that Thomas Lawson had caused earlier in the century.

### III

Arrears were clearly a major problem for a landowner in this period, particularly during the mid-fifteenth-century recession, but just how large a problem? In the 1450s and again in the 1480s, arrears for a single accounting year could reach as high as £450, around one-third of the bursar's total expected income. But how much of this amount could the bursar expect to recoup in years to come? Fortunately, when accounts survive from consecutive years this can be answered with reasonable certainty because the accounts often include arrears from the previous year, which was a reduced amount as these debts were recouped during the current year. Occasionally, this

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<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 1480/81-1519/20.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 1400/1-1519/20.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 1513/14.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*



method was used to keep track of arrears for several years, and so we can see how the bursar slowly managed to claw back his income. It is much more likely that this gradual lowering of the amounts in arrears for each year represents tenants paying off their debts rather than the bursar writing them off as uncollectable since much older arrears, often dating back a decade or more, were kept on the accounts even though nothing had been collected for them for several years.

Figure 4 is the result:

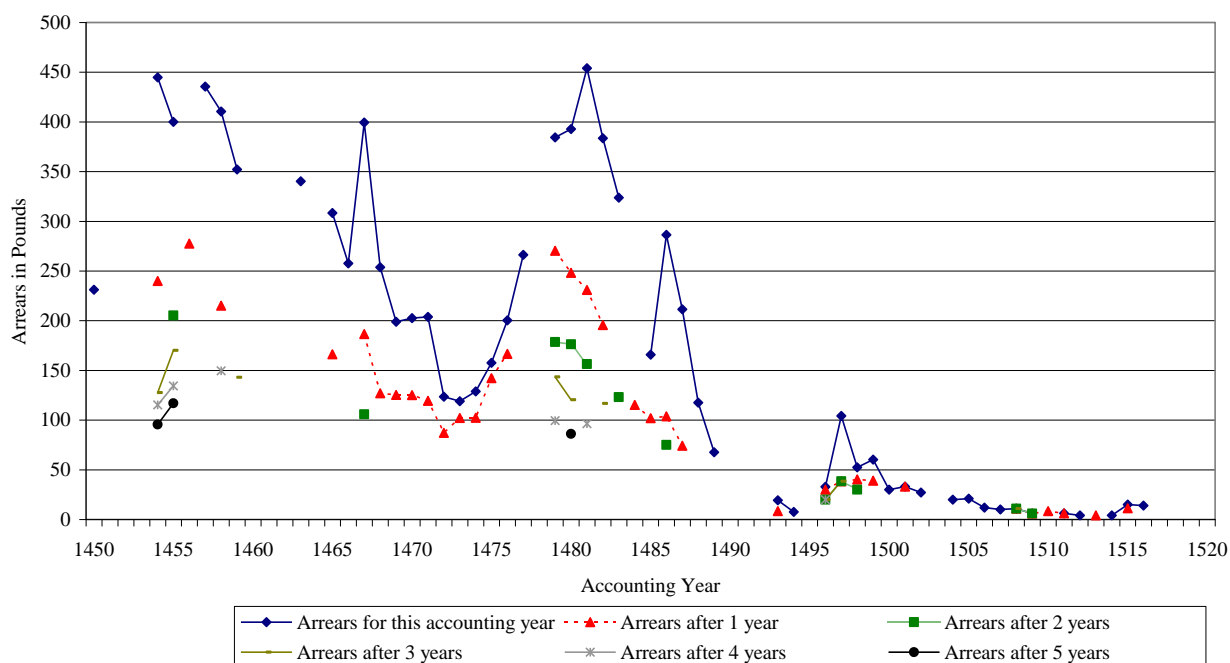


Figure 4: The Collection of Arrears by the Bursar of Durham Priory, 1450-1520

As can be seen, the bursar was quite efficient at reducing his arrears, and within five years often succeeded in getting arrears down to one-fifth of the original figure. Thus for the high arrears of 1479/80 the bursar managed to recoup just under £320 so that the original arrears of nearly £400 were reduced to £86 within five years.<sup>53</sup> This reinforces the tenacity of the monks of Durham Priory in this period: during the 1480s, despite renewed outbreaks of plague, the sweating sickness, and the second worst harvests of the century, waste and decay did not appreciably

increase, whilst arrears, although initially crippling, were gradually recouped so that only a fifth of late payments would eventually have to be written off.

Indeed, any hope of collecting outstanding arrears generally ended after five years and these amounts would then accumulate on the accounts until they were simply cancelled as uncollectable. Figure 5 shows the level of accumulating arrears in the bursar's account rolls, representing long-standing bad arrears and temporary annual arrears.

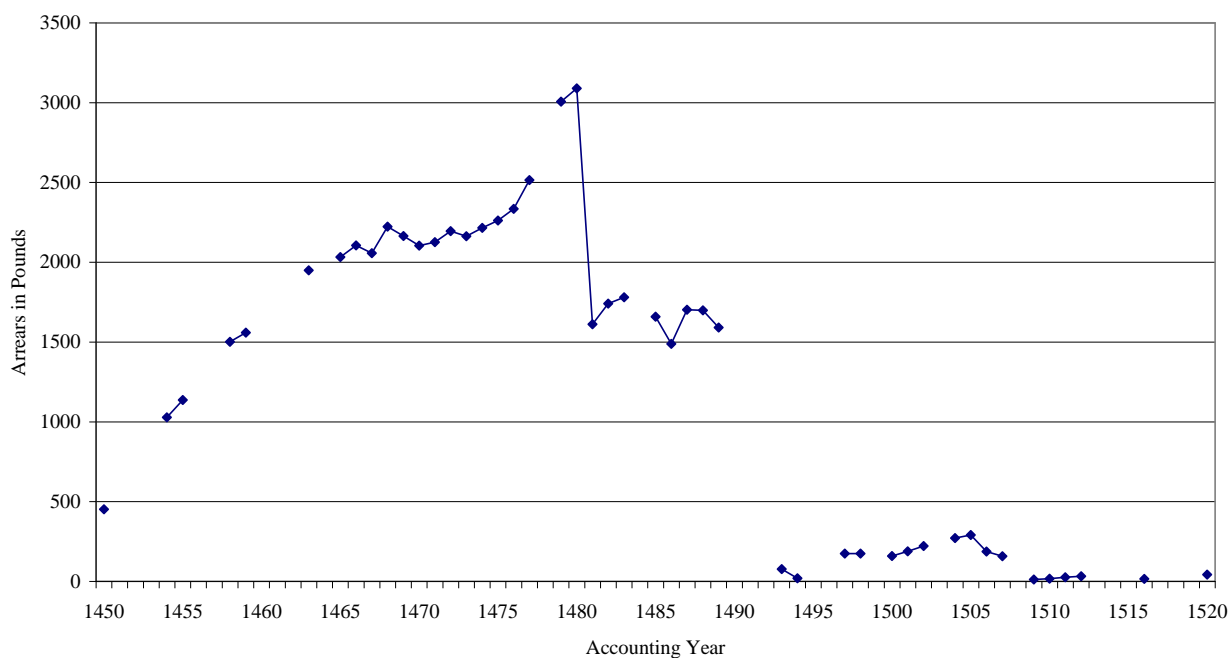


Figure 5: Cumulative Arrears in the Account Rolls of the Bursar of Durham Priory, 1450-1520

The endless struggle against accumulating permanent arrears was clearly a problem for a landowner in this period, with bad debts constantly increasing. It is impossible to reconstruct the amount of income lost to permanent arrears on an annual basis accurately because temporary arrears were constantly being added to this total. However, once long-term arrears were written off, it is possible to produce an approximation of yearly losses for the period those arrears

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 1479/80.

covered. Thus, between 1450 and 1463 permanent arrears increased by £1,500, an annual increase of around £115.<sup>54</sup> This meant that in a typical year during this same period the bursar was permanently losing over £200 to waste, decay and bad arrears, whilst having to wait for several years before he managed to recoup the further £300 worth of arrears that accumulated on an annual basis. When he only had an income of around £1,300, the bursar could ill afford to lose 15 per cent of his income, whilst being unable to collect a further 20 per cent in the accounting year it was due. Although the bursar could take some comfort from the fact that he eventually managed to regain such a large proportion of arrears owed to him even at the height of the mid-century recession, the very existence of such large sums in arrears, coupled with the high proportion of income permanently lost, reveal the true depths of the recession. By comparison, between 1465 and 1475, permanent arrears increased at the much slower pace of around £20 per year, clearly supporting the earlier impression that this was a period of recovery from the depths of the mid-century recession.<sup>55</sup> Cumulative arrears then leapt to their record height of £3,089 by 1479/80, primarily due to the rapid increase in temporary arrears as a result of the poor harvests and plague outbreaks of these years.<sup>56</sup> Despite the fact that the bursar was ultimately able to recoup many of the arrears accumulated during these crises, he was clearly concerned by the fact that he had over twice his annual income in cumulative arrears on the accounts, and so resorted to writing off around £1,500 worth of bad arrears. The remaining cumulative arrears then stabilised for several years, after which the bursar cancelled a further £1,500 worth of bad arrears at the end of the 1480s. The accounting procedure changed at this point so that cumulative arrears were cancelled when the bursar changed office, which, together with the improvement in rent collection, ensured that bad arrears never reached their previous

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 1449/50-1462/63.

levels. By the 1510s, permanent arrears were increasing by as little as £5 a year, which, when added to the £11 lost in waste and decay, meant that the bursar was only losing approximately 1 per cent of his annual income, a clear testament to the improvement in rent collection made by successive bursars of Durham Priory.<sup>57</sup>

#### IV

How were successive bursars of Durham Priory able to reduce arrears, waste and decay by over £500 at the same time as raising rents by £130? The fifteenth century is traditionally described as a golden age for labourers and tenants compared to the endless struggle landowners underwent to collect their income.<sup>58</sup> The Priory's own efficiency must have been a vital component of their success given that a large proportion of this improvement came from a reduction of the amount in annual arrears. However, there are many other regional factors which need to be taken into account as the vitality of the local economy could have a serious impact on the monks' own financial success. It is doubtful that the monks of Durham Priory could enforce a higher percentage of rent payment unless there was a wider improvement in the economy, or tenants themselves became much more cooperative as the century progressed. Moreover, a rise in the local population could have increased the demand for land and so enabled the monks to reduce waste and decay, whilst pressurising tenants into paying their rents more diligently.

During a recession, the adaptability and efficiency of any institution will be crucial to how they are able to recover, or indeed, if they can recover. In 1436/7 the Durham monks

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<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 1464/65-1474/75.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 1479/80.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 1509/10-1519/20.

expressed alarm at the decline in their spiritual income, in a ‘surprising example of economic self-awareness’.<sup>59</sup> The monks not only analysed their economic position over the past century, but went on to give suggestions as to why their income had declined since the thirteenth century, blaming the loss of Scottish parishes, and explaining how garb tithes had declined as land was put to pasture and frequent outbreaks of pestilence led to many places becoming waste.<sup>60</sup> It is likely that this awareness of their own declining economic position led the monks to search for a more efficient system of rent collection in the face of continued recession later in the century. Indeed, it was at this time that the bursar’s office was divided in a major administrative experiment that sought not only to spread the responsibility of the bursar, but also aimed at improving efficiency and eradicating the arrears which had accumulated under Lawson. Although this was ultimately a failure, it is representative of the resourcefulness of the monks of Durham Priory.

It is likely that this adaptability explains the transformation that the bursar’s rent-book underwent in this period: changing from a rental which merely listed what rent each tenant owed, to one of the most detailed lists of rent payment imaginable. In the fourteenth century, the procedure was to place a mark by a tenant’s name when they had paid, but this developed at some time in the fifteenth century into a detailed account of how tenants met their rental obligations, where and when they did so, and often include extra details such as in whose presence they paid.<sup>61</sup> It is unclear exactly when this new style of rent-book came into use, with the book of 1495/96 being the first surviving example, but it might have been in use from the

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<sup>58</sup> J. Rogers, *Six Centuries of Work and Wages: The History of English Labour* (1906), p. 326.

<sup>59</sup> B. Dodds, ‘Durham Priory Tithes and the Black Death between the Tyne and Tees’, *NH*, XXXIX (2002), 24.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 23-4.

<sup>61</sup> *Durham Cathedral Priory Rentals, vol. 1: Bursars Rentals*, ed. R. Lomas and A. J. Piper, Surtees Society, CLXXXVIII (1989), p. 9.

mid century onwards.<sup>62</sup> The standard page was pre-filled in with four or five tenants' names and what they owed evenly spaced out.<sup>63</sup> As the tenants met their obligations, new entries were recorded underneath their names, a typical entry looking like this:

'+ From John Calvert per annum 73s. 10d.  
Whereof he paid at the court of Pittington 6s. Item he paid in 8 quarters of wheat 32s.  
Item in 8 quarters of barley 24s. Item in 4 quarters of oats 5s. Item in 4 chickens 12d.  
And thus quit.'<sup>64</sup>

Such a detailed description would have proved invaluable in improving the efficiency of rent collection; tenants prone to late payment could be targeted by the itinerant rent collectors, whilst those still owing could be identified more easily and pressured into paying.

The rent-books are perhaps the clearest evidence of the Priory's adaptability in the face of economic hardship; as rent collection became more difficult, the whole process evolved to reflect the complexity of the fifteenth century. One of the clearest changes from earlier rentals is that the two-payment system in evidence in the fourteenth century appears to have disintegrated, if indeed it was ever that simple in reality. The new style of rent-book allowed for a greater flexibility in recording rent payments, to represent the fact that tenants were paying on a more ad hoc basis than earlier rentals would suggest. As in the above example of John Calvert, tenants often paid in five or six transactions throughout the year, instead of the two traditional collection days in earlier rent-books. The monks of Durham Priory attempted to maintain a certain degree of control over the process through attempts to impose regular collection days. These perhaps represent the arrival of the halmote court to the region, or a visit by an itinerant rent collector. In 1495/96 this rent collector was Richard Wren, who appears in the rent-book on 146 occasions,

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> DCM, Bursar's Books, G-M.

<sup>64</sup> *Durham Priory Rentals*, p. 156.

and who also had an assistant of some kind who collected rents on his behalf.<sup>65</sup> The Priory, although having to adapt to the circumstances, still tried to maintain a certain regularity to payments, and could be quite tenacious in tracking down tenants who still owed rent. An example of this is from Monkton, where John Oxenherd can be seen paying ‘at the plough in the presence of the Master of Jarrow 8s.’<sup>66</sup> This is, perhaps, an example of a particularly truculent tenant who could not be relied upon to pay his rents without a personal visit to his lands.

The sheer scale of the task confronting a rentier landowner in this period was truly formidable. The bursar was owed some 595 rents, which were met in thousands of individual transactions, sometimes amounting to little more than a few pence at a time.<sup>67</sup> For a modern institution to ensure prompt and regular payment in such circumstances would be impressive, but given the unique challenges of the medieval economy, not least the heavy reliance on a successful harvest, it is amazing that successive bursars virtually eradicated arrears, waste and decay by the sixteenth century. However, it is only when the fact that the Priory received many of these rents in kind is taken into account that the true complexity and difficulty of the annual rent collection process is revealed. Using the rent-book of 1495/6 Lomas calculated that 428 quarters of wheat, 733 quarters of barley, 311 quarters of oats, 199 sheep, 115 cattle, 104 items of poultry, 30,000 red herring and 1,000 dogdruff were acquired by these means, with a further 105 payments in the form of labour.<sup>68</sup> Rent collection was an extraordinarily complex operation, involving the large-scale movement of goods throughout the region. The only way the Priory could hope to improve its efficiency in the face of such difficulties was by a concerted effort: it is unlikely that the changes adopted by successive bursars were accidental or stumbled upon by

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<sup>65</sup> R. Lomas, ‘A Priory and its Tenants’, in *Daily Life in the Middle Ages*, ed. R. Britnell (Stroud, 1998), p. 115.

<sup>66</sup> *Durham Priory Rentals*, p. 139.

<sup>67</sup> Lomas, in Britnell, *Daily Life*, p. 116.

chance, but represent a determined effort to ease the rent collection process and improve efficiency.

Further management changes took place in this period which also reveal the adaptability of the Priory so that 'by the middle of the fifteenth century the structure of the estate was completely altered'.<sup>69</sup> The most prominent of these changes was the process of syndication: as the fifteenth century progressed leases were renegotiated so that whole townships were leased to groups of tenants. Gone were the myriad rental obligations due in the fourteenth century, leaving all of the land and tenements of a region, except freeholds, divided into equal shares amongst the remaining tenants. Syndication replaced the confused state of landholding, where tenants could owe ad hoc amounts of rent for holdings of unequal size and number that were often spread throughout the region, with a uniformity which must have increased the bursar's efficiency. This process of syndication was ongoing throughout the fifteenth century and will have greatly eased the rent collection process, as the myriad ancient rental obligations were replaced with simple cash values that were equal for all tenants in the region. Moreover, this could help to explain how the bursar was able to decisively overcome the problem of waste: all land in the region was put into these syndicates. It is likely that previously vacant land was placed within a syndicate's obligations, and so the bursar could greatly reduce this loss of income by cleverly reorganising his lands.

Did the increasing efficiency and improvement in rent collection come at a price for Durham Priory? The bursar had a fairly substantial repair bill, with entries for the monastery's buildings, including the prior's apartments, and for mills and tithe barns on the bursar's various

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., pp. 119-20.



estates.<sup>70</sup> The below table shows the average of repairs undertaken by the bursar of Durham Priory during each of the sub-periods found in the above investigation.

Table 1: Annual averages of repairs undertaken by the bursar of Durham Priory

Sub-Period of Recession and Recovery	Average Annual Repairs
1400–1430	£72 8s.
1430–1465	£65 12s.
1465–1475	£63 13s.
1475–1485	£87 1s.
1480–1520	£62 17s.

Source: DCM, Bursar's Account Rolls, 1400–1520

As can be seen from Table 1, the bursar did not noticeably increase his expenditure on repairs throughout the century except for one sub-period: the crisis of the late-1470s. Robert Weardale, and then his successor John Swan, tried to weather the loss of income of these years by investing more heavily in their properties. Investing during this crisis was a huge financial gamble, as the Priory's actual income was hit hard by arrears and there was no guarantee that this was just a temporary lull. However, through prudent investment successive bursars were able to bring the Priory quickly out of this crisis; indeed, it is likely that the immense success of these bursars in collecting arrears noted above was a direct result of some of this investment.

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<sup>69</sup> R. Lomas, 'Developments in Land Tenure on the Prior of Durham's Estate in the Later Middle Ages', *NH*, XIII (1977), p. 35.

<sup>70</sup> Lomas, M.A. thesis, p. 37.

Could the monks of Durham Priory have experienced such a recovery in rent collection purely through a programme of increasing efficiency? The vitality of the regional economy was certainly an important factor in the Priory's recovery. A comparison of average grain prices in the region with levels of arrears, waste and decay will partly reveal how dependent the bursar's rent collection process was on the success of the harvest. Figure 6 shows that there was, indeed, a correlation between the bursar's ability to collect rents and the success of the annual harvest.<sup>71</sup> The two worst periods of harvest failure, when the average price of all grains roughly doubled, coincided with two of the highest levels of arrears, waste and decay in 1438-40 and 1480-82. However, there are two distinct periods which do not correlate so well: the mid-fifteenth-century recession, and the recovery noticed from the 1490s onwards.

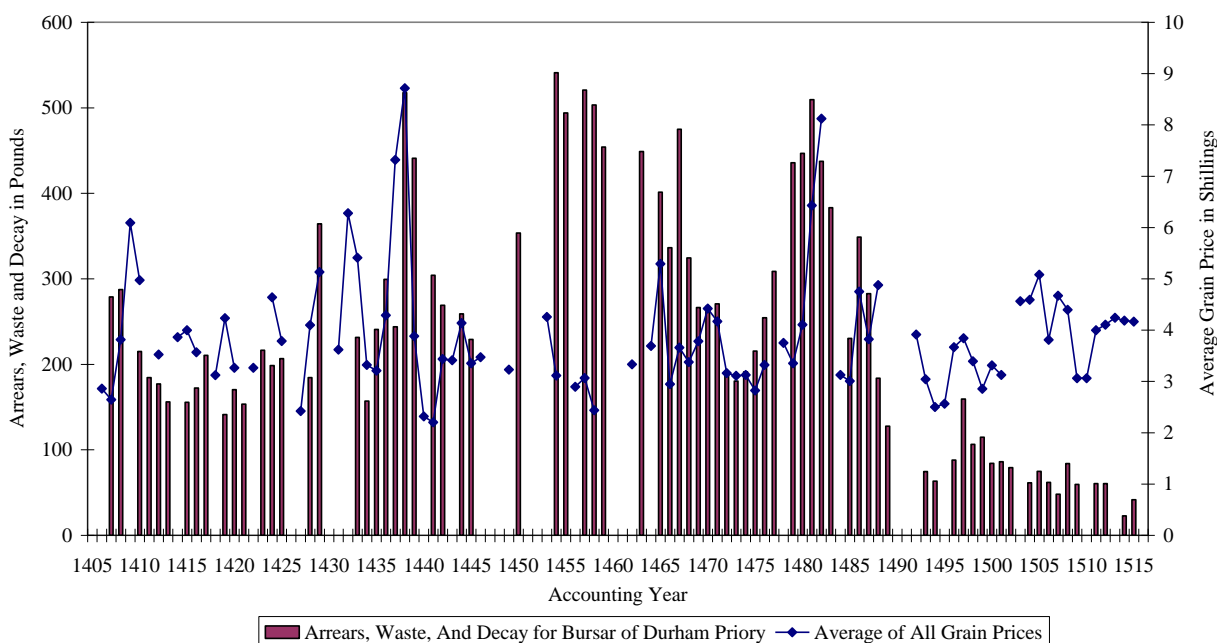


Figure 6: Average of All Grain Prices Compared to the Sum of Arrears, Waste and Decay for the Bursar of Durham Priory, 1400-1520

<sup>71</sup> Data on grain prices used in the below graph and this paragraph taken from Dodds, Gemmill, and Schofield, 'Durham Grain Prices', currently unpublished.

In these periods, arrears, waste and decay seem to be acting independently of the quality of harvests, with the bursar struggling to collect rents in the 1450s and 1460s far beyond what should have been the case if the success of the harvest were the only factor, whilst the recovery from the 1490s is better than any improvement in harvest qualities would allow for. Indeed, Dodds's work on calculating output levels from tithe receipts in the region has shown that there was no discernible increase in arable production from the 1480s onwards, and so this recovery is particularly hard to explain.<sup>72</sup> Hoskins described the 1490s as a 'bountiful decade', when 'five out of ten harvests were plentiful; only one was deficient. It was indeed a golden decade'.<sup>73</sup> Perhaps a decade without a dearth harvest produced a situation in which the prospects for collecting rents were greatly improved; after all, the dearth in 1480-2 had a knock-on effect on arrears for several years. However, that alone cannot explain the recovery: the 1450s experienced good harvests, but simultaneously formed the low-point of the Priory's income in the fifteenth century. Furthermore, there are no signs of resurgence in urbanisation or trade in the region: quite the reverse is generally believed to have occurred, with Newcastle and York losing out to London.<sup>74</sup> The only section of the regional economy to have noticeably increased was the mining industry, but this was still in its infancy and could not have stimulated enough demand to account for such large improvements in rent collection.<sup>75</sup> Given current research, it seems unlikely, therefore, that this improvement can be explained solely through tenants' abilities to pay their rents.

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<sup>72</sup> Dodds, *Peasants and Production*, p. 113.

<sup>73</sup> W. G. Hoskins, 'Harvest Fluctuations and English Economic History, 1480-1619', *Agricultural History Review*, XII (1964), 31.

<sup>74</sup> Pollard, *North-East England*, pp. 78-80.

<sup>75</sup> Dodds, *Peasants and Production*, p. 120.

How can we explain such a radical reversal of fortunes in rent collection for the bursar unless tenants were becoming more willing to cooperate with the Priory? Arrears accumulated either because of inefficient management, which was certainly not the case at Durham Priory, or because tenants either could not pay their rents or refused to do so. Given the low yields of medieval farming, where a ratio of 1:4 might be expected, it is easy to see how arrears could accumulate during bad harvests.<sup>76</sup> Of the four seeds harvested, for example, a tenant might allocate one to be sown next year, another two for their own consumption and selling at market for other necessary goods, and the last one towards paying rent and tithe. Although this is an extremely simplified version of a tenant's decision-making process, it is easy to see that, in a poor harvest where the yield is reduced to 1:3 or even 1:2 it is the landlord who loses out, because the other uses of the harvest may well be crucial to the tenant's very survival. As can be seen in Figure 6, there are certainly examples of high arrears accumulating at times when tenants simply could not pay their rents in the year they were due such as in the crisis of the early-1480s. During poor harvests it thus appears to be the landlord who often suffered much of the financial burden, with tenants able to pass on at least part of their difficulties by withholding their rents for several years until harvests improved. Within five years most tenants had repaid these arrears: they were not withholding their rents from some ideological stand against the rapaciousness of a medieval landlord, but simply unable to pay their rents on time because of a succession of poor harvests. Many tenants may well have even been grateful that the monks of Durham Priory gave them this leeway until harvests improved and they could start repaying their rents.

However, there are also periods when arrears increased radically beyond what would be expected if all tenants fully accepted the principle of rent payment and genuinely tried to be

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<sup>76</sup> D. L. Farmer, 'Grain Yields on the Winchester Manors in the Later Middle Ages', *ECHR*, XXX (1977), 559-60.

punctual with their payments. In a period and region where land was relatively abundant, the Priory may well have experienced difficulties with particularly truculent tenants who sought to take advantage of the monks' weakened economic position. Indeed, as Dyer points out, how else can we explain the many examples of tenants paying absolutely none of their rents, which is also in evidence at Durham?<sup>77</sup> Some tenants may well have used rent payment as a bargaining position; getting into arrears for several years, for example, then promising to make amends if the monks paid for some repairs on their land, or reduced their overall rent. Moreover, the monks of Durham Priory rarely managed to recoup any arrears that were outstanding for more than five years, and some tenants may have tried to postpone paying part of their rents for as long as possible in the hope that the rent collectors would write their debts off as uncollectable. For an earlier period, Larson suggested that the 'bursar had little hope of generating and then sustaining economic recovery with a recalcitrant peasantry'.<sup>78</sup> It is possible, therefore, that tenants became more cooperative as the fifteenth century progressed, perhaps because the monks of Durham Priory became more responsive to their tenants' needs: syndication may have been a tenant initiative to enlarge their landholdings which the bursar allowed, whilst the monks were clearly flexible about where and when rents were to be collected. Although this is perennially hard to prove beyond a suggestion, it is unlikely that the Priory could have forced a higher percentage of rent payments, unless the tenants themselves were more compliant.

An increasing population could similarly have provided a stimulus for tenants to pay their rents on time and for less land to be vacant. An increase in the pool of tenants available would certainly explain the bursar's ability to keep waste low from the third quarter of the fifteenth century onwards, whilst also explaining how he could keep arrears to manageable levels.

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<sup>77</sup> Dyer, *Lords and Peasants*, p. 183.

However, there are two large obstacles to this theory of population growth towards the end of the fifteenth century in medieval Durham. The first of these is Dodds's work on agricultural production levels based upon the Priory's tithe receipts.<sup>79</sup> If there were an increase in population large enough to occupy all of the bursar's vacant holdings, whilst enabling him to reduce arrears and decay, it would surely be expected that agricultural production would increase in the region. The second problem with this theory is Hatcher, Piper and Stone's work on the mortalities of Durham monks, which has convincingly shown that the life expectancy of these monks 'plunged precipitously in the second half of the fifteenth century and then staged a partial recovery in the early sixteenth century'.<sup>80</sup> They emphasise that there was a 'precipitous surge in mortality which began in the 1460s and lasted into the 1520s', the exact period of recovery found for the bursar's lands.<sup>81</sup> Although there are doubts about how far monastic deaths reflect similar mortality rates in the region more widely, the widespread nature of Durham's monastic community, with regional cells spread throughout the North-East, makes it probable that secular death rates followed a broadly similar trend.<sup>82</sup> It is unlikely, therefore, that population in the region was increasing by the end of the fifteenth century, unless there was a radical increase in fertility rates.

## V

The monks of Durham Priory were certainly tenacious in trying to maintain their income during this period, but is it really possible that they could have achieved such a remarkable improvement in rent collection in the face of stagnating production levels? Despite the fact that

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<sup>78</sup> P. Larson, *Conflict and Compromise in the Late Medieval Countryside, 1349-1400* (2006), p. 143.

<sup>79</sup> Dodds, *Peasants and Production*, p. 113.

<sup>80</sup> J. Hatcher, A. J. Piper, and D. Stone, 'Monastic Mortality: Durham Priory, 1395-1529', *EcHR*, LIX (2006), 667.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 676.

almost every economic indicator produced for this period shows little sign of sustained recovery in the North-East, successive bursars of Durham Priory were able to reduce arrears, waste and decay from a combined total of £540 in 1453/54 to a meagre £18 by 1519/20, whilst simultaneously raising overall rents by £130; an almost unbelievable feat. Could the monks of Durham Priory have stimulated such a vast improvement in rent collection through a sustained programme of efficient management without rousing widespread dissent from their tenants? These tenants must have seen their standards of living gradually decline as the Priory siphoned off more and more of their personal incomes, unless, of course, production levels were not as stagnant as current research suggests.

Although Dodds has shown that arable output stagnated from the 1480s onwards, pastoral farming was often a preferred alternative to labour-intensive farming in this period of low grain prices and high wages and may have provided a valuable supplement to tenants' incomes. Moreover, arable output itself may not have been as stagnant as Dodds' research has implied: it is possible that there could have been an increase in output which is disguised by the nature of the tithe data he used. The usual problems of using cash tithe receipts to calculate arable output, not least the varying cost of collection and the completely unknown profit taken by tithe buyers, are further compounded in late-fifteenth-century Durham by the leasing of tithes for multiple years.<sup>83</sup> Many of the receipts for cash tithes become fossilised from the 1470s onwards, as the monks of Durham Priory sought a reliable and stable income from tithes. This meant that tithe buyers would bear all the risks associated with poor harvests, often gambling on harvests several

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<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 667.

<sup>83</sup> B. Dodds, 'Estimating Arable Output Using Durham Priory Tithe Receipts, 1341-1450', *EcHR*, LVII (2004), 247-57.

years in advance.<sup>84</sup> It is likely that the negotiated value of the tithes would reflect this, with leases that would be at an artificially lower price in recognition that the tithe buyer assumed all of the risk. Indeed, Figure 7 shows this remarkable stability from the 1470s onwards, which may have represented a change in leasing patterns more than a stagnation in arable output.

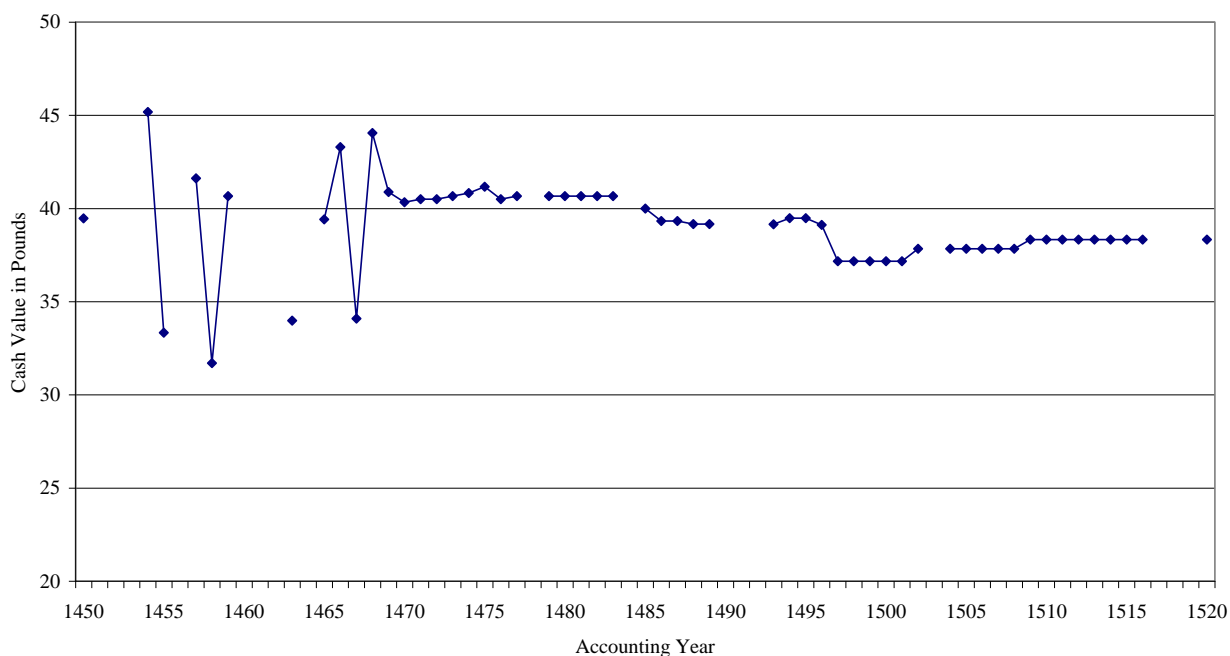


Figure 7: Cash Tithe From the Parish of Heighington From the Bursar's Accounts, 1450-1520

It is likely, therefore, that the cash tithes at Durham Priory are not sensitive enough to reflect arable output by the end of the fifteenth century. If this is so, then the improvement in rent collection that successive bursars of Durham Priory achieved, might reflect an increase in arable production in the region.

But how would this increase in arable output arise? An increasing population would likely produce a rise in overall agricultural output, but this would have been in the face of very high mortality in the region and have implied an even higher fertility rate, of which there is little

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., p. 257.



evidence. Another possibility is that output per capita rose; for example, the monks themselves experienced an increase in the yields on Elvethall Manor from the 1460s onwards when average output rose by 85 quarters a year.<sup>85</sup> Could the tenants of the Priory have experienced a similar improvement in output? The process of syndication may not have been solely, or even primarily, at the instigation of the Priory: enlarging their landholdings could have enabled tenants to overcome the notorious medieval problem of low yields. Even a slight increase in the availability of manure, or a process of improved fallow, could produce a corresponding rise in yields, which would have in turn enabled tenants to pay more of their rents without it affecting their living standards. Indeed, this may reflect a process of negotiation between tenants and landlords, whereby the tenants agreed to pay their rents more punctually in return for a redistribution of landholdings which enabled them to increase their livestock, or improve yields through fallowing more often. If there truly was no increase in output in this period it is remarkable that the monks of Durham Priory could have pressurised tenants into paying such a larger proportion of their incomes by the end of the fifteenth century. It seems more likely that the monks, through a process of efficient management, were able to share in a wider recovery of the region that they may have helped to stimulate through negotiation with their tenants.

## VI

How does this recovery in rent collection by a northern landowner compare with other areas of the country? Dyer's extensive study of the bishop of Worcester's lands in the fifteenth century tells a remarkably similar story of recovery from the depths of the mid-century recession. In

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<sup>85</sup> Lomas, *NH*, XVIII, 31.

around 1450 a survey of the estate was made, which revealed at Wick complaints of a ‘great decay and falling down of the buildings of tenants for lack of repair’, clearly emphasising the waste and decay which must have accumulated on the estates.<sup>86</sup> On the bishop’s lands ‘increases of rents...were occasionally made in the second half of the fifteenth century’, whilst his net income increased from a low of £820 in 1458/59 to a relative high of £1,074 by 1540, broadly in step with the increases made by Durham Priory.<sup>87</sup> However, it is in rent collection that the similarities become abundantly clear, as this increase in net income was primarily facilitated by a decrease in arrears, with ‘1486 marking a turning point in the history of arrears on the estate’.<sup>88</sup> Under Bishop Alcock’s successors ‘arrears did not build up, and remained at a relatively low level, less even than in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries’.<sup>89</sup> This is remarkably similar to the economic history of Durham Priory outlined above: indeed, Dyer’s description of the bishop of Worcester’s increased efficiency in collecting rents as the fifteenth century progressed is so familiar he could well have been describing the Priory’s own struggles against accumulating arrears.

There are many other examples of landowners who appear to have recovered from the mid-century recession through a concerted effort in improving their own efficiency. Du Boulay’s study of the estates of the archbishop of Canterbury revealed an increase in revenues on the majority of the Kentish estates after 1490.<sup>90</sup> It is once again, though, in rent collection where the archbishops saw the most prominent improvement. ‘In general, there was a moderate burden of arrears up until the 1480s or 1490s, but after this arrears declined and often died away altogether,

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<sup>86</sup> Dyer, *Lords and Peasants*, p. 165.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 177.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 185.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>90</sup> Du Boulay, *EcHR*, XVI, 435.

and the payments of money, always fairly steady, rose gently to a correspondingly high plateau.<sup>91</sup> Other examples include Margaret Beaufort, who managed to achieve a similar feat in her lordship of Kendal in Westmorland. In 1453/54, it had yielded *c.* £200 to the Earl of Richmond, but ‘the financial yield from Kendal rose steadily under Margaret’s administration, reaching an annual figure of around £380, a sum further swollen by efficient collection of long-standing arrears of rent’.<sup>92</sup>

These estates all followed a broadly similar course to that of Durham Priory, with recovery that was largely caused by an improvement in rent collection from the 1470s onwards. Much akin to the improved efficiency of Durham Priory, the above estates all seem to have undergone some kind of ‘orgy of administrative activity’ and so managed to improve their rent collection process.<sup>93</sup> By comparison, Rosenthal found that ‘a permanent loss of about 20 per cent of the revenues was seemingly unavoidable’ on the estates of Richard Duke of York in the early fifteenth century.<sup>94</sup> This noticeable difference in the efficiency of landowners could help to explain the divergent views of historians about the chronology of recovery. It is unlikely that even an efficient landowner could completely avoid the mid-century recession, as this was so pervasive that all of the estates suffered to some extent. However, the speed and timing of recovery from this trough was likely to have been greatly affected by the efficiency of the landowner in question: an improvement in rent collection enabled some landowners to increase their real incomes by several hundred pounds without the need to increase rents.

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<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 436.

<sup>92</sup> Fryde, *Peasants and Landlords*, p. 262.

<sup>93</sup> Dyer, *Lords and Peasants*, p. 165.

## VII

Durham Priory experienced real recovery from the 1470s onwards, so that by the turn of the century the Priory was in a much stronger economic position than it had been at the end of the fourteenth century. Successive bursars showed a remarkable degree of flexibility in adapting the style of rent collection, and the recording thereof in their records, to represent the complexity and ad hoc nature of tenant payments. The process of syndication must have greatly improved the efficiency of rent collection as well; not only did syndicates ease the job expected of rent collectors, but they may also have enabled the bursar to eradicate waste through a clever redistribution of landholdings, and for tenants to improve arable output through consolidating and enlarging their landholdings. Successive bursars were thus able to reduce arrears, waste and decay down from a combined total of £540 in 1453/54 to a meagre £18 by 1519/20 at the same time as increasing overall rents by £130, a truly remarkable feat.<sup>95</sup>

Dyer has suggested that the initiative shown by demesne lessees and peasants was the stimulus for economic recovery in the fifteenth century, whilst the very terminology used by historians in describing the ‘retreat’ or ‘decline’ of direct demesne farming suggests that landowners became passive or absentee lords.<sup>96</sup> Writing in a similar vein Bailey has argued that landlords obviously wanted a good income but did ‘not look to maximise profits’.<sup>97</sup> However, the financial management of large institutions should not be too quickly dismissed: Durham Priory was clearly responsive to change and adapted its style of management, rent collection process, and even repairs, all in the pursuit of increased efficiency. The fifteenth century was not

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<sup>94</sup> J. Rosenthal, ‘Fifteenth Century Baronial Incomes and Richard Duke of York’, *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, XXXVII (1964), 233-39.

<sup>95</sup> DCM, Bursar’s Accounts, 1453/54-1519/20.

<sup>96</sup> Dyer, *An Age of Transition?*, pp. 170-210.

necessarily a period of ceaseless decline, but should be seen as a period of ‘new beginnings’ for landowners, who experimented and adapted to the difficulties of the economic situation, showing ‘a readiness to spend and to innovate’, whilst displaying considerable financial acumen.<sup>98</sup> Given the complexity of collecting hundreds of such disparate rents, often in kind rather than cash, Durham Priory showed a remarkable adaptability and ingenuity in improving rent collection to such extents as successive bursars managed. Although it is possible that the monks of Durham Priory enjoyed this improvement in rent collection in the face of stagnant production levels, it is much more likely that this recovery reflects a wider improvement in the agricultural output of the region which other economic indicators, such as cash tithe receipts, are not sensitive enough to register.

The fifteenth century still defies easy description, but it cannot be characterised as a century of continuous stagnation and decline for landowners. The mid-century recession was indeed a dark period in the economic history of Durham Priory, and the period from c.1430 until the late-1460s should rightly be seen as some of the most challenging in its history. However, by the 1470s recovery was well underway, and, despite further crises in the 1480s, the Priory emerged from the fifteenth century in a strong and stable economic position. Not only were the monks able to increase rents closer to their early-fifteenth-century levels, but successive bursars could also rely on actually collecting a larger income than had been possible for generations. A more cautionary tale could be told, in which the bursar’s income was still much lower than it had been in the fourteenth century, but we should not fall into the trap that so many contemporaries

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<sup>97</sup> M. Bailey, ‘Historiographical Essay: The Commercialisation of the English Economy, 1086-1500’, *Journal of Medieval History*, XXIV (1998), 309.

<sup>98</sup> Hare, in Barron, *Church in Pre-Reformation Society*, p. 90.

did: to compare the bursar's income with pre-Black Death levels, or indeed, even with those of the 1370s, is unrealistic and unfair. Successive bursars had stopped the rot that had set in on their lands, and improved the position of the office so that by the end of the fifteenth century the economic fortunes of the Priory looked healthier than they had for over a hundred years. Indeed, successive bursars, despite not having the advantages associated with the burgeoning textile industry, or a thriving metropolis like London in the vicinity, were able to recover a large portion of the Priory's real income through a programme of adaptability and efficiency in the face of continued recession. It is unclear how far landowners could escape the ravages of the mid-century recession altogether, but the ability of a landlord to recover clearly lay in his own hands: if Durham Priory could experience such recovery, it is perfectly feasible that others could have done likewise.