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Medieval Vicars Choral - Choristers and Property Dealers.

Introduction

The Medieval vicars choral were a small specialised body of clergy, who became essential to the operation of the English secular cathedrals. Over a period of time, stretching from approximately 1200 until the Reformation, they gradually became better established as the day to day clerical presence in the cathedrals. They were the recipients of gifts of land and money in return for their prayers and masses on behalf of their patrons. The vicars choral normally held their lands as a corporate body, not as individual holdings, and the income would go into a common fund, the balance of which was distributed to the 'shareholders'. Analysing how they managed the estates which they gradually accumulated is one of the objectives of this paper. It should be noted that the vicars had other sources of income, such as 'obits' – masses for the dead, acting as a chantry priest, playing the organ, or other duties which attracted a fee. It is also necessary to examine just who the vicars choral were, how they came into being and the ways in which they interacted with both the other clerics, most of whom were their superiors, and with the laity, many of whom sought their intercession with God. It was their association with the laity which sometimes helped to give them a dubious reputation, as they sometimes struggled with their vows of chastity and obedience. There is in fact not too much

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primary source evidence regarding them. In general they were recorded either when they misbehaved or in whatever of their charters have survived. It is important to assess if undue emphasis on a few cases have unduly sullied their reputation, but there are many other examples of clerical misbehaviour, so the actions of the vicars choral have to be seen in context.²

The intention of this article is to examine some of the charters of the vicars choral in order to extract some better understanding of them and the context in which they operated. Only a handful of historians have any real knowledge of exactly who they were and what their functions were, and even then there are some false assumptions, some of which will be explored.

The need for vicars choral emerged following the Norman invasion of England in the eleventh century. Anglo Saxon cathedrals had been largely run by Benedictine monks, but after the conquest, Archbishop Lanfranc of Canterbury decided to keep some of the Benedictine organisations, but to replace others with canons.³ The Norman system used canons as the main officers of the cathedrals, and divided the income of the cathedral between them. In the end, out of the nineteen English cathedrals, nine of them were secular, staffed by canons, nine were Benedictine and one, Carlisle, was Augustinian.⁴ There were also several collegiate churches which used canons in the same manner. The most important of these were the three minsters of Beverley, Southwell and Ripon in the vast Yorkshire Arch-diocese, each of which had an archbishop's palace and acted from

² Martin Heale, *The dependent priories of medieval English monasteries* (Boydell Press, 2004), p. 135.

³ Kathleen Edwards, *The English Secular Cathedrals in the Middle Ages* (Manchester University Press, 1949), pp. 11-13.

⁴ Barrie Dobson, 'The English Vicars Choral: An Introduction', in Richard Hall and David Stocker (eds), *Vicars Choral at English Cathedrals, Cantate Domino* (Oxbow Books, Oxford, 2005), p. 2.

time to time in the role of cathedral. In fact the chantry certificate of 1546-7 describes Ripon Minster as 'The Cathedral Mother Collegiate and Parish Church of Ripon'.⁵

Canons, unlike monks, were free to come and go outside of the cathedral or minster and could carve out careers for themselves. As the canons were amongst the best educated men in the country, their services were in demand by the Norman authorities to help to run the state, fulfilling the vital role of senior civil servants.⁶ Since Norman cathedrals were much bigger than their Anglo Saxon equivalents, these cathedrals demanded full time attention and more voices to fill them, thus the absenteeism of the canons led to the establishment of the vicars choral, both to act as minor clergy and to be the mainstay of the choir. The canons remained attached to the individual cathedrals, and as they still had their share of the cathedral's income, or prebend, they were also known as prebendaries. In theory they were still supposed to spend some time in residence, but the requirement varied from cathedral to cathedral. The development of 'pluralism' meant that a canon could secure the income from several different prebends, usually from different cathedrals, exacerbating the problem.⁷

The vicars choral were very different from the canons. Their education was minimal, usually just enough to get them ordained, and they were often recruited from local boys who had previously sung in the choir.⁸ They have been neglected by historians, though on a local level some small booklets have been published about individual chapters, e.g. Maddison's work on the vicars choral of Lincoln.⁹ Otherwise they are occasionally

⁵ Joseph T. Fowler (ed.), *Memorials of Ripon* Vol. 115 (Durham, Surtees Society, 1888), p. 8.

⁶ Dobson, 'The English Vicars Choral', p. 4.

⁷ Robert N. Swanson, *Church and Society in Late Medieval England* (London, Blackwell, 1993), p. 53.

⁸ Richard T. W. McDermid, *Beverley Minster Fasti* (Leeds, The Yorkshire Archaeological Society, 1990), p. xxvi

⁹ Arthur R. Maddison, *A short account of the vicars choral, poor clerks, organists and choristers of Lincoln Cathedral: From the 12th century to the accession of Edward VI* (London, 1879).

mentioned in more general works concerning cathedrals. A good example here would be Edwards' work on English secular cathedrals.¹⁰ The only real attempt to reach a comprehensive national view of them was at a conference, held in York in 2002, the papers from which were later published in book form.¹¹ It focused largely on archaeology, but did raise various aspects of their lives. The introduction gave good background information on the vicars choral, Barrow covered their origins,¹² and Tringham dealt with the life style of the York vicars choral, but his examination could not be complete because not all the records have survived.¹³ The remaining chapters are mostly concerned with the 'Bederns' or dwellings of the various chapters of vicars choral at each of the remaining secular cathedrals, with Ripon, Southwell and Beverley Minsters considered together. Each chapter comments on the relevant vicars choral, but only in passing.

It is perhaps a reflection of the lack of interest that even those historians who do comment on them often get even basic facts wrong. For example, it is often assumed that their job was to act as deputies for the absent canons but in fact their duties were distinct.¹⁴ The canon, when he was present, had three main duties; one to take part in services – including leading High Mass at the main altar; his second function was one of hospitality, including having the minor clergy to his table; and finally, he was part of the management team of the cathedral, taking part in chapter meetings.¹⁵ The vicars choral did take part in the cathedral services, but this was the only area of overlap and they seldom said mass at the main altar. The vicars had neither the means nor the obligation

¹⁰ Edwards, *English Secular Cathedrals*.

¹¹ Richard Hall and David Stocker (eds), *Vicars Choral at English Cathedrals, Cantate Domino* (Oxbow Books, Oxford, 2005).

¹² Dobson, 'The English Vicars Choral', pp. 1-10; Julia Barrow, 'The Origins of Vicars Choral to c.1300, in *Vicars Choral at English Cathedrals*, pp. 11-16.

¹³ Nigel J. Tringham, 'At Home in The Bedern: the Domestic Life of the Vicars Choral of York Minster', in *Vicars Choral at English Cathedrals*, pp. 188-191.

¹⁴ Edwards, *English Secular Cathedrals*, p. 270.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 56-70.

to offer hospitality, and they were not allowed to join the chapter discussions. What probably gave rise to this assumption is that because the canons, rather than the cathedral, had the income they were obliged to pay for the vicars choral.¹⁶

There are also mistakes in other accounts. For example in the numbers in Dobson's introduction to the 2002 conference he gave a table showing the numbers at each cathedral and minster.¹⁷ His total is inaccurate since he makes the mistake of equating numbers of canons with numbers of vicars choral. Thus he cites Lincoln cathedral's fifty eight canons and therefore assumes it also had fifty eight vicars choral, despite other evidence that they never exceeded twenty five.¹⁸ In fact by c.1330 there were approximately three hundred and ten vicars choral in the chapters being considered here, and by c.1540 the number had dropped to just under two hundred.¹⁹ Other inaccuracies occur in estimating the value of the vicars choral estates, but that will be covered later.

We should now return to the question of their behaviour. Records of 'visitations' have played a large part in giving them a bad reputation. These were created when a bishop, or other senior clergy visited a cathedral, or any other ecclesiastical establishment to hold court, and the clergy there would accuse each other of various breeches of discipline. Given that many of the vicars choral were healthy, young men, usually with time on their hands, and with local connections, the accusations were often that they had been consorting with women or fighting, but might be milder and simply concern neglect of their duties.²⁰ As an example on 28 October 1490 three vicars choral at Southwell were

¹⁶ Dobson, 'The English Vicars Choral', p. 5

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹⁸ Maddison, *Lincoln Cathedral*, p. 3.

¹⁹ Peter W. Hampson, 'The Medieval English Vicars Choral: A reassessment of their representation in historiography', unpublished M.A dissertation (Liverpool, 2009), p. 5.

²⁰ Christopher Harper-Bill, *The Pre-Reformation Church in England 1400-1530* (Longman, revised ed. 1996), p. 49.

reprimanded because not only did they not pay attention but also gossiped, laughed and played games during the service, ‘*Domini Johannes Kyrk, Henricus Frankych Robertus Rochell fabulantur, rident et ludificant in choro tempore Divinorum.*’²¹

Vicars were regularly accused of adultery, such as in 1481 at Southwell when John Bull, who was often in trouble, was accused of adultery with two wives.²² Similarly at Ripon, in 1464 vicar Thomas Rande was found to have committed adultery with Isabelle, wife of Mathew Blyssyng.²³ At Wells in 1445 it was noted that ‘women of evil and dishonest repute’ were present in the common hall for breakfast and drinking.²⁴ Part of the problem concerning discipline was that it was virtually impossible for the vicars to advance to a higher position, there simply was no career path for them, except perhaps, to become a parish priest, as sometimes happened at Exeter Cathedral.²⁵ This lack of opportunity, coupled with the fact that they were acquiring property of their own, thus generating their own income, gave them a certain measure of independence.²⁶ In addition to this they had security of tenure, so that they could not be dismissed.²⁷ Moreover it is easy to get their behaviour out of proportion, only a few, and often the same ones, are mentioned. This should mean that many of them were well behaved, and many of them matured in time. The John Bull mentioned above eventually became a churchwarden and died in office in 1537, having served the Church for over six decades.²⁸

²¹ Arthur F. Leach (ed.), *Visitations and memorials of Southwell Minster* (London, Camden Society, 1891), p. 53.

²² Leach, *Visitations and memorials*, p. 44.

²³ Joseph T. Fowler, *Acts of Chapter of the Collegiate Church of SS Peter and Wilfred, Ripon 1452 – 1506* (Durham, Surtees Society), p. 222.

²⁴ C. S. Colchester, *Register of the Vicars Choral of Wells*, Wells Cathedral Archive, ref. 262/3, p.10.

²⁵ Dobson, ‘The English Vicars Choral’, p. 9.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

²⁷ Edwards, *English Secular Cathedrals*, p. 274.

²⁸ Leach, *Visitations and memorials*, pp. lxxx – lxxxi.

Property Holdings of the Vicars Choral

By the start of the fourteenth century the vicars choral were established. There might be a resident canon in overall charge, but the day to day work was done by the minor clergy, which included the vicars choral. They had started to receive grants of land from the thirteenth century onwards; Tringham lists grants to the vicars choral of York as early as 1219.²⁹ It was mentioned above that there were inaccuracies in the estimate of the vicars' estates. Whilst this obviously varied with time there is one source that can reveal this information for comparison. The *Valor Ecclesiasticus* was the survey of the wealth of the Church initiated by Henry VIII in 1535 which audited every religious establishment and recorded the results.³⁰

Table 1. Estates of the vicars choral in the 1530s.

Chapter	Dobson ³¹	Lehmberg ³²	Other	No. of Vicars	Income/ Vicar
Chichester	Little	£31.60	£31.20	12	£2.60
Exeter	£204.00	£204.00	£204.00	20	£10.20
Hereford	£88.00	£106.90	£89.00	27	£3.30
Lichfield	£199.00	£173.90	£99.80	12	£8.32
Lincoln	£358.00	£259.66	£145.55	25	£5.82
St. Paul's		£245.90	£248.00 ³³	10	£24.80
Salisbury	£272.00	£236.55	£236.55	14	£16.90
Wells	£100.00	£208.50	£66.00	30	£2.20
York	£255.00	£136.25	£192.50 ³⁴	20	£9.63
Beverley	£0.00		£12.00 ³⁵	9	£1.33
Ripon	£0.00		£44.00	6	£7.33
Southwell	£0.00		£28.00 ³⁶	16	£1.75

²⁹ Nigel Tringham (ed.), *Charters of the vicars choral of York Minster: City of York and its suburbs to 1546*, (Yorkshire Archaeological Society, 1993), p. xxiv.

³⁰ John Carey and Joseph Hunter (eds), *Valor Ecclesiasticus, temp. Henry VIII, auctoritate, regia institutes*, (Record commissioners, 1814-1834), Vol. 1-6.

³¹ Dobson, 'The English Vicars Choral', p. 3.

³² Stanford E. Lehmberg, *The Reformation of Cathedrals* (Princeton, 1988), p. 28.

³³ Derek Keene, 'From Conquest to Capital: St Paul's 1300-1540', in Derek Keene, Arthur Burns, Andrew Saint (eds), *St. Paul's: The Cathedral Church of London 604-2004* (New Haven, Yale University press, 2004), p. 24.

³⁴ Fredrick Harrison, *Life in a Medieval College* (John Murray, London, 1952), p. 197.

³⁵ McDermid, *Fasti*, p. 127.

³⁶ Estimated as an average of Ripon and Beverley.

The table reproduced above shows three different values for the estates of the vicars choral. The column headed 'Dobson' is from the 2002 conference, the column headed 'Lehmberg' is from his work on English cathedrals, whilst the column headed 'Other' is from the *Valour Ecclesiasticus*, unless otherwise stated. It should be noted that Dobson actually notes that some of his figures are approximate.³⁷ Just where Dobson and Lehmberg got their numbers from is not clear, but to take one example: at Lincoln, Dobson says it is £358, Lehmberg says £259.66, the *Valour Ecclesiasticus* gives a figure of £145.55, and this is confirmed by Maddison's work on Lincoln Cathedral, who cites from the *Valour Ecclesiasticus*, the figure of £145.55.³⁸

Church or clerical ownership of land had its own problems. The Church was always hungry for land, and each cathedral had its own estates and these were divided amongst the absentee prebendaries. The minor clergy, and especially the vicars choral did the day to day work of the cathedral. As a result the vicars choral were offered land in return for praying for those who donated it, and this raises the question of 'Mortmain'. Mortmain literally means 'dead hand' and refers to the idea that the king was usually paid tax when land changed hands, usually on the death of the owner. If the Church owned the land then it owned it, in effect, in perpetuity and thus the king received no tax.

Essentially the various statutes which come under the general heading of 'Mortmain' were designed to prevent the king from being deprived of regular taxes. Blackstone's Commentaries, which were written originally in the eighteenth century, are considered to be the authority on medieval law and give a very good explanation of the various legal

³⁷ Dobson, 'The English Vicars Choral', p. 3.

³⁸ Maddison, *Lincoln Cathedral*, p. 45.

aspects.³⁹ The statute of 1279 is the one often referred to as the Statute of Mortmain, but its real title was the ‘Statute De Religiosis Viris’.⁴⁰ A lot of land had been given to the Church, but this was not the real problem. Raban makes the point that the acts were more aimed at curbing the Church’s desire to buy more and more land, rather than suppressing gifts.⁴¹

Prior to the strengthening of the Statutes of Mortmain the church was often given gifts of land. After The Statutes of Mortmain, effectively 1279, these small parcels of land were given less often as a licence was required. However, substantial gifts were still possible. In York in 1420 Canon Cawood left the vicars choral the sum of £337 6s 8d.⁴² Also, in York, the vicars choral used capital, which was given for obits or chantry duty to further develop existing property.⁴³

We have considerable details about how some vicars choral handled their property. There is a very interesting example at Southwell Minster. This is analysed below because it is rather more complex than some of the smaller charters, and we have the original bond which the vicars choral made, together with several of their charters, showing some of the ways that they used it.

Rolls has done a detailed breakdown of a series of charters, all concerned with land from this bequest.⁴⁴ His main interest is to examine the legal aspects of these charters, but in doing so he presents valuable information about the way that the vicars choral handled

³⁹ William C. Sprague (ed.), *Blackstone’s Commentaries (Abridged)* (Callahan, Chicago, 1915, ninth ed.), pp. 212-219.

⁴⁰ Sandra Raban, ‘Mortmain in Medieval England’, *Past and Present*, 62: 1 (1974), 3.

⁴¹ Sandra Raban, *Mortmain Legislation and the English Church, 1279-1500* (Cambridge, 1982), p. 142.

⁴² Nigel J. Tringham (ed.), *Charters of the vicars choral of York Minster: City of York and its suburbs to 1546* (Leeds, Yorkshire Archaeological Society, Vol. 1, 1993), p. xxxv.

⁴³ Tringham, (1993), pp. xxiii,- xxx.

⁴⁴ G. Washington Rolls, *The Vicars Choral of Southwell Minster and their lands at Ranmarsh (1408-1850)* (Private publication, 1979)

such matters. Rolls also looks at the implications of the various statutes regarding the problems of Mortmain and he suggests that the land in question, which was granted to the vicars choral at Southwell, was under a special licence, and the original charter does indeed make reference to the '*statutum De Religiosis (viris)*'.⁴⁵

First Rolls examines the bond entered into by the vicars choral in exchange for a considerable parcel of land, the date of this bond was June 1408. They bound themselves to sing masses for Dominus John Deyncourt and his wife, Dame Joan. Also included was his mother Dame Alice, plus all ancestors and heirs. Then, also included was John De Bellow, his wife and all their relatives. They bound themselves, and their successors, to do this, and if they did not perform correctly they would forfeit three pounds of silver. However, if the vicars choral were deprived of the lands, then the masses would cease.⁴⁶

The donation of land and property was considerable. It listed eighteen dwelling houses, six furnaces (kilns), twenty agricultural holdings of two acres each, two hundred acres of plough land and one hundred acres of pasture land. The location of these properties was in Rawmarsh, which is just to the north of present day Rotherham, and forty miles north of Southwell. The land therefore was a considerable distance away from Southwell, and this would be one reason why later documents specify that the vicars choral held court twice each year to collect rents and, presumably, settle any disputes. Having obtained this land, it is interesting to see just what the vicars did with portions of it. The collection of charters available to Rolls is obviously not complete, since the next one is dated 1474, and he does give the impression that these were all the ones available, and that they had

⁴⁵ Cragg Collection, Lincoln Record Office, MS ref. 3/15.

⁴⁶ Rolls, *Southwell Minster*, pp. 13-14.

not been studied before this time. In total there is the original bond and four separate leases, with the suggestion that others have been lost.⁴⁷

Thus the next document, which is dated 1474, was for an eighty year lease of land between the vicars choral and Marjory, wife of William Dyson of Rawmarsh, of an estate of land called Below Stubbing, plus a close of land called The Ickles. The size of the two parcels of land was not specified, so presumably they had well defined boundaries. It is interesting that she was described as the wife, not the widow, of William Dyson, yet he was not otherwise mentioned in the charter. This would imply that a married woman was setting up a lease separately from her husband and the inheritors were her children. One interesting factor here was that Marjorie Dyson was clearly a married woman, and as such she should, under the laws of coverture, be unable to make a contract. Coverture had been introduced by the Normans, and whilst we hear more about it in the nineteenth century, partly due to the pressure to reform it, it would still have been applicable in the Middle Ages.⁴⁸ Quite surprisingly the nineteenth-century law was harsher than it was in the Middle Ages. According to Blackstone, even under coverture, husbands and wives could make civil contacts separately and the wife could also purchase land in her own name, though the husband had some powers of veto.⁴⁹ This was certainly not the case in the nineteenth century when campaigners to change the law referred to coverture as 'civil death'.⁵⁰ It was not impossible for women to lease or rent land and property, which shows quite clearly in some of the commentaries on properties rented from the vicars choral of York, where, at various times in the late Middle Ages women even

⁴⁷ Rolls, *Southwell Minster*, p. 9.

⁴⁸ Norma Basch, 'Invisible Women: The Legal Fiction of Marital Unity in Nineteenth-Century America', *Feminist Studies*, 5: 2 (Summer 1979), 347.

⁴⁹ Sprague, *Blackstone's Commentaries*, p. 83 and 206.

⁵⁰ Amy Louise Erikson, 'Coverture and Capitalism', *History Workshop Journal*, 59 (Spring 2005), 4.

outnumbered men in the city properties rented from the vicars choral.⁵¹ Of course, from other sources we know that some of these were prostitutes, though it should be noted that single women were sometimes viewed, especially by the clergy, as prostitutes.⁵²

The way that the inheritors are detailed in the Rawmarsh lease seems to show a determination to ensure that her husband, William Dyson of Rawmarsh, should not inherit, even specifying in the end that if all of the heirs named should have died, then inheritance passed to the heirs of a second Marjory, wife of Henry Dyson. Marjory, wife of William, identifies her children, who will inherit in order of seniority, John, William, Richard, Robert Agnes and Joanna. Virtually all of the first part of the lease is taken up with this detailed inheritance plan, which is endorsed by the vicars and this seems to confirm the idea that women had more independence at this period.⁵³

The lease then moves on to the rental aspects. The lease specifies the rent was thirty five pounds on 11 November but also required fitches of bacon at Pentecost in the spring. However, on the death of Marjory the cash sum payable was reduced to thirty three pounds four shillings. This also is when there is the first mention of the ‘Two Great Sessions of the vicars choral at Rawmarsh’, which was presumably when the rents are paid, and was perhaps so specified due to the distance from Southwell.⁵⁴

It was in the next section of the lease where the vicars choral seem to show their hard bargaining powers, for they specify that it is a major condition of the lease that Marjory is

⁵¹ Sarah Rees Jones, ‘Women’s Influence on the Design of Urban Homes’, in Mary Carpenter Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski (eds), *Gendering the Master Narrative* (Cornell University, 2003), pp. 207-211.

⁵² P. J. P. Goldberg, ‘Women in fifteenth-Century Town Life’ in John A. F. Thompson (ed.), *Towns and Townspeople in the fifteenth century* (Gloucester, Sutton, 1988), p. 119; Beth Allison Barr, *The Pastoral Care of Women in late Medieval England* (Boydell Press, 2008), p. 17.

⁵³ Rolls, *Southwell Minster*, p. 25.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

responsible for building, at her own expense, what was to be a considerable farm, consisting of four buildings, where the dimensions and method of construction were specified, even down to the type of nails being used.⁵⁵ Rolls later modernises the measurements and shows that the buildings consist of:

an 'inset house', presumably the main dwelling 64 ft. by 42 ft., 2688 sq. ft.

a granary 72 ft. by 24 ft., 1,728 sq. ft..

a sheepfold 54 ft. by 24 ft., 1,296 sq. ft.

a stable 54 ft. by 24 ft., 1,296 sq. ft.

This gives a total of 7,008 square feet.⁵⁶

It was also specified that all walls, ditches and fences should also be constructed. All of this had to be completed within one year. Then it had to be kept in a good state of repair and surrendered to the vicars choral at the end of the lease. If this condition was not met, either in the building or the maintenance, then the vicars choral could re-possess the estates, as they could if the rent was in arrears for more than forty days, and they would also take the buildings.⁵⁷

Finally, in the lease, there was an appreciation of the value of mineral rights, a clear confirmation that even at this period mineral rights did not necessarily belong to whoever had the right to farm the land. The lease spells out in detail that the vicars choral retained the right to extract any coals or metals (*minera carbonum seu metalli*) and

⁵⁵ Rolls, *Southwell Minster*, p. 26.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

indeed to either smelt them on site, or carry them away, without any interference from Marjory or her heirs.⁵⁸

It would seem that the vicars choral took the long view. The lease was for eighty years, but at the end of that time they would get back the same estates plus a very considerable farm, which had to be kept in good order, and they would have therefore increased the value of their property. Also, by imposing strict conditions, they ensured that any sort of failure either to build or maintain the property, or fail in the rent, would result in the tenants being evicted and the vicars would retain whatever improvements had been carried out. Finally, they were aware of the value of mineral rights, and separated out the right to work them.

The next Southwell document, dated 1481, is a lease of land to Sir Thomas Fitzwilliam, specifically to allow coal to be mined, and refers to an existing coal pit, known as 'Clookeepitte' against which is the comment '*ab antique perforatum*' (opened up from ancient time), it was therefore an established pit.⁵⁹ This document has a link with the one above as the lease goes on to state '*in quoddam clausum dictorum Vicariorum vocat Ichyls et sit abinde et quorum in aliud clausum vocat Colerydyng carbonibus maritimis infra dictum clausum.*'⁶⁰ This says that as well as mining in the Clookeepitte, it was allowed to prospect into the close called Ickles, and from there into another close called 'Coleridding' for 'sea-coals'. The term 'sea-coals' is to distinguish between this material and 'charcoal'.

The earlier lease, discussed above included the close of Ickles, but the lease reserved the mineral rights to the vicars choral, and here we see them making use of that clause to

⁵⁸ Rolls, *Southwell Minster*, p. 26.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

⁶⁰ Lincoln Record office, Cragg Collection, MS Ref. 3/13.

allow a third party to go into the Ickles close and prospect for coal. They also put a proviso in the lease that still allows the vicars choral to retain the power to go into Clookepitte and Ickles and Coleridding for further prospecting. Somewhat surprisingly there is no mention of payment, other than a comment, which in the original is partly obscured, but which says *'adquirendi salmos et dextras partes pro dextra parte nobis praeafatis'*. Rolls suggests that this might be interpreted 'winning seams 'equally' to us the aforesaid'.⁶¹ If this is the case it might suggest some sort of partnership, or maybe the vicars choral were content to have someone else do the work of opening up new seams, whilst they reserved the right of access. There was also no time limit on the lease.

The last two leases covered by Rolls are both in English, and date from 1538 and the second in 1539. Both are for land only, with no mention of mineral rights. The first was to Robert Clerke, Elizabeth, his wife and John their son and was for thirty three years. The lease was for a small estate known as Rycroft, together with six acres of land, plus one further acre of meadow. There was nothing too controversial in the lease: the rent is eighteen pounds plus two capons, with an annual rent of one pound for the extra meadow.⁶²

An interesting point was that whilst the tenant is responsible for the upkeep and repair of the property at his expense, the 'gret tymbre only escept', which seems to indicate that, in what was probably a typical sixteenth-century building with timber frames, the main beams were the responsibility of the landlord.⁶³ In fact, Thomas makes the point that in Chichester, where tenants were also responsible for the maintenance of their own

⁶¹ Rolls, *Southwell Minster*, p. 42.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 43.

⁶³ Nottinghamshire Record office, Re. 3959, and DD.SP. 26/79.

properties, 'by far the most common form of maintenance was the replacement of existing laths of wood and the 'daubing, breeding and liming' of the walls'.⁶⁴

The final document is the lease of 1539, which was a forty-year lease of ninety two acres of land, and was being transferred from an existing tenant, William Bird, to a new tenant, Thomas Nutt. There was no mention of why the lease was being transferred, but Nutt already had a lease running for four and a half acres. The new rent for ninety six and a half acres was to be nineteen pounds plus two capons.⁶⁵ There was no suggestion of an 'entry fine'. Considering that this lease and the previous ones are so close in date it is strange that the six acre lease was eighteen pounds and this one was nineteen pounds when one was fifteen times the size of the other. There was no mention in either lease about any special quality of land, but it has to be assumed that the larger lease was for poorer quality land, after all Clerke was paying an extra pound per annum for a one acre meadow. Again this lease specifies that the main timbers are the responsibility of the landlord, so this would appear to be a common factor of sixteenth-century leases.

An interesting point arises here. The leases in Latin gave the rental in 'solidos', which is generally taken to be 'shilling', but Rolls translates it as 'pounds', the Latin for which is 'libra'. However the English documents actually specify 'pounds', even 'pound sterlynge'.⁶⁶ With only some sixty years between the lease in Latin and the lease in English it is difficult to explain why the 1538 and 1539 leases should have been so much higher. In the original bond, if the vicars choral fail in their duties they are to pay a fine which Rolls translates as 'three pounds of silver', but the Latin text says '*tres solidos argent?*'. Paying a fine of three shillings against such a bond would not make a lot of sense. Latin

⁶⁴ Spencer Thomas, 'Chichester and its Cathedral on the eve of the Reformation', *Urban History*, 29: 2 (2002), 172.

⁶⁵ Rolls, *Southwell Minster*, p. 54.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

word lists do show how words evolved and that the same word can have various meanings and it might well be that Rolls is correct – given that the charter written in English so soon after is clearly pounds.

The information at Southwell is exceptionally well detailed, whereas at Wells it is a lot more basic. A copy of all of their charters from 1348 until 1600 exists, available in translated form.⁶⁷ A typical lease is that in the charter number 10. This is an undated lease, but probably around 1470, because of the dates of the ones before and after it. The lease is for a reasonably substantial piece of land, presumably in the city, since there are various references to the boundaries, described by street names, but it also specifies a right of way, ‘fifteen feet beyond the whole plot ... with free entry and exit for Thomas Lowden and Joan, his wife ... for carts and other wagons without hindrance.’⁶⁸ The period of the lease is for sixty years at an annual rent of 20s, payable quarterly. This is typical of the various small charters.

Seemingly after the Reformation there is a stream of charters, presumably with none missing since they are in numerical and date order. One point which shows up occasionally is the question of a ‘fine’, and this is usually on a new lease. Harris makes it clear that this was often charged as an ‘entry fee’, and was not a fine in the modern sense, and that early in the sixteenth century, when inflation was starting to bite, many tenants refused to pay the fine.⁶⁹ This does not seem to have been the case in Wells: in June 1579 a tenement with a garden and a slaughterhouse was leased to ‘Ales Foster, wife of Henry Foster of Wells, tanner, and George and John their sons’. This was transferred from one

⁶⁷ C. S. Colchester, *Register of the Vicars Choral of Wells Cathedral 1393-1534*, Wells Cathedral. Archive, ref. 262/3.

⁶⁸ C. S. Colchester, *Original Documents, 1348-1600, of the Vicars Choral of Wells*, Wells Cathedral Museum, 262/3, p. 6.

⁶⁹ Barbara J. Harris, ‘Landlords and Tenants in England in the Later Middle Ages: The Buckingham Estates’, *Past and Present*, 43 (May 1969), 147-148.

John Wilmott, and a fine of six pounds was made, the rent was 6s 8d.⁷⁰ Thus the entry fine was almost twenty times the annual rent, which seems excessive.

In 1587 a further two 'shammels' (shambles or slaughterhouses) were leased to John Proctor and his family. These were also transferred from an earlier lessee, one Thomas Lucas, but in this case there was no fine.⁷¹ The rent for the two was 13s 4d, so presumably the going rate for a slaughterhouse was an annual rental of 6s 8d.

The above transactions seem to indicate that there was considerable latitude in how property was handled, and no set formula, even in the question of an 'entry fine'. Of course we have no idea of other background details, which, if known, might well reveal a more consistent pattern. Nor are there any strict provisions applied in any of the charters concerning property. Many medieval charters specified who was responsible for repairs, but maybe local custom took care of this. About the only unusual feature of any of the leases was a provision in the charter number 29 of 1593, which was for land adjacent to the cathedral, and which specified that there had to be space for 'the Vicars Choral and their successors ... to laye their ladders without contradiction lett or denyall.'⁷² Generally speaking the charters of the vicars choral of Wells are reasonably unexceptional.

Nigel Tringham has done an excellent job of collating, transcribing and analysing virtually all of the charters relating to the vicars choral of York Minster. His first volume relates to the City of York, whilst the second volume concerns itself with charters outside York.⁷³

Because York has such a wide selection to choose from, and because the intention is to

⁷⁰ Colchester, *Original Documents*, p. 8.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁷³ Tringham, (1993); Nigel Tringham, *Charters of the Vicars Choral of York Minster, II, County of Yorkshire and Appropriated Churches to 1538* (Leeds, Yorkshire Archaeological Society, 2002).

compare with the way that vicars choral in other collegiate chapters managed their affairs, examples have been selected which best match those of Southwell and Wells, where the selection is much smaller. In this respect the way that the vicars leased out land, and possibly imposed conditions, is the main interest. All of the examples quoted come from York city.

The Wells charters were quite straightforward, and so it is also with many of the York leases, most of which are for small, city properties. A typical lease of a city property by the York vicars choral is the one dated 19 December 1395, which specifies the location of a small farm to John de Wakefield and his wife Cecily, which was leased to them for twelve years. The cost is a rental of twenty six shillings and eight pence payable at both Martinmas and Pentecost.

One of the closest matches to the Southwell lease of 1474 is the agreement made by the vicars choral at Pentecost in 1318 with Richard David, a butcher, and his wife Margaret. They leased a strip of land adjacent to the slaughter house from the vicars choral for twenty two years. The agreement specified that the butcher and his wife had to build houses on the land by Christmas of the same year, i.e. within approximately six months, the number of houses was not specified. They had to pay for all the building materials, and keep the houses in good repair and then, after the end of the lease of twenty two years the houses and the land reverted to the vicars choral.⁷⁴

There is a striking similarity between the lease at Southwell and the lease at York. However, there is one key difference and that is in the dates. The Southwell lease was dated 1474, whilst the York lease was dated 1318. By the late fifteenth century the vicars

⁷⁴ Tringham, (1993), p. 173-174.

choral of York were not in such a strong position that they could impose such conditions. In fact, in 1491 the vicars choral of York Minster leased a building to a baker by the name of Thomas Rawson, but the vicars agreed to pay for the erection of a chimney and oven, both materials and labour, Rawson only had to pay if he tried to remove the oven.⁷⁵

Of course, this question of the economy of York, and the economic standing of the vicars choral of York is quite well known. Bartlett makes the point that the first part of the fourteenth century was a prosperous time, thanks in part to the wars against Scotland.⁷⁶ By the late fifteenth century, York was in decline, and the vicars choral were struggling to let their properties, hence the special terms for the bakery. Obviously this was not the case in other parts of Yorkshire, the vicars at Southwell were able to strike a tough deal, reminiscent of the York lease a hundred and fifty years earlier.

The various charters show that the differing groups of vicars choral had a broadly similar approach to their property, but that occasionally they appeared to take a tougher line, possibly due to the attitude of the one negotiating, but local conditions also played a part. The decline in prosperity in York was matched by a decline in the number of vicars choral from thirty six in 1300 to twenty two in 1540.⁷⁷ As they could not get the rents that they wanted, the numbers were reduced.

Other than one or two notable exceptions, it would seem that the vicars choral were not particularly aggressive business men. Generally speaking, as befitted clergy, with an obligation towards charity, they did not impose too many harsh conditions on their

⁷⁵ Tringham, (1993), p. 129

⁷⁶ J. N. Bartlett, 'The Expansion and Decline of York in the Later Middle Ages', *The Economic History Review*, New Series, 12: 1(1959), 20.

⁷⁷ Hampson, 'Medieval Vicars Choral', p. 5.

tenants, and were content with the income that these generated. Most of the charters are quite simple, without any arduous conditions attached.

Conclusion

Writings on the vicars choral are not extensive, once established they tended to fade into the background in terms of their words and actions being recorded. They mostly show up in visitation records and their charters, and in the former they are being accused of behaviour which is against their vows, or likely to bring the cathedral into disrepute. On this basis it is the badly behaved ones which are recorded, and they often seem to be the same ones time after time. Those who simply get on with the job are not recorded. As a result the vicars choral have earned a rather dubious reputation, but we have to bear in mind that manners and customs of the time were quite different. Overall they probably did not deserve the reputation that many historians have attached to them; after all, plenty of other clergy faced similar charges. Yes, there were some boisterous young men, who regularly got into trouble, but they tended to evolve with time into more mature clerics.

That there were some shrewd men amongst them is clear from the way that Southwell handled the Rawmarsh bequest, but they all operated locally and there were big differences in their incomes across the country. Their charters, with one or two exceptions, seem to be largely straightforward. Whilst the role of vicars choral might seem to be arduous, with the requirement of chastity and obedience, given their background they had a rather comfortable existence. They had a steady income and were assured of food and shelter, which was not always a given in the medieval period.

The Reformation did not quite sweep them away, as with other parts of the church the tide changed several times. At Southwell for example they were originally pensioned off, after Edward came to the throne, with fifteen vicars choral sharing £65 – 4s- 6d between them.⁷⁸ Then Mary tried to reverse the situation, but eventually it was Elizabeth who gave Southwell a new constitution, in 1585. This specified that the prebendaries had to run the church and that there were only six vicars choral, one of whom was the schoolmaster and one was the parish vicar, and the church had to present its accounts annually.⁷⁹ As Wells' charters come to an abrupt end around 1600 it would seem that this was the time when the old medieval concept of churchmen running their own affairs was ended. It was now a state religion and the state made the rules.

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⁷⁸John L. Ottley, *The Story of Southwell Minster* (John L. Ottley, 2005), p. 44.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

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