

Monks and Markets: Durham Cathedral Priory 1460–1520

Review Number:

464

Publish date:

Friday, 1 July, 2005

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ISBN:

199253811X

Date of Publication:

2005

Price:

£50.00

Pages:

253pp.

Publisher:

Oxford University Press

Place of Publication:

Oxford

Reviewer:

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This book is based on a University of Durham doctoral study by Miranda Threlfall-Holmes using the extensive archives of Durham Cathedral Priory. It is the first full-length study of its kind that concentrates exclusively on the purchasing strategies and consumer behaviour of a monastic house in late medieval England, and whilst the study period is limited to 1460–1520, the analysis of the material attempts to be a comprehensive assessment of the cathedral priory's involvement with the market in the North East of England and beyond. This provides the author with an opportunity to make some wider generalisations about market behaviour and consumerism in late-medieval England.

The study is split into five main sections covering the monastic diet, factors influencing the priory's purchasing decisions, tenurial purchasing, market purchasing, and the suppliers of the priory. In addition there is an introductory chapter that attempts to contextualise the priory in its regional place as well as describing the accounting systems of the monks; both essential concomitants to any understanding of the priory's consumer behaviour. The author also uses this introduction to suggest that the 'institutions of the middle ages are generally seen as unreflective, unresponsive, and uninnovative' (p.1); an attitude which the author immediately sets about disproving by way of her own assessment and reference to several other recent studies such as Dyer, Harvey and Stone.⁽¹⁾ Like these studies, her assessment is based on an atheoretical approach, that analyses and interprets the surviving data using well-established economic methodologies without attempting to impose a theoretical narrative upon the consumerism and purchasing strategies of the priory.

The first main section examines the monastic diet at the priory and provides a useful comparison to the dietary practice of the monks at Westminster Abbey analysed by Barbara Harvey.⁽²⁾ There was a complex

accounting network within the priory that dealt with buying foodstuffs and then distributing it among the relevant departments. At Durham the main departments were those of bursar, cellarer and granator, and it is from the account rolls of these officials that the data is obtained to analyse the monks' diet. The most important item making up the monastic diet was grain. It is clear that at Durham, in line with the evidence from Westminster, most of the wheat purchased for the priory by the bursar was used for bread for the refectory and that barley was used almost entirely as malting for ale. Oats were a minority purchase and were used in the main for malting and for animal fodder. However, the account rolls do not allow for any further detailed analysis of the types of bread and ale being produced at the priory and the assessment is limited to tracking the annual trends of grain purchases and consumption. Over the study period, average grain purchases were made up of 1074 quarters of barley, 539.6 quarters of wheat, 440.3 quarters of oats and 64.6 quarters of pulses. The granators' accounts include a monthly record of grain usage for the three principle grains and therefore allow the author to gauge how much of these purchases were consumed by the monks and their domestic staff: on average these sums were 1049.4 quarters of barley, 458.5 quarters of wheat and 91.9 quarters of oats. The granators' accounts also allow for the tracking of wheat (and therefore bread) consumption over four-week periods in an average year. As would be expected, Lenten consumption was highest in order to compensate for the prohibition of other foodstuffs, and there was also a rise during the Christmas period. This fluctuation through the year is the first hard evidence in this study that monastic provision and consumption was responsive to circumstances and not controlled by conventional portions that varied little over the course of a year.

The prodigious amounts of meat consumed at Durham outstripped the amounts eaten at Westminster Abbey during this period. Despite the difficulties in comparing the data from the two houses it appears that the monks of Durham consumed almost four times as much meat as their southern compatriots and perhaps 50 per cent more fish. It is suggested that this discrepancy can be accounted for partly by farming practices in the two different regions and the availability of grain and meat. The monks at Westminster also seem to have consumed higher quantities of dairy produce than those at Durham, which may have closed the protein-gap between the two houses somewhat.

Further aspects of the monastic diet at Durham are considered: vegetables, honey, salt, spices, butter and wine, although the types of data rarely allow for the detailed analysis of distribution within the priory. However, one important trend that is noticed is the per capita increase in consumption over the study period, most especially in the consumption of meat and fish, shown in table 2.2 (p. 48). The consumption of nearly all fish and meat foodstuffs either doubled or trebled over the period.

The second chapter is a discussion of the factors influencing the priory's purchasing decisions. In terms of grain there was a relationship between price and purchase. The author uses the percentage of wheat from the weighted average modal price for all grains over the study period to demonstrate that there was a correlation between years of high prices and amounts purchased by the bursar, most clearly illustrated during the poor harvest years of 1480–82, when the proportions of wheat to other grains fell by between 10 and 20 per cent (p. 83).

Wine, however, seems to have been purchased regardless of the annual cost per tun. Years of high prices, such as 1475/6 and 1487/8, were not matched by decreased purchases, and the conclusion is reached that the monks were more willing to absorb the increased cost of wine than to adapt their consumption of wine.

Cloth purchases form an important element in the discussion of purchasing strategies at the priory. As would be expected, there was a distinction between cloth for utilitarian usage and cloth used for purposes such as vestments and liveries. One of the cheapest types of cloth purchased in large quantities was hardyn; the bursar bought an average of 148.6 ells per year. The author suggests that there is a clear correlation between the amount purchased and the price per ell. This is true for the period to 1494, but is certainly not true for the period 1495–1515 (as demonstrated by the graph in figure 3.9), eleven years of which (1495–1506) the price per yard [*sic*] was a standardised 2*d*, suggesting that the bursar had contracted an agreement with a seller for a term of years. Linen was used for a wide variety of purposes and represented the largest cloth purchase of the priory, averaging over 495 ells per annum, with purchases split between the three departments of sacrist,

bursar and chamberlain. Purchases of linen were made at different times of year at varying prices and the price data is thus represented in a scatter diagram (figure 3.11). But the scatter diagram is rendered relatively useless without some form of moving average to indicate trends. The conclusion is reached that there was no correlation between linen prices and amounts purchased, but no interpretation is offered as to why there were relatively wide divergent amounts of the cloth purchased year by year.

The discussion of higher quality cloth purchases for vestments and clothing is generally hampered by a lack of tabulated and/or graphed data. Indeed, the only graph in this section of the chapter is figure 3.13, which shows the prices paid by the bursar for livery cloth for the prior, obedientiaries, gentlemen, valets and grooms. This is a pity because as the author points out (p.131) there is a relative lack of evidence of cloth purchasing from other monastic establishments and the Durham data is an important benchmark for further study in this area. Unfortunately, this data is somewhat hidden within the discussion. This is partly due to the relative lack of price fluctuation during the period, and the subsequent flat-lining of price data (as exemplified in figure 3.13), but in terms of amounts of cloth purchased for clothing the monks and dependents the discussion would have benefited from more graphically represented data. However, the important point is made that the monks were willing and able to shop around for various types and qualities of livery cloth, and that they were adaptable consumers. Despite having a relatively inflexible annual purchasing regime, the obedientiaries making the purchases were able to be flexible in their purchasing strategies and to buy clothing at prices which reflected both the subtle distinctions between those who would be wearing the clothes and the desire to find the best price from a variety of producers.

Chapter 4 covers tenurial purchasing strategies at the priory. All monastic houses engaged in purchasing goods and services from their tenants, and Durham was no exception, with commodities being purchased from the occupiers of the priory's lands between the Rivers Tyne and Tees. Most important amongst these commodities was grain, the majority of which was purchased from priory tenants. A proportion of this grain was acquired in lieu of rent, and the purchases therefore appear in the bursar's rentals. Unfortunately, these only survive for a limited number of years and there is therefore a restricted amount of time-series analysis that can be carried out. But from the surviving rentals it seems, rather surprisingly, that there was limited customary arrangement made between the bursar and the tenants to ensure grain supply to the priory. The author's analysis of the grain rental payments from the priory's manor of Cowpen Bewley (pp. 142-4) demonstrates that the payments were not fixed in relation to price by the priory. The ratios of rents paid in grain, as opposed to cash, did not increase in years of high prices, as would be expected if the priory's strategy was to minimise expenditure. Rather, the varying amounts of rental grain paid by the tenants was not related to grain prices:

Such variation would suggest that the way in which rents were paid was a matter for the tenants to decide, and that their decision was based on their individual circumstances in each year rather than being a matter of policy. If this were indeed the case, it would imply that the relationship between the priory and its tenants was cordial and based on a high degree of mutual trust and understanding (p.144).

The fact that one of the most important commodities purchased by the priory from their tenants was not controlled by customary index-linking to prices is an important finding that has many implications for our view of late medieval monastic landholding, reinforcing the idea that tenants were better off under monastic landlords than under their less indulgent post-Dissolution secular counterparts.

The author is able to identify sources of tenurial grain supply to the priory's bursar and show that the grain was purchased from a relatively wide area that would have involved not inconsiderable transport costs (although the distribution map at figure 4.2 manages to leave off Durham). This is also the case with other agricultural foodstuffs, where the priory sourced livestock from diverse tenurial holdings and acquired fish from as many as 32 places. It is shown that there was also a high level of fish specialism by geographic locality, so that cod came primarily from the coastal areas and herring from the South Shields area.

Whilst a majority of agricultural foodstuffs were purchased using tenurial relationships, most imported and manufactured commodities were acquired through the market. Chapter 5 examines the priory's market purchasing strategies, which were carried out either directly by priory officials or through a network of local agents and credit arrangements. One of the most important aspects of market purchasing by the priory was the increasing proportion of goods that were bought from Newcastle merchants. The important point is made that almost all the priory's wine was purchased from Newcastle merchants by the beginning of the sixteenth century, and that this had been partly at the expense of York wine merchants. This is attributed in part to the recession in York during the fifteenth century, which is suggested as being a contributing factor to the bursar's department turning almost exclusively to merchants operating out of the growing port of Newcastle for its wine supply. Cloth purchases from the market also shifted away from York over the period, most especially to the West Riding and to Durham.

The chapter ends with a discussion of transport methods and costs for the purchased commodities. Once again this is an important subject and the Durham material collected here may act as a benchmark for further research into monastic transport arrangements. However, there are problems with the analysis of these types of costs, not least of which is the frequent failure of the accounts to differentiate between the various types of commodities being transported to the priory. But the author manages to extract data for wine and cloth transportation costs that can be usefully compared to studies by Dyer, Edwards and Hindle, Kowaleski and Masschaele.⁽³⁾

In chapter 6 the author emphasises the importance of the supplier-purchaser relationships to the priory, which was reliant on levels of trust between the monastic officials and their agents and suppliers. This is carried out most skilfully in the sections covering 'Commodity specialists and generalists' and a case study examining the suppliers of cloth. The former makes it clear that for most commodities the priory used a large number of suppliers, rarely forming long term relationships or contracts with individual merchants. To an extent this was also true of cloth suppliers, although merchants supplying the priory with the more expensive types of livery cloth were more likely to receive repeat contracts. Between 1464 and 1520 the priory used only seven suppliers of livery cloth, one of the most important of these being the York draper John Marshall who supplied all of the priory's livery cloth over a thirty year period to 1481.

The emphasis throughout this study is that Durham Cathedral Priory was a sophisticated consumer of goods, and that its officers were able to manipulate their purchases from tenants and the market for the benefit of the priory in a competitive environment. The author succeeds in demonstrating that the priory was an adaptable institution, able to adjust its purchasing strategies and consumption on both an annual basis and over the period of this study. Several important issues are demonstrated in the course of the analyses: the good relationship and high levels of trust both between the priory and its tenants and the priory and its market suppliers; the large number of suppliers used by the priory for most of its consumer goods; and the patterns of consumption within the priory that can be (in part) usefully compared to Harvey's study of Westminster Abbey and also create a blueprint for further research at other monastic houses.

The study is limited by its relatively short timespan, and no explanation is given as to why the analyses are not carried through to the Dissolution of the priory in 1539, although this is most likely due to the limitations of account roll survival. This type of economic study would also have benefited from more graphical representation of the data, as some of the more detailed statistical arguments become lost in the textual discussion. However, this detracts little from what is an important study that contains a detailed and authoritative exploration of the consumption and purchasing patterns of a major medieval monastic

institution. It will provide a welcome addition to the relatively small but rapidly growing corpus of work assessing medieval markets and consumption, as well as supplementing studies of the internal administration of religious houses in the later Middle Ages.

Notes

1. C. Dyer, 'The consumer and the market in the later Middle Ages', *Economic History Review*, 42 (1989), 305–27; B. Harvey, 'The aristocratic consumer in England in the long thirteenth century', in ed. M. Prestwich, R. H. Britnell and R. Frame, *Thirteenth Century England 6: Proceedings of the Durham Conference* (Woodbridge, 1997), pp. 19–37; D. Stone, 'Medieval farm management and technological mentalities: Hinderclay before the Black Death', *Economic History Review*, 54 (2001), 612–38.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. B. Harvey, *Living and Dying in England 1100–1540: The Monastic Experience* (Oxford, 1993), pp. 34–71.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. C. Dyer, *Everyday Life in Medieval England* (1994), p. 262; J. F. Edwards and B. P. Hindle, 'The transportation system of medieval England and Wales', *Journal of Historical Geography*, 17 (1991), 123–34; M. Kowaleski, *Local Markets and Regional Trade in Medieval Exeter* (Cambridge, 1995), p. 268; J. Masschaele, 'Transport costs in medieval England', *Economic History Review*, 46 (1993), 266–79.[Back to \(3\)](#)

The author is currently on maternity leave and thus unable to respond to this review, but is happy to accept it.

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