

# MONKS AND MARKETS

DURHAM CATHEDRAL PRIORY 1460-1520

Miranda Threlfall-Holmes



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MIRANDA THRELFALL-HOLMES

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# Introduction and Context

## INTRODUCTION

There is a general view that the middle ages were tradition-bound. Only with the advent of the early modern period, runs the conventional wisdom, did individuals and institutions begin to exercise choice, experiment with new ways of doing things, look around them at their social, economic, and political contexts and invent relevant and intelligent responses. The institutions of the middle ages are generally seen as unreflective, unresponsive, and uninnovative. This is of course a caricature of an attitude, but it is a recognizable caricature of a very common attitude. And when it comes to the church, and especially to monasteries, this point of view is even more firmly and widely held. Monks are seen as being, metaphorically as well as literally, creatures of habit. So if we were to find that a large and ancient monastery was in fact very conscious of both the strengths and weaknesses of its traditions, was prepared to undertake drastic experiments to address the weaknesses, and was exercising rational choice in response to a wide range of changing circumstances, this would be of decisive relevance to our understanding of the medieval mindset and in particular for our understanding of how medieval institutions operated and the range of strategies and options available to them.

This was the case at Durham Cathedral Priory in the later fifteenth century. The findings presented in this study therefore force us to reconsider any remaining prejudice against medieval institutions, and monasteries in particular, as hidebound by tradition and unable to adapt to rapidly changing circumstances. Interestingly, the few recent studies that have explicitly considered questions surrounding marketing and purchasing strategies have concluded that rational choice and considered strategic thinking lay behind much of what they have found. For example, Stone has come to this conclusion in his recent study of medieval farm management and technological

mentalities, whilst Dyer found that clergy in the West Midlands were ‘discriminating and sophisticated purchasers’.<sup>1</sup> Durham’s outstanding archive has allowed an unprecedented level of detail about the purchasing strategies of one of England’s foremost monasteries to be uncovered, and it can be seen that the monks were indeed reflective, responsive, and innovative when such qualities were called for. If this is true of a large Benedictine monastery, it is likely to be true to at least the same extent for the vast majority of other households and institutions in medieval England for which comparable evidence does not exist.

Furthermore, this material allows us a unique insight into the nature of medieval consumer behaviour, which throughout history, and particularly from before the early modern period, remains a relatively neglected subject. This neglect seems to have resulted from a combination of deficiencies in the available evidence, together with a lingering sense that the medieval buyer was somehow an inhabitant of a pre-commercial ‘golden age’, free from the essentially modern taint of consumerism. The economic history of the middle ages has tended to concentrate on international trade, on the big merchant companies, and on estates and farming. That is to say, the main focus of medieval economic history has been on the suppliers of goods. Yet discussions of the development of markets, cash crops, transport, protectionist policies, and so on all presuppose the existence of a large cohort of consumers, ready and apparently eager to buy the goods discussed once they reach the port, market, or fair. Undoubtedly, the consumer was an important consideration in the supply chain, then as now. Whilst medieval and modern consumerism are of course very different phenomena, nevertheless the importance placed on the consumer in modern economic theory should alert us to the relative neglect of the procuring of goods and services in medieval studies. As Dyer has argued, ‘Consumption deserves more research, and a long-term aim must be to identify the buyers, to see what they bought, and from whom, and how purchases were organised.’<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> D. Stone, ‘Medieval Farm Management and Technological Mentalities: Hinderclay before the Black Death’, *Economic History Review*, 54 (2001), 629–30, 634; C. Dyer, ‘Trade, Towns and the Church: Ecclesiastical Consumers and the Urban Economy of the West Midlands, 1290–1540’, in T. Slater and G. Rosser (eds.), *The Church in the Medieval Town* (Aldershot, 1998), 71.

<sup>2</sup> C. Dyer, *Everyday Life in Medieval England* (London, 1996), 257.

The Durham archives provide a rare and valuable glimpse into the mind of a major medieval consumer. The survival of substantial series of detailed purchasing accounts, together with a supporting cast of letters, rent-books, and other material, has allowed an analysis of patterns of consumer behaviour over a period of some sixty years. This reveals how the monks reacted to changing circumstances such as price movements, harvest failures, and structural changes in the nature and locations of industries in both the short and the long term. Dramatic differences are also revealed between the strategies used in the selection and purchasing of different commodities, so that in some cases we can see diametrically opposed reactions to the same changed variable, such as a price increase, in two different categories of goods. It becomes clear that issues of choice, the availability of competition, taste, fashion, and personal preference must all be factored in with the more commonly discussed concepts of need and tradition in seeking to understand the habits and whims, strategies and choices of the medieval consumer. Moreover, such considerations applied not only to what goods were purchased, but also to a whole range of supplementary questions such as how those goods were bought, and from whom, when, where, in what quantities, and how and when they were paid for.

These insights bring a fuller coloration to the picture of the economic history of medieval England that we have at present. The shape of England's international trade has been discussed by many historians, using records of imports and exports and of the big merchant companies.<sup>3</sup> Several of the latter have attracted analysis in their own right, and certain particularly well-documented industries have also been discussed in some detail.<sup>4</sup> Attempts to dig beneath the surface of the records that we have of economic activity of late medieval England and examine in detail the economic structures, trading networks, and consumption patterns of a variety of levels in society, however, are plagued by the vagaries of the surviving evidence. Whilst a great deal of relevant material has indeed survived, much of

<sup>3</sup> e.g. W. R. Childs, *Anglo-Castilian Trade in the Later Middle Ages* (Manchester, 1978), and E. Ashtor, *Levant Trade in the Later Middle Ages* (Princeton, 1983).

<sup>4</sup> Notable studies of merchant companies include E. M. Carus-Wilson, *Medieval Merchant Venturers* (London, 1954); P. Nightingale, *A Medieval Mercantile Community* (London, 1995); and S. L. Thrupp, *The Merchant Class of Medieval London (1300-1500)* (Chicago, 1948). Studies of particular industries include M. K. James, *Studies in the Medieval Wine Trade*, ed. E. M. Veale (Oxford, 1971), and A. R. Bridbury, *Medieval English Clothmaking: An Economic Survey* (London, 1982).

it is inevitably fragmentary or consists of single examples.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, much valuable work has been done. For example, Dyer has been able to shed a great deal of light on standards of living at all levels of society, whilst the household accounts of noble households have been discussed by Woolgar.<sup>6</sup> For monastic households, Harvey's study of Westminster provides an unusually detailed discussion of many facets of late medieval life (and indeed death).<sup>7</sup> The provisioning of Cambridge and its colleges has been studied by Cobban and Lee, whilst the costs associated with medieval transactions have been analysed by North and by Kowaleski.<sup>8</sup>

In addition, the ways in which medieval consumers used markets have been discussed in some depth by both Harvey and Dyer. Barbara Harvey's work on the purchasing of magnate households in the long thirteenth century has demonstrated the importance of magnate demand in the economy as a whole, and has exposed the essentially sporadic and ambivalent relationship which existed at that time between such major consumers and the market.<sup>9</sup> Christopher Dyer

<sup>5</sup> The most comprehensive list of surviving medieval household records is to be found as Appendix A to K. Mertens, *The English Noble Household, 1250–1600* (Oxford, 1988).

<sup>6</sup> The standard text on medieval standards of living remains C. Dyer, *Standards of Living in the Later Middle Ages: Social Change in England c.1200–1520* (Cambridge, 1989). Detailed studies on particular aspects of consumption include C. Dyer, 'The Consumption of Fresh-water Fish in Medieval England', in M. Aston (ed.), *Medieval Fish, Fisheries and Fishponds in England* (British Archaeological Reports, British Ser., 182; Oxford, 1988), and C. Dyer, 'English Diet in the Later Middle Ages', in T. H. Aston et al. (eds.), *Social Relations and Ideas* (Cambridge, 1983). Woolgar's work on great households is available in C. M. Woolgar (ed.), *Household Accounts from Medieval England*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1992, 1993), and C. M. Woolgar, *The Great Household in Late Medieval England* (New Haven, 1999).

<sup>7</sup> B. Harvey, *Living and Dying in England 1100–1540: The Monastic Experience* (Oxford, 1993); B. Harvey, *Westminster Abbey and its Estates in the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1977); B. Harvey and J. Oeppen, 'Patterns of Morbidity in Late Medieval England: A Sample from Westminster Abbey', *Economic History Review*, 54 (2001); B. Harvey, *The Obedientaries of Westminster Abbey and their Financial Records, c.1275–1540* (Woodbridge, 2002).

<sup>8</sup> A. B. Cobban, *The King's Hall within the University of Cambridge in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1969), 112–47; J. S. Lee, 'Feeding the Colleges: Cambridge's Food and Fuel Supplies, 1450–1560', *Economic History Review*, 56 (2003); D. C. North, 'Transaction Costs in History', *Journal of European Economic History*, 14 (1985); M. Kowaleski, *Local Markets and Regional Trade in Medieval Exeter* (Cambridge, 1995), 179–221.

<sup>9</sup> B. Harvey, 'The Aristocratic Consumer in England in the Long Thirteenth Century', in M. Prestwich et al. (eds.), *Thirteenth Century England 6: Proceedings of the Durham Conference* (Woodbridge, 1997).

has extensively considered the location of purchases, looking at markets and extra-market trading.<sup>10</sup> In particular, he has found that much trade took place outside official markets, and in common with Harvey concludes that small towns did not necessarily benefit a great deal from the presence of a large household nearby. Of particular relevance to this study and to its wider implications is Dyer's conclusion that there was little distinction in geographical purchasing patterns between lay and clerical households, despite what one might expect given the greater stability and the collective nature of religious houses.<sup>11</sup>

In this context, the Durham records provide a uniquely rich resource, allowing an analysis of a large consumer's market participation over a long period, and so enabling a slice or snapshot of their economic activities at local, regional, and national levels to be seen. By using a substantial series of accounts from a major consumer, rather than the records of a single town, village, estate, or farm, it is possible to see how a range of such places fit into the provisioning and marketing strategies used by a substantial local institution and so to establish a sense of their relative importance and individual roles. Whilst this is at heart a detailed study of a single consumer, it seems probable that what we find here will have much wider implications for our understanding of medieval consumers and the medieval market.

Above all, the findings presented here enable us to gain some insight into the thought processes behind a major medieval consumer's purchasing and consumption. The strength of the Durham evidence is that its scale and breadth enables us to see beyond the bare facts of what was purchased, where, for what price, and from whom, and to begin to understand the purchasing strategies employed by the monks. We can begin to comprehend not just what they bought and from whom they bought it, but why they made those decisions. In doing so, it will become clear that the caricature of a tradition-bound, unreflective medieval monk with which we began is very far from the truth.

<sup>10</sup> C. Dyer, 'The Consumer and the Market in the Later Middle Ages', *Economic History Review*, 2nd ser., 42 (1989); C. Dyer, 'Trade, Towns and the Church'.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* 67–8.



## THE REGIONAL CONTEXT

The pattern of trade in England in the fifteenth century has been characterized as one of depression for the first quarter of the century, followed by recovery in the second quarter, depression again in the third quarter and finally prosperity for the last twenty-five years of the century.<sup>12</sup> The classic picture portrayed has been one of a general atmosphere of decline or at best of stagnation, and particularly of an urban crisis affecting the majority of England's towns.<sup>13</sup> But other historians have seen growth and entrepreneurial development, and have pointed to the flourishing of certain towns as an exception to, or even a refutation of, the received wisdom.<sup>14</sup> Overall, the emerging consensus is that the fifteenth century saw both growth and decline side by side in different areas, with neighbouring towns often experiencing very different turns of fortune.

The north-east region does not appear to have provided an exception to the general pattern of the economy in this period. Pollard has argued that 'like the rest of Europe, north-east England passed through an extended economic crisis in the later middle ages. The major factors were climatic deterioration, war damage and above all, population decline.' He concluded that 'the fifteenth century after 1440 was a bleak era in the economic history of the north-east'.<sup>15</sup> However, the variety of fortunes found across the country seems to have been mirrored in the region. Dobson was unpersuaded by arguments that the north-east suffered badly in this period, concluding that 'the prevailing impression left by the sources we have is of severe adversity successfully faced and eventually surmounted' by all classes.<sup>16</sup> Newcastle, along with other towns such as Chester, Exeter, and Colchester, was notably exempted by Pythian-Adams from the

<sup>12</sup> H. L. Gray, 'English Foreign Trade from 1446 to 1482', in E. Power and M. M. Postan (eds.), *Studies in English Trade in the Fifteenth Century* (London, 1966), 1.

<sup>13</sup> See e.g. R. B. Dobson, 'Urban Decline in Medieval England', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th ser., 27 (1977), and C. Pythian-Adams, *Desolation of a City: Coventry and the Urban Crisis of the Late Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1979).

<sup>14</sup> A. Dyer, 'Urban Decline in England, 1377-1525', in T. R. Slater (ed.), *Towns in Decline, A.D. 100-1600* (Aldershot, 2000). Pythian-Adams, *Desolation*, 19, notes that towns such as Exeter, Newcastle, and Reading may be considered 'the "success" stories', exceptions from the general picture of decay.

<sup>15</sup> A. J. Pollard, *North-Eastern England during the Wars of the Roses* (Oxford, 1990), 43, 78.

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

general picture of decline which he saw as prevalent from the early sixteenth century; he argued that towns like these, 'ports or centres on navigable rivers . . . acted as outlets for their neighbouring industrial hinterlands' and as such 'survived reasonably unscathed'.<sup>17</sup> However, the lack of satisfactory evidence which is endemic to medieval studies is particularly acute for the north-east. The evidence available for the history of medieval Newcastle in particular is notoriously limited, with only a handful of municipal records having survived from before the sixteenth century, forcing Dobson to conclude that it was almost pointless to ask how Newcastle fared in this period, since virtually no evidence could be brought to bear on the issue.<sup>18</sup>

However, the expenditure recorded in the Durham Cathedral Priory obedientary accounts can shine a ray of light on patterns of trade in the north-east and on the economy of Newcastle in the late medieval period. Using the accounts of a substantial local consumer to investigate the extent and structure of trade in the Durham and Newcastle area provides a fresh perspective on these issues. The wide range of purchasing information from substantial series of years which is detailed in the Durham obedientary accounts can provide valuable insights into the range and extent of trading activity both in Newcastle itself and throughout the north-east region. As will be seen in the following study, the evidence from Durham Cathedral Priory indicates Newcastle's considerable importance as a centre for trade and distribution in the late medieval period, and moreover that this importance increased over the course of the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries.

<sup>17</sup> C. Pythian-Adams and P. Slack, *The Traditional Community under Stress* (Milton Keynes, 1977), 16.

<sup>18</sup> Dobson, 'Urban Decline', 19. Despite this limitation, a substantial body of work has been built up by the resourceful use of the documentary evidence that does remain, such as customs accounts. See e.g. J. F. Wade, 'The Overseas Trade of Newcastle upon Tyne in the Late Middle Ages', *Northern History*, 30 (1994); J. F. Wade (ed.), *The Customs Accounts of Newcastle-upon-Tyne 1454-1500* (Surtees Society, 202, 1995); C. M. Fraser (ed.), *Accounts of the Chamberlains of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 1508-1511* (The Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Record Ser., 3, 1987). Rents from Newcastle properties belonging to University College, Oxford have also been analysed, in A. F. Butcher, 'Rent, Population and Economic Change in Late-Medieval Newcastle', *Northern History*, 14 (1978). Work on the earlier middle ages has included J. Conway Davies, 'Shipping and Trade in Newcastle upon Tyne, 1294-1296', *Archaeologia Aeliana*, 4th ser., 31 (1953); J. Conway Davies, 'The Wool Customs Accounts of Newcastle upon Tyne for the reign of Edward I', *Archaeologia Aeliana*, 4th ser., 32 (1954); and C. M. Fraser, 'The Pattern of Trade in the North-East of England, 1265-1350', *Northern History*, 4 (1969).

The agricultural and industrial profile of the region around Durham was a mixed one. On a macro level, the agricultural geography of Britain has been characterized as being divided into two broad areas, with pastoral country predominating to the north and west and arable country to the south and east of a line running from Teesmouth or Tynemouth in the north-east to Weymouth or Exmouth in the south-west.<sup>19</sup> In other words, this conventional dividing line bisected the north-east region. In keeping with this, a great variety of husbandry and cultivation can be seen to have been in operation across the region.<sup>20</sup> In the area centred on Durham itself, pasture tended to be concentrated on the moor land to the west, and arable farming on the eastern lowlands, although there were also extensive moor lands to the east.<sup>21</sup> The priory purchased large quantities of cattle, sheep, pigs, many types of poultry, wheat, barley, oats, corn, and freshwater and seawater fish from the region, as well as smaller amounts of other foodstuffs such as honey.<sup>22</sup>

In addition to this wide range of farming activity, the region also possessed notable mineral resources, including iron, lead, and coal, all of which were commercially exploited to some degree throughout the medieval period.<sup>23</sup> Lead mining was only sporadic for much of the fifteenth century, prices having collapsed around 1406, but there is evidence of a significant revival in the industry in 1471/2, and by the 1490s the export market in Yorkshire lead was so profitable that the York merchants attempted to secure a monopoly on its export through Hull.<sup>24</sup> Iron manufacture was concentrated in the area between the river Wear and the river Derwent. This region was exceptionally well endowed with the natural resources for iron-making, being provided with iron ore of lower than average phosphorus content, plentiful fuel in the form of both wood and coal, and

<sup>19</sup> J. Thirsk, *England's Agricultural Regions and Agrarian History, 1500-1750* (London, 1987), 12.

<sup>20</sup> Pollard, *North-Eastern England*, 30-8.

<sup>21</sup> The survival well into the later medieval period of a great deal of wasteland in the north-east is one of the key discoveries of H. M. Dunsford and S. J. Harris, 'Colonization of the Wasteland in County Durham, 1100-1400', *Economic History Review*, 56 (2003).

<sup>22</sup> See Ch. 2 (for details of foodstuffs purchased by the priory) and 5 (for details on the locations from which such goods were purchased).

<sup>23</sup> Pollard, *North-Eastern England*, 38; M. Threlfall-Holmes, 'Late Medieval Iron Production and Trade in the North East', *Archaeologia Aeliana*, 5th ser., 27 (1999).

<sup>24</sup> Pollard, *North-Eastern England*, 74-5.

water power.<sup>25</sup> The total output of this iron industry has been estimated at around 100 tons a year in 1508, increasing to 500 tons a year from the 1530s, though it seems probable that the industry underwent significant expansion from as early as the 1480s.<sup>26</sup>

Coal was a much larger concern. The total output of the coal mines on the lower Tyne was around 40,000 tons in 1550, and whilst this is overshadowed by the huge growth seen by the seventeenth century, when production rose to around 800,000 tons per annum, it remains a major element of the late medieval economy of the region.<sup>27</sup> Newcastle exported thousands of tons of coal a year across a wide area including most of northern Europe and into the Baltic.<sup>28</sup> In the thirteenth century, Newcastle had been one of the four chief woolshipping ports of England, alongside London, Boston, and Hull, although its role in exporting wool had dropped significantly by the fifteenth century and, unlike developments at some other ports, cloth had not taken wool's place.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, the coal trade meant that Newcastle maintained its status as an internationally important port.

The international nature of Newcastle's port is clearly demonstrated by the fourteen surviving particular customs accounts, which cover 133 months between 1454 and 1509. Of the sailings recorded in these documents, 19 per cent of ships were from Newcastle itself and 6 per cent from other English ports, whilst 46 per cent were French, 21 per cent from the Low Countries, 4 per cent were Hanseatic, and 3 per cent Scottish. The remaining 1 per cent were Scandinavian or unidentified.<sup>30</sup> In addition to Newcastle's main exports of coal and wool, sandstone and lead were also frequently included in cargoes as profitable ballast. Wine was pre-eminent among the imports into Newcastle, but these also included fish (especially salted herring), luxury foodstuffs (such as filberts, almonds, figs, raisins, and peppercorns), hops, iron, and a wide range of miscellaneous goods such as flax, alum, soap, oil, pitch, bricks, glass, kettles, and felt hats.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Threlfall-Holmes, 'Late Medieval Iron Production', 116.

<sup>26</sup> I. S. W. Blanchard, 'Seigneurial Entrepreneurship: The Bishops of Durham and the Weardale Lead Industry 1406–1529', *Business History*, 15 (1973), 79; Threlfall-Holmes, 'Late Medieval Iron Production', 113–15.

<sup>27</sup> R. A. Butlin, 'The Late Middle Ages, c. 1350–1500', in R. A. Dodgshon and R. A. Butlin (eds.), *An Historical Geography of England and Wales* (London, 1978), 178.

<sup>28</sup> R. A. Pelham, 'Medieval Foreign Trade: Eastern Ports', in H. C. Darby (ed.), *An Historical Geography of England before A.D. 1800* (Cambridge, 1951), 321.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* 308–11.

<sup>30</sup> Wade, 'Overseas Trade', 32–4.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* 38–43.

Furthermore, the merchants of Newcastle upon Tyne were a self-conscious and well-organized group by this period. The important traders in wool and coal overseas had incorporated themselves as the Merchant Adventurers of Newcastle upon Tyne, and they achieved some notable successes.<sup>32</sup> In 1463 they were given statutory exemption from the requirement to export all wool via the Calais staple, and in 1489 they gained a royal licence to pay only a quarter of the standard rate of custom and subsidy for five years.<sup>33</sup> Newcastle was second only to York in the region in terms of economic importance and organization.

The urban hierarchy in late medieval England comprised small market centres with populations of between 500 and 1,500; regional centres, including ports and places with specialized industries, with populations of between 1,500 and 5,000; and major towns and cities. London was in a class of its own with a population of over 60,000 in 1500, but other major cities included Bristol, Norwich, York, Exeter, and Newcastle, with populations of over 7,000.<sup>34</sup> The north-east region as a whole was served by around fifty markets, from villages to the cities of Newcastle and York.<sup>35</sup> Amongst these, late medieval Durham might be considered 'a comparatively small market town, with a limited range of trades'.<sup>36</sup> Durham certainly provided a marketplace serving the needs of its immediate area, being well placed in this respect at around fifteen to twenty miles from the nearest other market towns of Newcastle, Darlington, Hartlepool, and Barnard Castle. Indeed, it was no doubt of major importance to the economy of this immediate region, since the presence of the cathedral and castle meant a continual demand for foodstuffs which could not be satisfied from the town itself. The presence of these large consumers meant that Durham could be counted amongst the main market towns and ports which served the region—Richmond, Ripon, Northallerton, Yarm, Darlington, Malton, Whitby, and Scarborough, with Newcastle and York dominant and York predominant as the 'regional capital'.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Few records survive from the merchants' company for this period, but those that do have been published in F. W. Dendy (ed.), *Extracts from the Records of the Merchant Adventurers of Newcastle-upon-Tyne*, i (Surtees Society, 93, 1895).

<sup>33</sup> Wade, 'Overseas Trade', 42–3. <sup>34</sup> Butlin, 'The Late Middle Ages', 143.

<sup>35</sup> Pollard, *North-Eastern England*, 40.

<sup>36</sup> M. Bonney, *Lordship and the Urban Community: Durham and its Overlords, 1250–1540* (Cambridge, 1990), 145.

<sup>37</sup> Pollard, *North-Eastern England*, 40–2.

Durham's physical appearance mirrored its experience of lordship and its claim to national importance, with the cathedral and the bishop's castle both dominating the small peninsula on which the town was (and indeed remains) centred. The priory and the bishopric were the two major landlords of the town and the surrounding farmland. Durham itself was administratively complex, comprising four separate, though adjacent, jurisdictions, each designated a borough. The bishop was particularly associated with the 'Bishop's Borough' (the area around the marketplace at the entrance to the peninsula), and the priory with Elvet and Crossgate boroughs.<sup>38</sup> Both ecclesiastical landlords held a great deal of property throughout the town, however, and not just in these particular boroughs. For example, the almoner of the priory received rents from across the city, from a range of properties including South Street, Crossgate, the marketplace, the Bailey, Elvet, and St Mary Magdalene.<sup>39</sup> In a very real sense the town was a creation of the church, and continued to be maintained by its demand for service industries and particularly the victualling trades. It was also undoubtedly the case that the cathedral and its bishop and priory gave Durham a social status and an importance beyond its size, so that Durham was certainly York's closest challenger in the ecclesiastical hierarchy of the region and was an important pilgrimage destination. Henry VI himself made a pilgrimage to the shrine of St Cuthbert in 1448.<sup>40</sup> Bonney concluded, in her study of the town of Durham, that its significance 'lay not so much in its economic development, or lack of it, but rather in its political role as the centre of government for the bishop, with the castle as the visible sign of his power in the region'.<sup>41</sup>

Despite its island-like appearance, Durham and indeed its region were by no means cut off from the rest of England. Links beyond the region were many and various. To begin with, it is clear that there was no physical bar to travel and the transport of goods to, from, and within the north-east in this period. The infrastructure of roads and waterways of England was adequately developed from early in the

<sup>38</sup> Bonney, *Lordship and the Urban Community*, 41–6. An analogous, though less complex, division was in place in Coventry, which was divided into an earl's half and a prior's half (J. C. Lancaster, 'Coventry', in M. D. Lobel (ed.), *The Atlas of Historic Towns*, ii (London, 1975), 3–4).

<sup>39</sup> Bonney, *Lordship and the Urban Community*, 266.

<sup>40</sup> Dobson, *Durham Cathedral Priory*, 174.

<sup>41</sup> Bonney, *Lordship and the Urban Community*, 230.

middle ages, and the main routes were well travelled by the fifteenth century. The first known medieval map of England, that of Matthew Paris from c.1250, shows the route from Dover to Newcastle via London, Doncaster, Northallerton, and Durham, and known royal itineraries show a similar route from London to York and Newcastle via Durham in frequent use throughout the medieval period.<sup>42</sup> The coast and rivers provided an additional network of alternative routes, the importance of which is shown by the high proportion of prominent medieval towns built with ready access to navigable water.<sup>43</sup> Durham was unable to take direct advantage of water transport, since the river Wear was not navigable from the sea. However, Newcastle and Hull provided major ports for the region into which goods could be shipped both from abroad and from other English ports, notably London. Other smaller ports included South Shields, Jarrow, Hartlepool, and Sunderland, from all of which the priory purchased fish in this period, alongside a host of other coastal villages which no doubt supported minor fishing industries.

Overall, the evidence available about medieval travel and road systems indicates that the existing infrastructure was adequate well into the sixteenth century.<sup>44</sup> Martin's study of the fourteenth- and fifteenth-century journeys of the warden and fellows of Merton College, Oxford, whilst restricted by a lack of information about specific transport costs, concluded that travel in this period was 'systematic and regular, and . . . undertaken as a matter of course'.<sup>45</sup> Even winter weather does not appear to have posed a regular bar to the travel necessary for trade or business to be carried out; haulage could be carried on in the winter months without attracting undue comment or problems, and the royal household continued to travel around the country at all seasons.<sup>46</sup> This ability to travel and to forge and maintain links across the country was certainly used by the priory. For some centuries the monks of Durham had had notable

<sup>42</sup> B. P. Hindle, 'The Road Network of Medieval England and Wales', *Journal of Historical Geography*, 2 (1976), 209, 215.

<sup>43</sup> J. F. Edwards and B. P. Hindle, 'The Transportation System of Medieval England and Wales', *Journal of Historical Geography*, 17 (1991), 129.

<sup>44</sup> B. P. Hindle, 'Roads and Tracks', in L. Cantor (ed.), *The English Medieval Landscape* (Croom Helm Historical Geography Ser., 1982), 214.

<sup>45</sup> G. H. Martin, 'Road Travel in the Middle Ages: Some Journeys by the Warden and Fellows of Merton College, Oxford, 1315-1470', *Journal of Transport History*, NS 3 (1975/6), 172.

<sup>46</sup> B. P. Hindle, 'Seasonal Variations in Travel in Medieval England', *Journal of Transport History*, NS 4 (1978), 170, 176-7.

connections northwards. The monastic cell at Lindisfarne was of great symbolic importance, whilst that at Coldingham in Scotland was by far the most prominent of Durham's cells in terms of wealth and prestige in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.<sup>47</sup> After the 1290s, however, the Anglo-Scottish wars continually threatened the stability and prosperity of the monastery at Coldingham, and in 1462 the Scottish link was finally lost to Durham when the English monks were unceremoniously expelled from Scotland.<sup>48</sup>

The priory retained strong connections, however, across England and into Europe. The surviving letters between the prior of Durham and his representatives at the papal Curia, in connection with the situation at Coldingham, show that links with Rome were in place but were hampered by logistical difficulties with transferring money and documents back and forth between the two. The priory maintained at least one agent in Rome, and a Durham monk, Richard Billingham, went out to Rome personally to oversee the handling of the Coldingham case in 1465.<sup>49</sup> Durham Priory had a long history of sending monks to study at Oxford University: from as early as 1278 monks had lived there whilst studying, and in 1381 the monastic cell which had become established in Oxford was formally endowed as a college.<sup>50</sup> Apart from the erstwhile cell at Coldingham, the other cells maintained by the priory comprised five within the region (Jarrow, Monk Wearmouth, Finchale, Farne, and Holy Island), together with one in the north-west, at Lytham in Lancashire, and another at Stamford.

Much of the land in the counties of Durham and Northumberland was owned by the immensely powerful Percy and Neville families, who gave the region a national importance in the political intrigues and power struggles which characterized this period in England's history. Both Edward IV and Richard III were sons of Cecily Neville, and Richard inherited the large Neville estates in Durham on his marriage to Anne, the daughter of Richard Neville, Earl of Warwick. Richard spent significant periods of time in the region, notably as ruler of the 'Council of the North', based in York, and both Richard and Anne were members of the Fraternity of St Cuthbert.<sup>51</sup> But the

<sup>47</sup> R. B. Dobson, *Church and Society in the Medieval North of England* (London, 1996), 110.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.* 111, 116.      <sup>49</sup> *Ibid.* 119–21.

<sup>50</sup> Dobson, *Durham Cathedral Priory*, 343–4.

<sup>51</sup> M. Dufferwell, *Durham: A Thousand Years of History and Legend* (Edinburgh, 1996), 67.



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