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978-0-521-07244-1 - Lords and Peasants in a Changing Society: The Estates of the Bishopric of Worcester, 680-1540

Christopher Dyer

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

This study of a large medieval ecclesiastical estate is written in the tradition of a series of English estate histories of the last fifty years. An estate is a useful unit for investigating medieval social and economic development because it encompassed a wide section of society, from its magnate owners, through the knights and gentry who held lands from it or acted as administrators, to the large numbers of peasants and townsmen who were its tenants. The documents are mainly gathered together conveniently in one archive and they are sufficiently limited in quantity to enable a long time-span to be covered. The manors of the bishops of Worcester lay in the west midlands, and the estates of this region have not been the subject of as many full studies as those in some other parts of England.¹ The bishopric estate was one of the largest in the region with lands scattered over three counties and can be regarded in some sense as representative, as the area was dominated by great ecclesiastics.

The estates of the bishops of Worcester have long been familiar to historians of the early middle ages as exemplifying elements of continuity in English society.² This study concentrates on change. Although the west midland region was in many ways a conservative one, it experienced much the same social and economic developments as the rest of England, indeed, of western Europe as a whole. In the early middle ages a feudal and seignorial régime was established; a period of expansion up to the early fourteenth century was succeeded by two centuries of contrary tendencies, combining decay and new growth. How do we explain these changes? Historians differ in stressing a variety of factors that determined the long-term trends in the economy – demography, developments in the market, social relationships and political and ideological

¹ The most notable recent estate study with a full account of west-midland manors is B. Harvey, *Westminster Abbey and its Estates in the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1977), which appeared too late for its findings to influence this book. There are many parallels between developments on the Westminster Abbey and Worcester bishopric manors, for example in forms of tenure after 1350.

² See F. W. Maitland, *Domesday Book and Beyond* (Cambridge, 1897), where much of the second essay is based on Worcester material; H. P. R. Finberg, 'Roman and Saxon Withington', in *Lucerna* (London, 1964), pp. 21–65.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

2 Introduction

movements. This study is concerned with a long span of time, from the foundation of the see of Worcester in 680 to the Reformation, because its aim is to define the long-term changes and, if possible, to offer explanations. The survival of documents had led to some concentration on the later middle ages, when the principal problem is seen as one of the causes of the evolution of a traditional and restricted rural society towards the emergence of agrarian capitalism.

The focus on the problem of economic change means that this study will be different from other estate histories. The peasantry receive a good deal of attention, and the manorial documents are used to reveal as much as possible about their own lives, not just as dependents and rent-payers of the estate. This choice is determined by the belief that the peasantry, as the productive base of medieval society, must have made a major contribution to its development. The bishops appear in their social rôle, as nobles and landlords. This omits other, very important, aspects of their lives; the medieval bishops included among their number a few saints, many active ecclesiastics and numerous politicians and administrators. These activities are often irrelevant to our immediate theme so they will only be mentioned when they seem to have affected the running of the estate. The bishops' lordship extended over many feudal tenants, magnates, knights and gentry. Ideally, a complete estate history should consider their economic activities and social functions in detail but the need to limit the size of this study means that they have, regretfully, been treated in a cursory fashion. Nor has it been feasible to give the urban element of the estate the attention that it deserves.

The archives of the bishops have survived in considerable quantity, but their distribution over time is very uneven. The estate is one of the best documented in England for the Anglo-Saxon period. This is because of the survival of one volume, British Library, Cotton MS. Tiberius A xiii, commonly known as Hemming's Cartulary. This consists of two cartularies, one of the early eleventh century, the other compiled by the monk Hemming in c.1100.³ Fragments of another, earlier, cartulary are known, and some individual charters.

³ N. R. Ker, 'Hemming's Cartulary', in *Studies in Medieval History presented to F. M. Powicke* (Oxford, 1948), pp. 49–75.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction 3

Originally many more were kept at Worcester, but all that remains in some cases are the notes made by antiquarians in the seventeenth century. Many of the charters were of course altered or even fabricated in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, but the charters of the early eleventh-century cartulary are remarkably free from tampering. Invaluable help in assessing the authenticity of the texts is provided by the calendars of Finberg and Hart and in the handlist compiled by P. H. Sawyer.⁴ Unfortunately Tiberius A xiii has lacked an editor since Hearne in the early eighteenth century and use has been made of the more reliable editions of Birch and Robertson. The charter evidence has been supplemented both by archaeological evidence and by reference to Domesday, whose survey of the Worcester estate is particularly informative. In spite of the relative abundance of materials, the results will be inevitably skeletal. We can only cast our eyes enviously across the Channel and regret that no ninth-century bishop compiled a *polyptique* which would reveal the social structure of the estate.

In comparison with other estates, the documents of the period from 1086 to the fourteenth century are patchily preserved. The main source must be the surveys of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries included in the *Red Book of Worcester*. The *Red Book* itself is lost, but an eighteenth-century transcription has been edited by Miss M. Hollings. A near-contemporary manuscript copy of a late thirteenth-century survey of the manor of Bredon suggests that not too much has been distorted by the three transcriptions to which the documents have been subjected.⁵ It would be churlish to criticize the service that Miss Hollings performed for medieval history, but it must be pointed out that the edition has some imperfections. To take an important example, the printed texts carry the dates assigned to them by Dr Thomas, the eighteenth-century copyist, with some revision by Miss Hollings, but internal evidence shows that the twelfth-century surveys cannot be as late as 1182 but must have been compiled at least a decade earlier. They have been dated in this study to c.1170. Similarly there seems to be no sound basis for regarding the *Alia Extenta* as belonging to 1282 and c.1290 has

⁴ H. P. R. Finberg, *The Early Charters of the West Midlands* (Leicester, 1961); C. R. Hart, *The Early Charters of Northern England and the North Midlands* (Leicester, 1975); P. H. Sawyer, *Anglo-Saxon Charters* (London, 1968).

⁵ WCRO ref. 009:1 BA 2636/191 92625 1/12.

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Christopher Dyer

Excerpt

[More information](#)

4 Introduction

been preferred as a date.⁶ The surveys contain a mass of information about demesnes, tenants, holdings, rents and services. Their chief drawback is that they provide a static picture and present a series of ideal types, somewhat removed from social reality. Their value would be greatly enhanced by a series of accounts and court rolls. All that survives is a stray membrane, containing two manorial accounts for 1246–7, revealing tantalizingly that the estates had an elaborate system of enrolled accounts, comparable with those of the bishopric of Winchester.

Changes in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries are indicated to some extent by the bishopric cartulary, the *White Book*. Like its predecessor, it contains two compilations, one of c.1300 and the other of the fifteenth century. The second book includes mostly charters granted before 1350. The cartularies consist mainly of grants made in favour of the bishops, but grants made by the bishops can be found in a variety of sources, such as marginal notes in the *Red Book*, the *Liber Albus* of the Cathedral Priory (because the prior and convent sometimes confirmed episcopal grants), and the chancery enrolments of the central government, after the land legislation of the late thirteenth century. Government documents are particularly useful also as they include accounts, in the pipe rolls and elsewhere, of the revenues collected from the bishopric during vacancies, as well as information of all kinds concerning the relationship between the bishopric and the crown, for example when enquiries were made into the judicial franchises. The series of bishops' registers, which begins with that of Godfrey Giffard (1268–1302), preserves the records of ecclesiastical administration, but a surprisingly large amount of material connected with the estates was also included.

⁶ Dr Thomas thought that, as the twelfth-century surveys referred to Bishop Roger (1164–79), but not to Bishop Baldwin, they must belong to the time of Baldwin. However, there are relatively few references to Roger, and many to his predecessors, suggesting that the surveys were made in the early years of his episcopate. In the survey of Henbury there is a reference to Robert fitz Harding (*RBW*, iv, p. 406), who died in 1171 (see I. J. Sanders, *English Baronies* (Oxford, 1960), p. 13). It is possible that the surveys resulted from the enquiries into fees of 1166. They differ in character: notably the Blockley and Withington surveys depart from the format of those of the other manors, so that the twelfth-century surveys may not all have been made at the same time. The *Alia Extenta* must have been compiled after 1283, when Wast Hills was acquired. There are references in the *Alia Extenta* to Hugh de Poher and John in the Hale, who are mentioned as recently dead in the 1299 surveys (*RBW*, iii, pp. 244, 258; iv, pp. 348, 349).

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Christopher Dyer

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction* 5

A more human interest to supplement these administrative documents is provided by narrative sources, notably the 'Life of Wulfstan', a reworking by William of Malmesbury of an earlier text, and the 'Annals' of the Cathedral Priory.

From the late fourteenth century the evidence becomes abundant. For reasons which remain mysterious, the main series of estate documents begins in about 1370. Many of these were retained at Worcester until the nineteenth century, when they were taken over, with the estates themselves, by the Church Commissioners, only to be transferred to the Worcester County Records Office in 1959. Many documents were removed from the archive before the nineteenth century, sometimes because the manors themselves fell into lay hands, but often in unknown circumstances. Some of the dispersed documents are now available in record offices and muniment rooms, but others may still be in private hands. The documents consist of the usual types of manorial records, rentals, account rolls and court rolls. There are also quantities of central estate documents: receivers' accounts, valors and arrears rolls, mainly from the mid-fifteenth century. Unusual documents include the explanations offered by royal keepers for their inability to collect rents in the vacancy of 1433–5; a book of rentals, charters and estate accounts, including a complete set of accounts for 1419–20; a survey of rents, made with an eye to improvement in *c.* 1450; an early sixteenth-century lease book; 'census' material on servile families from 1476 to the 1530s; and court books containing the scrawled notes made in courts in the 1530s, including verbatim reports of suitors' comments.

These sources were designed to enable the contemporary administrators to assess developments in the lord's income, and we can use them with assurance in order to investigate the management of demesnes, leasing, developments in rent income, trends in manorial profits and the like. The main problem in their use is understanding the administrative processes that created them – otherwise they may be dismissed as mere fictions, recording out-of-date rents and optimistic valuations. They are also very incomplete, with runs of manorial accounts before 1500, for example, for only a half of the manors of the estate. The court rolls are also defective, in that they do not usually survive in unbroken series, which is necessary for the thorough investigation of the tenants.

In order to examine the peasantry, the use of manorial records,

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Christopher Dyer

Excerpt

[More information](#)

6 *Introduction*

particularly court rolls, is essential but these were intended mainly to record those aspects of the peasants' activities that affected the lord or the village community. Many important aspects of peasant life, such as transfers of land or breaches of village by-laws, will appear in the court records, but others, such as the employment of servants or subletting of land, can be glimpsed only fleetingly. It is still necessary, in spite of the bulk of manorial material, to supplement it where possible with other sources. Some of these, such as the bishops' registers, vacancy documents or chancery enrolments, have already been mentioned. The main additional sources used here are the wills of tenants, taxation records, especially of the 1524 subsidy, an ecclesiastical court book relating to Hartlebury, Star Chamber documents and the archaeological evidence of deserted villages. These can often be linked with the manorial records so that a fuller picture emerges of individuals of all kinds, in particular the peasantry, who are the focus of the latter part of this study.

Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

I. *Origins, 680–1086*

The episcopal see of Worcester was founded in 680 as part of the re-organization of the English church by Archbishop Theodore. The new bishopric was designed to serve the west-midland kingdom of the Hwicce.

Who were the Hwicce? In the Tribal Hidage, a list of Anglo-Saxon peoples and kingdoms emanating from Mercia, perhaps in the late seventh century, they are assessed at 7,000 hides. This puts them in the middle rank of the groups included, comparable with the East or South Saxons, and exceeded only by such important kingdoms as Mercia, East Anglia, Kent and Wessex.¹ If the Hwicce formed a cultural or ethnic group, we might expect to see evidence for this in the grave goods from the pagan Anglo-Saxon cemeteries of the west midlands; however, they seem to be culturally diverse. Also the cemeteries are found in the east of the region, in the Avon valley and Cotswolds, so there is a lack of archaeological evidence for a Germanic population in the Severn valley and the western Cotswolds. It is possible that the Hwicce were a political entity created by the kings of Mercia, who installed a ruling dynasty over a mixed British and Anglo-Saxon population. The names of the ruling house of the Hwicce have been used to suggest that they came from a branch of a Northumbrian royal family.²

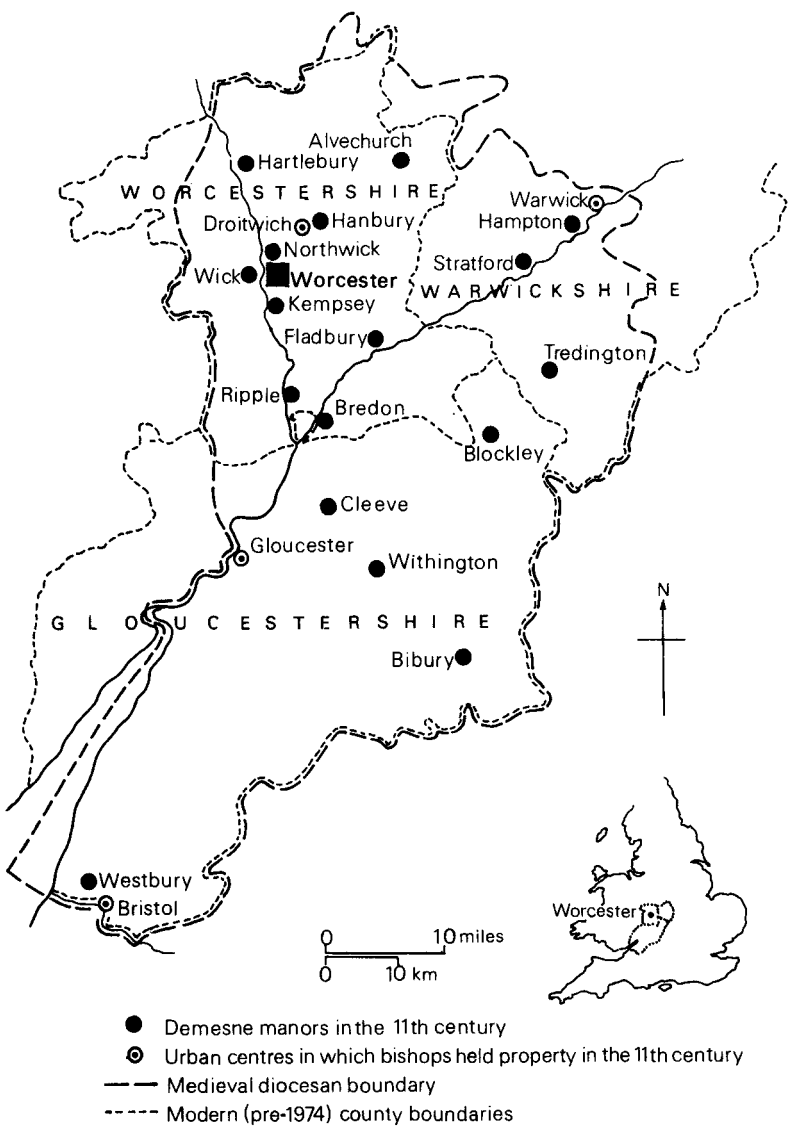
The bishops of the Hwicce became the bishops of Worcester, and it is assumed that the medieval boundaries of the diocese preserved those of the original Hwiccean territory. This consisted of the medieval counties of Gloucester and Worcester (omitting their western extremities) and southern and western Warwickshire (see Map 1).

The lands of the bishops mostly lay within the diocese. For much

¹ W. Davies and H. Vierck, 'The Contexts of the Tribal Hidage: Social Aggregates and Settlement Patterns', *Frühmittelalterliche Studien*, viii (1974), pp. 224–41.

² A. H. Smith, 'The Hwicce', in J. B. Bessinger and R. P. Creed (eds.), *Franciplegius: Medieval and Linguistic Studies in Honour of Francis Peabody Magoun Jr.* (London, 1965), pp. 56–65; M. Wilson, 'The Hwicce', *Trans. Worcs. Arch. Soc.*, 3rd ser., ii (1968–9), pp. 21–5; W. Stubbs, 'The Cathedral, Diocese, and Monasteries of Worcester in the Eighth Century', *Arch. Journ.*, xix (1862), pp. 236–41; H. P. R. Finberg, *The Early Charters of the West Midlands* (Leicester, 1961), pp. 167–80; A. Meaney, *A Gazetteer of Early Anglo-Saxon Burial Sites* (London, 1964), pp. 90–3, 257–63, 280–1.

8 LORDS AND PEASANTS



1 The diocese of Worcester, with the main bishopric manors

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-07244-1 - Lords and Peasants in a Changing Society: The Estates of the Bishopric of Worcester, 680-1540

Christopher Dyer

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Origins, 680–1086* 9

of the Anglo-Saxon period the estates should be regarded as belonging to the 'church of Worcester' (the cathedral monastery with its own endowment was created only at the end of the period). When the 'lands of the church of Worcester' were surveyed in Domesday Book in 1086 they were very extensive. The church was overlord of more than a quarter of the land in Worcestershire and substantial areas of Gloucestershire and Warwickshire. Corbett's calculations show that the Worcester estate was exceeded in value by only about thirty others recorded in Domesday, and it ranked sixth among the bishoprics. Because of its great wealth Worcester was held in plurality with the under-endowed archdiocese of York by a number of late Saxon bishops, notably the leading monastic reformer, Oswald, who was bishop of Worcester from 961 to 992 and held York from 972, and Wulfstan I, sermon writer and statesman, who simultaneously held York and Worcester in the years 1003–16.³

The estate was scattered over a variety of terrains within the diocese – the heavy soils of the north Worcestershire plateau, the limestone uplands of the Cotswolds, and the light soils of the valleys of the Severn, Avon and their tributaries. Most of the properties lay within thirty miles of Worcester; the most remote were at the confluence of the Bristol Avon and the Severn estuary, fifty miles from the cathedral city (see Map 2).

How and why were the lands of the estate acquired? How did its shape change during the four centuries after the foundation of the see? What was the nature of the estate's economy?

In attempting to answer these questions evidence from all of the lands associated with the pre-Conquest church of Worcester will be used, but attention will be concentrated on the seventeen demesne manors that formed the separate bishopric estate in the late eleventh century (see Map 1).

THE ACQUISITION OF LANDS, 680–900

It is impossible to compile a complete list of the various grants to the church in chronological order in spite of the survival of large numbers of charter texts. No records exist of the grants of some properties–

³ *DB*, fos. 164–5, 172–4, 238; W. J. Corbett, 'England, 1087–1154', in *Cambridge Medieval History* (Cambridge, 1926), v, pp. 510–11; for Wulfstan, see D. Whitelock, 'Archbishop Wulfstan, Homilist and Statesman', in R. W. Southern (ed.), *Essays in Medieval History* (London, 1968), pp. 42–60.

