

# **‘Playing a poor hand with some little skill’? Economic decision-making in medieval agriculture: the sergeants of Durham Cathedral Priory**

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Historians have been unsure how to characterise sergeants and reeves — the individuals who managed a manorial demesne.<sup>1</sup> Halcrow described the Durham sergeants as a ‘highly skilled body of small scale administrators,’ in her study of the decline of demesne farming at Durham Cathedral Priory some sixty years ago.<sup>2</sup> More recently, Campbell argued that ‘[f]ollowing the Black Death manorial officials proved hard to recruit, dilatory in the discharge of their duties, and fraudulent in their dealings’.<sup>3</sup> I will argue here that Halcrow’s statement overly limits the scope of activities of the sergeants off the manor and that Campbell’s statement does not accurately describe the state of affairs on and off the estates of the Priory bursar. Nor were these sergeants unfree tenants obliged to serve as manorial officials and perhaps not keen to take on the role again, as Stone characterises late fourteenth century manorial officials.<sup>4</sup> Rather, they were capable professionals who used their office as a gateway to economic advancement. This paper will focus on the Durham Cathedral Priory sergeants’ extra-demesne economic activities in the tithe market and renting of land.

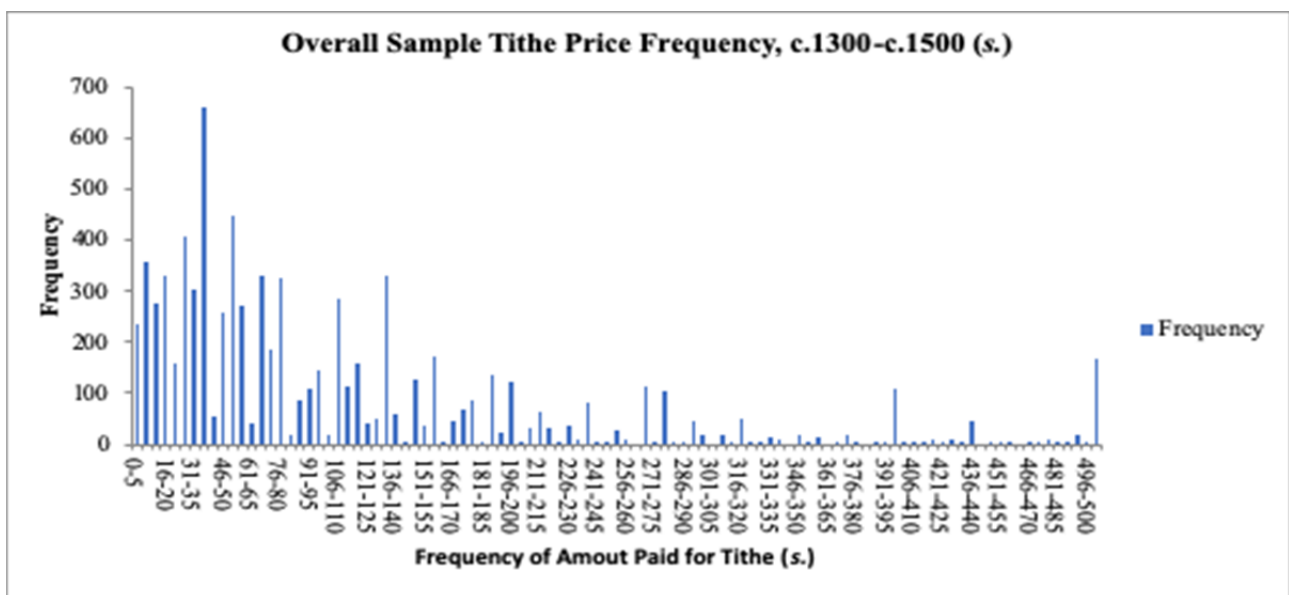
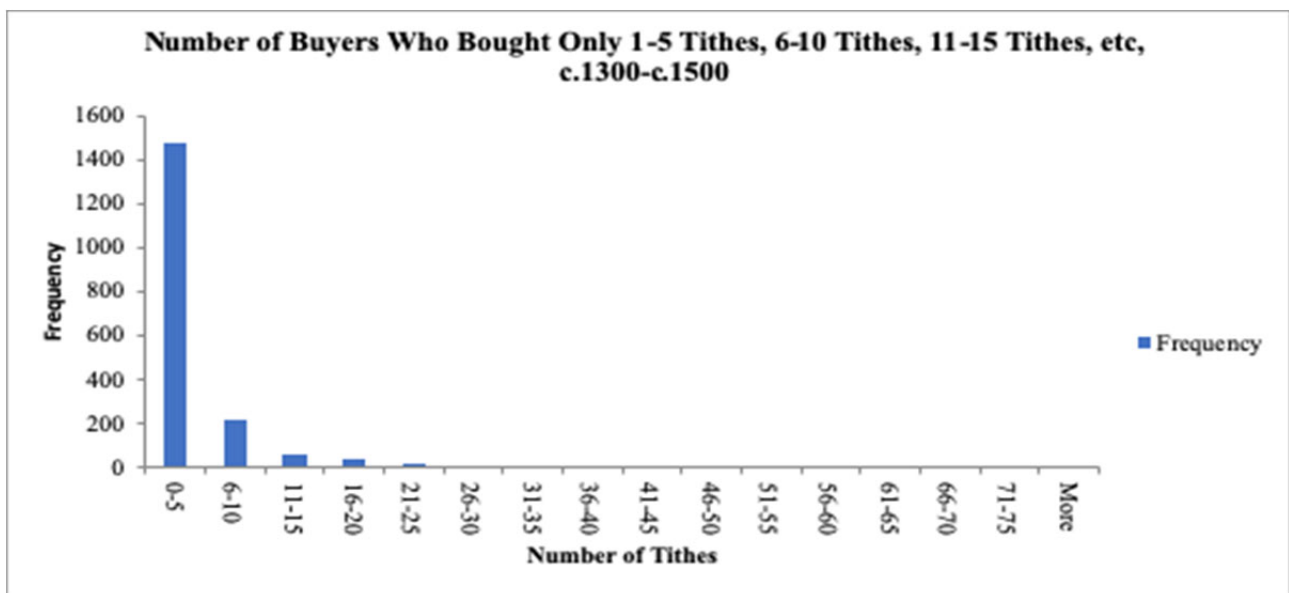
Firstly, it is worth noting that the sergeants of Durham Cathedral Priory do not appear to be exactly synonymous with reeves elsewhere in England. Sergeants at Durham may have held land as a customary tenant, as many reeves further south did. However, the Durham sergeants seem to command personal economic resources beyond what could be expected of a normal manorial reeve, even one. The sergeants likely filled what was considered a more prestigious and responsible role than the office of reeve on the Bishop of Winchester’s estates, as discussed by others.

Durham Cathedral Priory had the right to the garb tithes from its appropriated parishes, or one tenth of the grain harvest. The Priory incurred various expenses in collecting the tithes, for they were still responsible for threshing, transport, and storage of the grain, and those that produced the grain employed various tactics to ensure the Priory received as little as possible.<sup>5</sup> The Priory therefore sought to ensure that the rewards surpassed the hassles of collecting the grain and sold the right to these tithes on an annual basis. Payment for the grain was due in the following year.<sup>6</sup> After the harvest, the grain would be collected and transported by the purchaser and often stored long after the harvest. This purchase agreement recorded the value paid for the tithes, the ville and parish where the

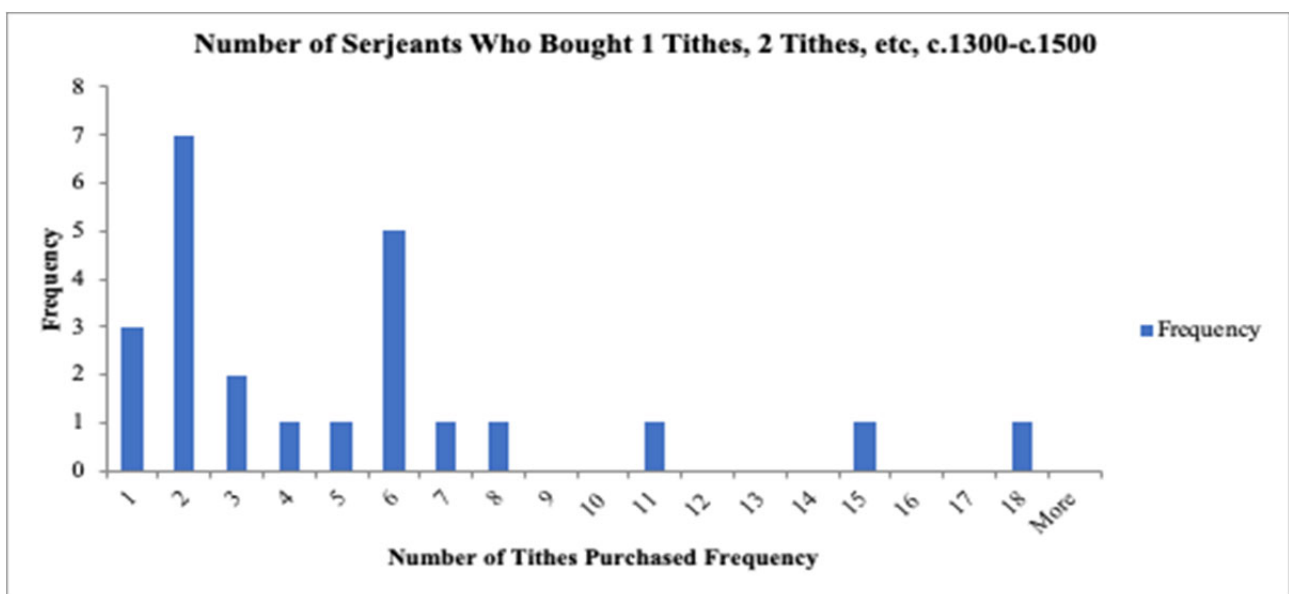
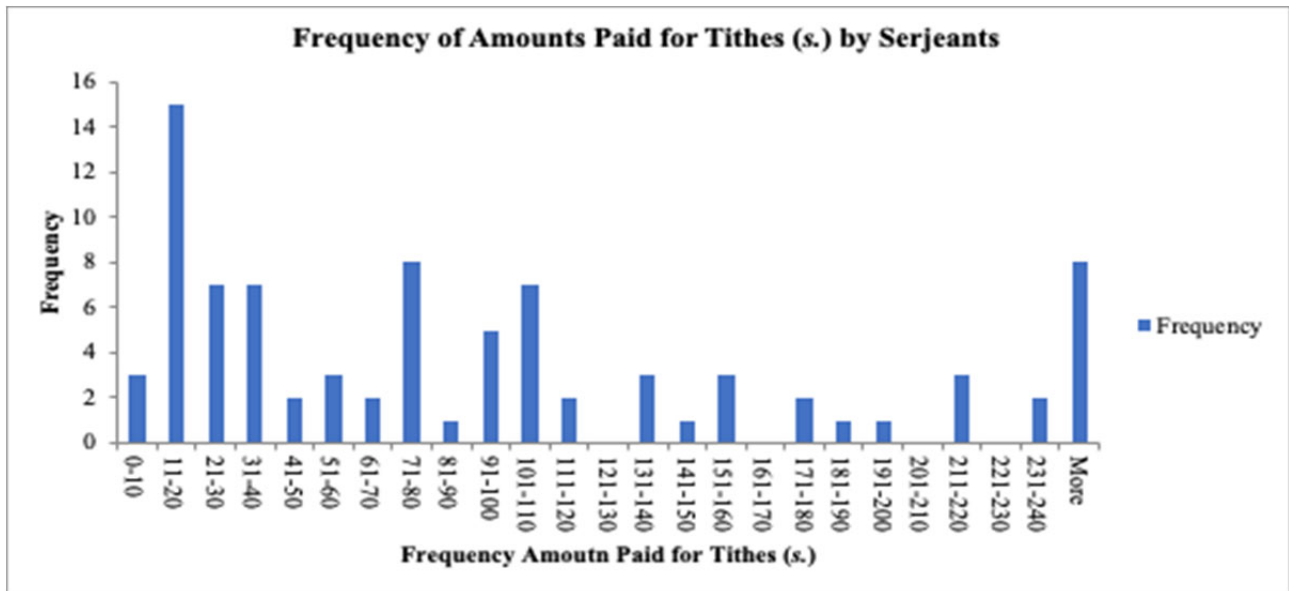
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1. The sergeants mentioned here were all identified from the extant Durham Cathedral Priory manorial accounts during the course of the primary source research for this project. These accounts are noted in the catalogue as GB-0033-DCD-Enr., DCD-Beapk. acs, DCD-Bels. acs, DCD-Bewl. acs, DCD-Bill. acs, DCD-Dalt. acs, DCD-Fery. acs, DCD-Fulw. acs, DCD-Hew. acs, DCD-Houg. acs, DCD-Ket. acs, DCD-Merr. acs, DCD-Pitt. acs, DCD-Ward. acs, DCD-West. acs.
  2. Elizabeth M. Halcrow, *Administration & Agrarian Policy of the Manors of Durham Cathedral Priory*, B.Litt. Dissertation (Oxford, 1959), p. 89.
  3. Bruce M. S. Campbell, ‘The Land’ in Horrox, Rosemary and W. M. Omrod, (eds.) *A Social History of England, 1200-1500* (Cambridge, 2006), pp. 225-226.
  4. Halcrow, *Administration & Agrarian Policy*, p. 89; David Stone, *Decision-Making in Medieval Agriculture* (Oxford, 2005), pp. 13, 168, 223.
  5. Ben Dodds, *Peasants and Production in the Medieval North-East: The Evidence from Tithes, 1270-1536* (Woodbridge, 2007), p. 7.
  6. *Ibid.*, p. 29. For example, when Reginald of Haswell purchased the tithes to Eden and South Sherburn for £15, 13s, 4d before the harvest on the first of August 1342, he agreed to pay half the agreed sum on the day before the feast of St Benedict, 20 March, 1343 and the balance on the feast of the nativity of St John the Baptist, 24 June, 1343. See Ben Dodds, ‘Estimating arable output using Durham Priory tithe receipts, 1341-1450’, *Economic History Review*, 57(2) (2004), p. 254.

tithes were located, and the name of the buyer. The difference between the amount paid for the tithe and the amount the grain fetched on the market would be pocketed by the purchaser as profit.

Many serjeants seem to have been considerably more active in the tithe market than other speculators. There are 8,242 named, distinct individuals in the tithe receipts covering the period from 1291 to 1536, of which 24 were identified as serjeants; only 436 individuals bought more than the average 4.13 tithes. If a serjeant entered the tithe market, he would usually purchase five tithes. A striking number of individuals only interacted with the tithe market once (1,796 individuals); only 370 individuals are recorded as purchasing the right to collect ten or more tithes, including individuals such as knights, priors, the Lords of Lumley, the Lords of Hilton, and the Count of Northumberland, three of whom are identifiable as serjeants. The financial outlay of the typical tithe speculator was also considerably lower than the typical serjeant-speculator. 7,672 receipts are for a value of 15s or less. In contrast, even John Goodwin, who was less active than the other tithe-buying serjeants, bought the right to collect five tithes, none for less than 69s., and for a total of nearly £20. William Scott only purchased two tithes, but nevertheless spent 56s in total. The scope of the activities of John de Chilton (eighteen tithes for a total of 261£, 9s, 8d), John Greveson (fifteen tithes for a total of 23£. 2s. 4d.), and John Watson (seven tithes for a total of 58£.) are staggeringly greater than the norm, even if these are some of the most active serjeants.<sup>7</sup>



<sup>7</sup> All data here and for the following graphs is from Dodds, B. (2007). Durham Tithes Database, 1270-1536. [data collection]. UK Data Service. SN: 5607, <http://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-5607-1>



The tithe receipts and even the limited amount of evidence provided by the fragmentary bursar's rentals suggests that the serjeants were not merely small-scale administrators. John de Chilton was certainly a capable administrator of the demesne at Ketton, as shall be demonstrated in the following sections, but he was further able to engage in potentially profitable, but also unpredictable and time-consuming ventures. During his term of service from 1390 to 1396, he spent approximately 122£. 6s. 4d. on the right to the tithes of ten villis within a five mile radius of Ketton, along with an additional 2£. for the tithes of School Aycliffe.<sup>8</sup> Such disposal of such grain would require considerable effort and time.

Using the relative seeding ratios of the three significant crops at Ketton for the same year (40 per cent of seed sown was wheat, 7 per cent barley, 53 per cent oats) and using the same local price data, John de Chilton's outlay might have fetched about 278 quarters of grain, of which about 54 quarters were of wheat, 12 quarters barley, and 212 quarters oats. This grain would net somewhere around 40,000 kilograms of grain and 143,543,808 kCal, well beyond the level of household consumption.<sup>9</sup> Though this calculation assumes that local peasant producers were following similar practices to seigniorial agriculture, it nevertheless reflects local conditions.

8. In 1391/2 and 1393/4, the heading is either missing or otherwise illegible. Based on my analysis of other manorial accounts for Ketton, I have identified John de Chilton as the probable serjeant.

9. Bruce M. S. Campbell, *English Seigniorial Agriculture: 1250-1450* (Cambridge, 2000), p. 215.

Chilton's organisational skills would have had to be considerable. So too would have been his knowledge of the local area and its people. As noted by Dodds, the potential buyers of tithes would see the grain in the field prior to the harvest and, on that basis, make an offer for the grain.<sup>10</sup> John de Chilton would have had to be aware of typical weather conditions that might impact the growth or harvest, the local price of grain, and be able to estimate the total amount of grain he might receive. The collection, storage, transport, and sale of the tithe grain would have required hired labour which he would have to use local networks to find and engage. He or a trusted individual would further have had to oversee the entire operation. Nor should we discount less tangible expenses such as the time away from his own fields and the demesne that he managed that such activities would have necessitated.

John de Chilton was certainly something of an outlier in terms of his activity in the purchasing of tithes, but even serjeants who kept their involvement small would have had to exhibit the same organisational skills and local knowledge. Gilbert de Wodom may have spent only 6£ on the right to collect tithes in 1333 in the vill of Ricknall, but, using the same rough estimations, he would have found himself with about 56 quarters of grain or 250 lbs that would similarly have to be gathered, stored, and either sold or otherwise disposed of. In addition to his activities on the tithe market, he spent 5£. 6s. 8d. to rent the entire (roughly) 240 acre manor of Aycliffe.<sup>11</sup> The rental of the manor came with considerable expenditure. Labour would have to be hired for the planting, harvesting, and other tasks, ploughs and additional livestock for ploughing would need to be secured. The manor would have required three or four plough-teams as well as any harvest labour or transport teams, though the plough-teams could have made up a part of either labour groups; there were normally eight draught animals per plough.<sup>12</sup> Such a rental could easily have placed Gilbert de Wodom economically among the ranks of the gentry, if not necessarily socially. Nor did individuals such as John de Chilton, John Watson, and William de Hilton who all rented local mills take part in a passive investment, for such mills would have required upkeep and staffing by trained individuals who would need oversight and paying.

Ready cash would also be necessary for any rents that became due. Some rents were certainly smaller and could be paid out of the serjeant's salary, but otherwise the serjeants would have had to have the cash in hand or rely on the availability of credit. The English rural credit market was well established during the period under investigation and Briggs suggests that cash credit was increasingly common during the later fourteenth century.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, as manorial officials, security for their loans could have come from the bursar in his role as lord of the manor, with whom they would have had, hopefully, a good working relationship.<sup>14</sup> Credit was extended to those who purchased the right to tithes as a matter of course by the Priory. The Priory expected payment well after the harvest and, as stated above, an interest payment was tacitly included in the amount to be paid.<sup>15</sup>

This sort of arrangement would allow for individuals such as William Forester and William Scott to sell enough grain to meet their obligation to the Priory and at times when the price of grain

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10. Dodds, *Peasants and Production*, p. 29.

11. R. A. Lomas and A. J. Piper, *Durham Cathedral Priory Rentals, Volume I: Bursars Rentals* (Newcastle, 1989), p. 213 and Richard Lomas, 'The Priory of Durham and its demesnes in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries', *Economic History Review*, 31(3) (1978), p. 348). for the details of the manor of Akley (Aycliffe). A document from the mid thirteenth century states that the manor was two carucates. Accepting Bruce Campbell's figure of one carucate equalling 120 acres, Aycliffe was around 240 acres (Campbell, *English Seigneurial Agriculture*, p. 121).

12. *Ibid.*, p. 121.

13. Chris Briggs, 'Money and rural credit in the later middle ages revisited' in Martin Allen and D'Maris Coffman, (eds.) *Money, Prices and Wages: Essays in Honour Nicholas Mayhew* (London, 2015), p. 135. The credit market on the Continent may have used more credit in kind (p. 140).

14. Philip Schofield, 'Access to credit in the early fourteenth-century English countryside' in P. R. Schofield and N. J Mayhew, (eds.) *Credit and Debt in Medieval England c. 1180-c.1350* (Oxford, 2002), p. 119.

15. Dodds, *Peasants and Production*, p. 29.

lowered by an abundance of supply. Those more heavily involved in the purchase of tithes such as Adam Carter and John de Monkton would have had to plan much more carefully. The 10£. 13s. 4d. Adam Carter paid or the 12£. 13s. 4d. John de Monkton would undoubtedly have returned significant amounts of grain. These individuals would have to rely on a commercialised network of associates, middlemen, and buyers to sell enough grain to meet their obligations to the Priory if they did not have the cash on hand. Reliance on such a network or even the knowledge of how to form one could well have been beyond the capability of a normal small holder or manorial labourer.

With such organisational skills and access to ready cash, we can safely assume that most serjeants would have been important individuals in their own communities, even if they did not hold administrative roles within them. As noted by Briggs, ‘many village credit networks featured many lenders and borrows presumably well known to one another’.<sup>16</sup> Perhaps some serjeants were able to act as lenders for their neighbours, for it seems that many had access to ready cash. Furthermore, manorial serjeants would have provided opportunities for employment within their community. Individuals who leased large amounts of land would likely have required greater amounts of labour than their household could provide. Nor can we discount the amount of power that a manorial serjeant might wield through his office over the surrounding area, especially in the hiring of labour. As noted by Britnell, turnover rates among the manorial servants, known as the *famuli*, were high throughout the late fourteenth century; from 1370/1 to 1409/10 decadal averages across the Priory estate show turnover rates of 45 per cent, 38 per cent, 37 per cent, 33 per cent, and 40 per cent.<sup>17</sup> Manorial serjeants would then have to fill such vacancies amongst their staff from the local labour force. They would have had to draw upon a network of local contacts to fill these roles and there were no systems in place to review those chosen to fill vacancies, beyond ensuring staff were not overpaid. Serjeants would likely have chosen individuals known to them and, in doing so, engaged in favouritism. An individual or family whom a serjeant found to dislike could find themselves with fewer opportunities for employment as a member of the *famuli*. To what degree a serjeant could freeze an individual or individuals out of harvest day or piece labour is more uncertain. Labour needs teamed with the urgency of the harvest may well have tempered even the most unpleasant serjeants.

Investigating the serjeants outside of their roles as manorial managers makes it clear that these were not merely small-scale administrators demesne managers obliged to serve. Their own economic activities and probable roles in their communities made them hugely important figures in the markets and societies of their regions. Just as a capable serjeant was valuable to his lord, he was also a figure of power and authority to those around him. These men are the most identifiable faces of the commercial markets in County Durham, but their relative conspicuousness should not belie the parts of the market hidden to us that were so essential for their economic activities

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16. Chris Briggs, ‘The availability of credit in the English Countryside, 1400-1480’, *Agricultural History Review*, 56(1) (2008), pp. 13-14.

17. Richard Britnell, ‘Labour turnover and the wage rates on the demesnes of the Durham Priory, 1370-1410’ in Allen and Coffman, (eds.) *Money, Prices, and Wages*, pp. 164-165.