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The Winchester Pipe Rolls and Medieval English Society

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Chris Briggs

The Winchester pipe rolls are among the very greatest monuments to medieval English administration and record-keeping. As a source for economic and social history between the thirteenth and the fifteenth centuries they are without equal, since even documents of roughly comparable structure and purpose cannot offer anything like the same quantity and variety of information, or coverage of such a long chronological period. Each bulky pipe roll consists of a summary of income and expenditure during the Michaelmas to Michaelmas accounting year from each of the bishop of Winchester's 50-60 manors, properties which were dotted across seven counties of southern England. The individual accounts that make up a pipe roll also provide detailed documentation of the management of the demesne within each manor, that is, of the land farmed directly by the bishop. The records were modelled on the royal administration, and the earliest relates to the accounting year 1208-9. Thereafter the series of rolls runs with some gaps until 1454-5, from which date the accounts were recorded in large registers rather than rolls. Although the later fifteenth and sixteenth century records continue to provide a sizeable and important source, the essays in *The Winchester Pipe Rolls and Medieval English Society* follow historiographical tradition by concentrating on the riches contained within the first two centuries of the pipe rolls. This volume originated in a conference held in 1999, and several of the papers present findings from major research projects based on the documents.

As Richard Britnell's introduction to the volume demonstrates, the story of historical study of the Winchester pipe rolls is inseparable from the wider story of the development of English medieval economic and social history as a field of research. The pipe rolls attracted surprisingly little attention in works published in the second half of the nineteenth century and the first decade or two of the twentieth century, though there were notable exceptions to this, such as a series of important early contributions to the classic debate on the economic consequences of the Black Death of 1348-9. However, it was only in the middle decades of the twentieth century that the pipe rolls came into their own, as historians became dissatisfied with the largely disconnected local investigations that had characterized the field up to that point, and sought instead to chart and understand the broader shape of medieval economic and demographic change affecting the country as a whole. To do this, statistics on fundamental matters like population growth, prices, rents, wages and crop yields were needed, and to obtain these researchers such as W. H. Beveridge and later J. Z. Titow and D. L. Farmer turned to the unrivalled information found in the Winchester accounts. The Winchester evidence dominated discussion of the thirteenth- and fourteenth-century economy even more fully from the 1950s as a consequence of the fact that the investigations of Titow, as collaborator and student of M. M. Postan, came to form a major part of the evidential basis for the famous 'Postan thesis', a general interpretation of medieval economic change which saw the balance between population and agricultural resources as the decisive factor. Britnell's introduction shows just how fully this highly influential view is articulated in Titow's studies of the Winchester data, as well as in Postan's own writings.

Today, research on the Winchester pipe rolls is no longer primarily concerned with gathering data on basic economic indicators such as prices and wages. Instead, investigations using these records are now much more diverse. This is reflected in the contributions to the volume under review, most of which use the pipe rolls to shed light on topics that have come to particular prominence in medieval economic history in the last two or three decades, such as the peasant land market, and the objectives and techniques of landlords' agricultural production.

The description of this book on its frontispiece states that it is both a 'celebration' of the pipe rolls as a historical source, and an attempt to question how far the evidence they contain is representative of England as a whole. The second, cautionary theme is developed most fully in Bruce Campbell's essay, 'A unique estate and a unique source: the Winchester pipe rolls in perspective'. Historians of the Winchester pipe rolls have never been able to avoid the disconcerting objection that their records were produced by an exceptionally powerful landlord operating a highly unusual agrarian regime in a relatively restricted area of the country, and hence that they are wholly inadequate as a guide to the characteristics of the typical medieval manor, landlord or peasant tenant, however full of detail they might be. Campbell investigates this claim by placing the Winchester estate and its archive in perspective, drawing on the national database of manorial accounts used in his earlier study of seigniorial agriculture, and on evidence assembled in collaboration with Ken Bartley for a forthcoming historical atlas of the early fourteenth century. Access to

this wealth of comparative material from all over England allows Campbell to show strikingly that 'territorially, tenurially, agriculturally, managerially, commercially and financially, the Winchester estate was in a class of its own'. He stresses the vast size of the estate controlled by the bishop, whose 50-60 manors far outstripped the holdings of all but a handful of other lords. A large estate would naturally engender a type of management policy wholly different from that practised on the small estates consisting of just a couple of manors that were the norm across the country. Large estates also tended to feature exceptionally large, valuable manors, and there are numerous examples of such huge properties among the lands of the bishop, the most obvious being East Meon (Hampshire) and Taunton (Somerset). The demesne farms of such Winchester properties were predominantly worked using the labour services of unfree customary tenants, which again marked this estate out as atypical. For the vast majority of lords, Campbell stresses, the use of labour services was not an option, simply because there were few, if any, customary tenants attached to the predominantly small manors in which their demesnes lay.

There are no easy solutions to the dilemma facing historians wishing to use the rich seams of evidence in the Winchester pipe rolls without losing sight of doubts about its wider significance. Campbell does, however, offer some intriguing suggestions in a concluding section of his essay headed 'the methodological challenge?', several of which are exemplified in the studies that make up the remainder of the book. Most of those contributions also shed light on the problems involved in studying general questions of economic history through the exceptional records of this exceptional estate.

As already noted, 'celebration' of the pipe rolls is also a major theme of this volume, and Katherine Stocks's investigation of payments made to the bishop's manor courts in the first half of the thirteenth century shows particularly well why this should be the case. Most of our knowledge of medieval village society comes via the institution of the manor court, and it is very important to know how its procedures developed from as early a date as possible. However, the earliest court rolls containing written records of curial proceedings date from the mid-1240s (these relate to manors of the abbey of Bec), and examples of this category of document do not become numerous until the last quarter of the thirteenth century. Without the Winchester pipe rolls, our knowledge of the operation of manor courts during an important formative period would be scant indeed.

The information analysed by Stocks takes the form of over 54,000 individual payments of court fines accompanied by brief entries summarizing the reason for each payment. While these entries appear to have been made primarily for financial accounting purposes, Stocks argues that it may also have been legally beneficial for the bishop to have them recorded. A number of interesting discoveries are presented here concerning the operation of the courts of the Winchester manors. For example, the increasing use of juries rather than the entire body of court suitors in giving manor court verdicts has been thought particularly characteristic of the latter half of the thirteenth century, but Stocks finds that juries were in operation in Winchester courts as early as the 1220s. Interestingly, the juries Stocks identifies all appear to have acted in private land disputes. No indication is given of the existence at this time of the 'presentment' jury which by 1300 dominated most manor courts as the body responsible for reporting a wide range of 'public' and manorial offences, though it is possible that this apparent absence is actually a function of the distinctive format of the court payment evidence contained in the pipe rolls.

Like Stocks's essay, the next two pieces in the book (by Mark Page and John Mullan) are also concerned with pipe roll information relating to the bishop's peasant tenants. In their case, the focus is on the land market, which is studied through the entry fines paid and recorded whenever an unfree or customary landholding changed hands. Page's essay arises from an ESRC funded project on the transfer of customary land on the Winchester estate before 1350, while Mullan's presents preliminary findings from a second project (funded by the Leverhulme Trust) which continues the investigation up to 1415.

After showing that most transfers between 1269 and 1349 took place by inheritance, Page considers the extent to which the characteristic standard-sized holdings of customary land (virgates, half-virgates etc.) were in fact subdivided between more than one occupier. He presents examples of parts of standard tenements being held as separate holdings, and of subletting, which show that the landlord's opposition to

fragmentation of the standard units did not always prevent it happening in practice. In the absence of any attempt to quantify such instances, however, it is difficult to assess just how far one should treat the pattern of standard holdings with their individual tenants as an unreliable guide to the actual pattern of land occupation. Page also looks closely at land existing outside the standard holding structure, either in the form of leases from the demesne or of acres colonised from waste. He demonstrates that the availability of such land had different effects on land transfer on different Winchester manors, and argues that these variations reveal a unique combination of local influences acting in each place. He rejects the idea of a unified estate-wide seigniorial policy on peasant landholding, casting doubt on any suggestion that the wider relevance of developments on an individual Winchester manor is inevitably compromised by the fact that it formed part of a large and atypical estate.

John Mullan uses the Winchester entry fines between 1349 and 1361 to explore some of the key themes identified in existing research on the post-plague peasant land market, including the growth in transfers outside the family at the expense of transfers between kin, and the tendency for individuals to accumulate unusually large holdings. Studies of other parts of the country show that such features did not all appear suddenly after the Black Death but rather tended to emerge gradually over a longer period, so, as Mullan concedes, it is not possible to explore these issues as fully as one would wish through a preliminary study covering little more than a decade. Nonetheless, he is able to identify changes after 1349, including a trend towards non-family transfers, and the emergence of new legal devices used by peasants to dispose of their land. Closer integration of the pre- and post-1349 evidence generated by the two Winchester land market projects would have assisted the reader in assessing just how 'new' the post-1349 developments highlighted by Mullan really were, but by turning back to Page's Table 1 and comparing it with Mullan's Table 3 it is possible to obtain confirmation of a contrast between the 1340s and 1350s in proportions of extra-familial transfers. Other features viewed as characteristic of the later medieval land market, such as the accumulation of holdings, had not really emerged to any significant extent on the Winchester manors by 1361, and Mullan cites notable examples of individuals acquiring several tenements who also shed substantial amounts of property over the same period.

In considering demesne crop yields, Christopher Thornton's study of the manor of Taunton shifts the focus to an aspect of Winchester pipe roll research that has a much longer tradition than some of the other topics explored in this volume. Yet his approach, giving close attention to innovation and regional variation in agricultural technology and to the opportunities offered by the market, is characteristic of quite recent historiography, and reflects in particular the influence of Bruce Campbell's work and the framework adopted by other current investigators of demesne agriculture such as Thornton himself, who has also published an important study of the Winchester manor of Rimpton (Somerset).⁽¹⁾

Thornton calculates arable productivity at Taunton and on each of the five sub-manors of this large manorial complex, making comparison with places elsewhere in the country. There is a particularly striking contrast between Taunton and the highly productive Norfolk manor of Martham, where the weighted aggregate crop yield was over three times greater than on the Somerset manor. Poor yields at Taunton were not a consequence of poor soil quality, but reflect a low seeding rate, the small acreage devoted to leguminous crops and minimal integration of livestock and arable husbandry. The format of the accounts makes it impossible to calculate labour inputs at Taunton, but it is clear that its demesne was cultivated using a system of very heavy labour services, abandonment of which is just one of several steps that, if taken, would almost certainly have raised productivity. In contrast to Page, Thornton implies that developments on an individual manor (in this case Taunton) were significantly influenced by the fact that it was part of an unusually large and bureaucratic estate, since he suggests that an inflexible centrally directed policy led to the perpetuation of inappropriate techniques, such as the use of a three course rotation on the marginal land of Taunton's two 'outlying' sub-manors.

In a highly original contribution, John Langdon, Jill Walker and John R. Falconer employ evidence of building expenditure on the estate to shed light on the 'crisis' of the early fourteenth century. In an attempt to move beyond the traditional explanations for the difficulties of this period, such as increased feudal surplus extraction or population pressure, the authors explore the proposition that the crisis should be seen in

terms of recession and consequent unemployment, using the building industry as their testing ground.

Data on sums spent on building across the entire Winchester estate are plotted to show chronological trends between 1297 and 1348. Perhaps the most striking feature is the growth in the late 1330s and early 1340s in expenditure on new building. These years are usually seen as a time of severe economic recession and of general hardship caused by high taxation levels, but Langdon and his co-authors suggest that this boom in construction in the early years of the Hundred Years War probably improved the lot of building workers employed on the Winchester estate. Yet across the period studied the overall picture is one of marked fluctuation over time in building expenditure, which must have created a very uncertain employment climate for craftsmen and labourers.

The arguments of Campbell's paper in this volume naturally lead one to ask how typical patterns of building on the Winchester lands were of the industry in general. The authors claim that Winchester 'might be considered typical of the majority of large estates in terms of its management and attitudes to building investment?', but at the same time they accept that the personal tastes and political ambitions of individual bishops may account for some significant chronological shifts in outlay on building projects.

Just how close the bishops of Winchester were to the centre of political power is demonstrated in the final essay in the volume, by Nicholas Vincent. Vincent's study of five thirteenth century bishops furthers the book's theme of 'celebration', showing why the pipe rolls are such a valuable source not just for social and economic historians but for political and religious historians also. As Vincent explains, the entries in the Winchester accounts quite frequently offer an important supplement to evidence in royal sources on the bishops' relations with kings, magnates and leading churchmen and justices, and, on occasion, the pipe rolls constitute the only evidence for a particular event or contact. Vincent exploited the pipe roll evidence in his 1996 book on Bishop Peter des Roches (1205-38)[\(2\)](#), and in the present essay he concentrates on the episcopates of des Roches's successors, uncovering the evidence pertaining to major political episodes, perhaps most notably the baronial rebellion and civil war of 1258 to 1267. He also extracts statistics concerning tallages and 'recognitions' (forced levies) imposed on tenants, and almsgiving by Bishop Aymer de Lusignan in 1258, evidence that sheds interesting light on the harshness or otherwise of the bishops as landlords.

Overall, this is a high quality collection which contains several substantial and important pieces and, in essays by Britnell, Campbell and Vincent in particular, makes useful suggestions for future research on the pipe rolls. The contributors successfully achieve their aim of celebrating the pipe rolls by showing some of the unparalleled strengths of the source. Collectively, the last six essays in the book give at least implicit answers to some of the doubts and concerns about historians' reliance on the records of the Winchester estate voiced by Campbell in his contribution. Clearly, however, challenges remain in this area, which must in part be met through greater efforts to track down and exploit the more fragmentary but arguably more typical manorial sources of smaller lay estates alongside those of the great ecclesiastical lords.

An appendix provides a handlist of the Winchester pipe rolls in the Hampshire Record Office, and there is a consolidated bibliography and detailed index.

Notes

1. Christopher C. Thornton, 'The Determinants of Land Productivity on the Bishop of Winchester's Demesne of Rimpton, 1208 to 1403', in *Land, Labour and Livestock: Historical Studies in European Agricultural Productivity*, eds. B. M. S. Campbell and M. Overton, (Manchester, 1991).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Nicholas Vincent, *Peter des Roches: an Alien in English Politics* (Cambridge, 1996).[Back to \(2\)](#)

The editor has no comment to add to this perceptive review by Chris Briggs, who accurately represents the content and the historical relevance of this collection of essays.

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