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## Canonsleigh Abbey: a Thriving Devon Nunnery?



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## Introduction<sup>2</sup>

“The most comprehensive work on medieval English nuns remains Eileen Power's *Medieval English Nunneries*.”<sup>3</sup> Such is the opinion of Marilyn Oliva, whose work on the female houses of the Norwich diocese has done so much to advance our knowledge of those convents. It is curious that Power's work, dating from 1922, should retain its hold on the scholarly community. Not only does Oliva feel bound to say that Power set the standard for subsequent views of medieval English convent life for women, but other authors too acknowledge Power's strong influence. Recent publications on the nunneries contain numerous references to Power.<sup>4</sup> None of this means that Power is without her critics. Nevertheless, *Medieval English Nunneries* is still an influential, landmark book. One of Power's key arguments is that in the two centuries before the Dissolution there was a sustained period of decline. Power makes her case in typically forthright fashion: “There was a steady movement downhill in the history of the monasteries during the last two centuries and a half before the Dissolution. They shared in the growing degradation of the Church in its head and members.”<sup>5</sup> Her analysis is a classic Protestant critique of the late medieval church, emphasising the decline of female monastic life from a pre-Conquest heyday.<sup>6</sup> This long trajectory of decline reaches its nadir in the early sixteenth century with “the last degenerate years of the monasteries in England.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The photograph on the title page is of the remains of Canonsleigh Abbey's gatehouse taken from the south-west. It is copyright Roger Cornfoot and is licensed for reuse under the Creative Commons Licence.

<sup>3</sup> Marilyn Oliva, *The Convent and the Community in Late Medieval England*, Studies in the History of Medieval Religion, Vol. 12 (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1998) p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> Examples include James G. Clark (ed.), *The Religious Orders in Pre-Reformation England* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2002), pp. 45, 146; Richard B. Dobson and Sara Donaghey, *The History of Clementhorpe Nunnery*, Archaeology of York, Vol. 2 (London: York Archaeological Trust, 1984), p. 12; Yvonne Parrey, 'Devoted disciples of Christ: early sixteenth-century religious life in the nunnery at Amesbury', *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, 67 (1994), 240-48 (p. 240). There are over twenty references in John H. Tillotson, *Marrick Priory: a Nunnery in Late Medieval Yorkshire*, Borthwick Paper no. 75 (York: University of York, 1989), pp. 36-50. In these works the authors may not be in agreement with Power's overall thesis.

<sup>5</sup> Eileen Power, *Medieval English Nunneries c. 1275 to 1535* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922), p. 472.

<sup>6</sup> Oliva, *Convent and Community*, p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> Power, *Nunneries*, p. 56.

Power's analysis of decline comes under three main headings: financial, moral and organisational. As regards finances her summary is stark, as she states that the financial difficulties of the nuns "had already begun before the end of the thirteenth century and they grew steadily worse until the moment of the Dissolution."<sup>8</sup> With respect to morals and behaviour, we have seen her view about degradation taking place in a steady downhill movement. Power identifies the movement away from the initial monastic vision of St. Benedict as being the cause of many organisational problems. For example, the employment of servants meant that little if any manual labour was undertaken by the nuns themselves, and the rise of the universities meant that learning was in decline within the religious houses. Losing two of the three foundations of the religious life meant that only the practice of divine service was left, and that became a stultifying ritual. "All safeguards against a petrifying routine were now broken down".<sup>9</sup> Power's method in arriving at her damning conclusions was to range broadly across her source material: episcopal visitation reports, account rolls, inventories, wills and correspondence. Indeed one of the strengths of Power's book was the way she revealed the wealth of data available for the study of the nunneries.<sup>10</sup> However there are dangers in Power's approach, creating in the minds of the reader a synthesized picture of a typical nunnery beset by all the problems identified above. By the end we feel that the dissolution of these decaying institutions is almost a relief.

There is an alternative viewpoint. The work of revisionist researchers writing in the 1990s such as Gilchrist, Oliva, Parrey and Cross has shown that a more nuanced view of the nunneries may match the evidence more closely. They see the nuns as having strong vocations, emphasising their piety and the value the nuns attached to poverty.<sup>11</sup> Much of their analysis is based on a detailed study of the female houses in East Anglia. They draw on all the sources available to

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 161.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 288-9.

<sup>10</sup> Inexplicably Knowles believed that the evidence from female monasteries was non-existent – David Knowles, *The Religious Orders in England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955), ii, p. viii.

<sup>11</sup> See especially Roberta Gilchrist and Marilyn Oliva, *Religious Women in Medieval East Anglia: History and Archaeology c. 1100-1540*, Studies in East Anglian History, Vol. 1 (Norwich: University of East Anglia, 1993).

carry out a reassessment of the life of the nuns, pointing to the “tired assumptions” in this “remarkably stubborn area of medieval English history”.<sup>12</sup> They point to the over-reliance on visitation records.<sup>13</sup> Their work is part of a broader movement that has sought to rehabilitate the late medieval church, or at the very least to encourage renewed study and re-evaluation.

This study of a single nunnery, Canonsleigh Abbey, attempts to cast light on Power's vision of decline. Canonsleigh has value in being a mid-sized house in a region of England that has been little studied for its nunneries. The smallest nunneries seem to have been beset with financial stringency, whereas a bigger convent with its larger endowment may have had greater financial freedom.<sup>14</sup> The cartulary of Canonsleigh Abbey survives and it is an outstanding document for the study of the convent in the first fifty years of its existence.<sup>15</sup> The end of the abbey's life is documented in another valuable survey, the *Valor Ecclesiasticus*.<sup>16</sup> Such information, combined with the series of bishops' registers for the Exeter diocese and other sources, provides a strong though incomplete basis of evidence.

The key question this study will attempt to answer is whether the evidence from Canonsleigh supports Power's overall theme of steady decline, or whether it suggests another model. There are several inter-related subsidiary themes that will be explored to answer this question. Firstly, what was the financial condition and management of Canonsleigh? Secondly, what was the size of Canonsleigh in terms of the number of religious, and did the numbers change to reflect the economic realities or for other reasons? Finally, what changes through time can we detect

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<sup>12</sup> Oliva, *Convent and Community*, p. 5.

<sup>13</sup> Martin Heale (ed.), *Monasticism in Late Medieval England, c. 1300-1535* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), p. 3.

<sup>14</sup> Colin Platt, *King Death. The Black Death and its Aftermath in Late-Medieval England* (London: UCL Press, 1996), p. 79.

<sup>15</sup> *The Cartulary of Canonsleigh Abbey*, ed. Vera C.M. Horn, Devon & Cornwall Record Society, New Series, Vol. 8 (Torquay: The Devonshire Press, 1965) [hereafter *Cart.*] is a key reference. In subsequent references, the numbers will normally refer to the section within London's published edition of the cartulary. Where the reference is a page number, this will be made explicit.

<sup>16</sup> See *Valor Ecclesiasticus Temp. Henrici VIII*, ed. John Caley and Joseph Hunter, (London: Record Commission, 1814), ii, pp. 328-30 for Canonsleigh's entry.

concerning the discipline and conduct of the nuns – do we see Power's inexorable downward trajectory towards inevitable dissolution, or is there another picture we can discern?

### **Location, Foundation and Possessions**

The rural site of Canonsleigh Abbey lies approximately seventeen miles north-east of Exeter near the county border between Devon and Somerset.<sup>17</sup> The site today is much altered from the medieval period and, apart from a small gatehouse (see title page) and a section of wall, there are few physical remains above ground. Canonsleigh has an eventful history: it was founded as a priory for Augustinian canons in about the year 1160 under the patronage of Walter de Clavile, lord of Burlescombe.<sup>18</sup> The canons appear to have had a problematic history, and in 1284 they were evicted from the priory when it was refounded under the patronage of Matilda de Clare, the widowed Countess of Gloucester and Hertford. The new abbey was dedicated as a house of prayer for the soul of her late husband.<sup>19</sup> There was acrimony at the time of the new foundation, and for the next fifteen years the canons struggled unsuccessfully to regain their possessions.<sup>20</sup>

In 1284 the newly arrived nuns benefited from the existing buildings and associated facilities, but the income they needed had not yet been provided. In August 1285 the bishop of Exeter acknowledged the receipt of six hundred marks from the countess as a security until she could complete the purchase and transfer of lands and rents. However that money was not released to the nuns for many years and the full endowment took almost thirty years to be completed.

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<sup>17</sup> See *Cart.*, pp. ix-xiv.

<sup>18</sup> *Cart.*, 12.

<sup>19</sup> Canonsleigh probably owes its abbey status to the nobility of its founder - see Sally Thompson, *Women Religious. The Founding of English Nunneries after the Norman Conquest* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 172.

<sup>20</sup> *Cart.*, pp. xi-xiii gives the details of this period as far as they are known. The monks engaged the support of Archbishop Peckham of Canterbury to combat Bishop Quivil of Exeter. Only after papal intervention was the case settled.

The new house was intended for forty Augustinian canonesses, and it inherited all of the endowment of the priory.<sup>21</sup> Additional lands and spiritualities were granted by the countess and her descendants. At the time of the foundation the countess said she was prepared to endow the nuns with an income of £200 per year.<sup>22</sup> The first three canonesses came from the sister Augustinian house at Lacock in Wiltshire, and the numbers at the abbey appear to have grown rapidly. An important early event was the death without issue in 1314 of the abbey's patron, Gilbert de Clare, at the battle of Bannockburn. The patronage then passed by marriage to the Despenser family for a century, before eventually ending up in the hands of the crown in 1487.<sup>23</sup>

The cartulary of the abbey was written in 1323 during the episcopate of Walter de Stapledon. By that date the temporal and spiritual possessions of the abbey were almost complete.<sup>24</sup> The broader historical record for Canonsleigh is at times frustratingly quiet. There is no direct evidence of the impact on the house of the great famine of the early fourteenth century, or of the Black Death. There is more information from the fifteenth century where we can see the number of nuns falling as low as ten, but rising towards the Dissolution in 1539 at which time there were eighteen nuns including the abbess (see Table 4). The list of names of the abbesses is almost complete.<sup>25</sup> Although in 1535 the income of the abbey as shown in the *Valor Ecclesiasticus* was a little under the £200 threshold required by statute for the house to continue, it was granted leave to do so on payment of a £200 fine.<sup>26</sup> The surrender of the abbey to the Commissioners of

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<sup>21</sup> *Calendar of Entries in the Papal Registers Relating to Great Britain and Ireland: Papal Letters*, ed. W.H. Bliss, C. Johnston, J.A. Tremlow and others (London: HMSO, 1893), i, p.478.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Henry VII seized the abbey from the widow of Richard Neville – *Calendar of Inquisitions Post Mortem and Other Analogous Documents Preserved in the Public Record Office: Henry VII*, ed. J.E.G. Sharp, E.G. Atkinson, H.C. Maxwell-Lyte and others, 2<sup>nd</sup> Series (London: Public Record Office, 1898), i, 680.

<sup>24</sup> See Maureen Jurkowski, Nigel Ramsay and Simon Renton (eds.), *English Monastic Estates, 1066-1540: a List of Manors, Churches and Chapels* (London: List and Index Society, 2007), i, pp. 62-3 for a full table of the abbey's possessions and the dates they were obtained.

<sup>25</sup> David M. Smith and Vera C.M. London, *The Heads of Religious Houses, England and Wales* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001-2008), ii, pp. 549-50, iii, pp. 634-35.

<sup>26</sup> *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, of the Reign of Henry VIII*, ed. John S. Brewer (Vaduz, 1965) XIII.i, p.177.

the king took place on 16 February 1539.<sup>27</sup>

The temporal possessions of Canonsleigh were mostly in Devon and neighbouring Somerset.<sup>28</sup> However there was also an important manor at Sheddon (Essex), as well as land in Suffolk and possessions in Exeter. The tenant lands amounted to 4,430 acres, and the demesne land to 1,790 acres. There were mills, dovecotes, fishponds, rights of way and the rights to an annual five-day fair at Leigh and a weekly market there. Of their three hundred tenants, two-thirds were free. The temporal possessions made up approximately three quarters of the value of the nunnery at the time of the *Valor*. The only urban centre of any importance was the small Essex town of Manitre (modern-day Manningtree) in the manor of Sheddon.<sup>29</sup> The *spiritualia* were mostly in Devon and Somerset, but there was also the church of East Morden in Dorset, which provided a significant proportion of the spiritual income. Like the temporal possessions, the spiritual possessions were rural ones.

In the sections that follow, some comparisons will be made between Canonsleigh and a small number of other nunneries in an effort to shed light on Canonsleigh itself. The focus is on those nunneries closest to Canonsleigh. Table 1 shows the size and value of these nunneries in 1535.

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<sup>27</sup> *Monasticon Anglicanum*, ed. J. Caley, H. Ellis, B. Bandinel and others (London: James Bohn, 1846), vi, p.334. Several other Devon houses were suppressed at the same time.

<sup>28</sup> See *Cart.*, p. xv; a comprehensive list of Canonsleigh's temporal and spiritual possessions may be found in Jurkowski, Ramsay and Renton, *English Monastic Estates*, i, pp. 62-3.

<sup>29</sup> A useful survey of Manningtree with a bibliography can be found at [http://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archiveDS/archiveDownload?t=arch-681-1/dissemination/pdf/Manningtree/splittext/Manningtree\\_1999\\_Historic\\_Towns\\_Assessment\\_Report.pdf](http://archaeologydataservice.ac.uk/archiveDS/archiveDownload?t=arch-681-1/dissemination/pdf/Manningtree/splittext/Manningtree_1999_Historic_Towns_Assessment_Report.pdf) [accessed 13 March 2015].

**Table 1.** The valuation and numbers at Canonsleigh and three other nunneries.

Nunnery	Net value in the <i>Valor</i> <sup>30</sup>	Number of nuns in the 1530s <sup>31</sup>	Notes
Canonsleigh	£197	18	Augustinian.
Cornworthy	£63	7	Near Totnes, Devon (Augustinian).
Lacock	£210	17	Wiltshire (Augustinian).
Polsloe	£164	14	Near Exeter, Devon. A Benedictine house.

In England there was a total of nineteen nunneries of the Augustinian order. Canonsleigh was in the top five of those by value in 1535. Table 2 lists the net valuations in pounds for each of these houses.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>30</sup> See Volume ii of the *Valor*: Canonsleigh pp. 328-30; Cornworthy p. 366; Lacock pp. 115-18; Polsloe p. 315.

<sup>31</sup> See Table 4 for Canonsleigh. For Cornworthy see Lawrence S. Snell, *The Suppression of the Religious Foundations of Devon and Cornwall* (Marazion: Worden, 1967), p. 127. For Lacock see Helena M. Chew, 'The abbey of Lacock' in R.B. Pugh and E. Crittall (eds.), *The Victoria County History of Wiltshire* (London: Institute of Historical Research, 1956), iii, pp. 303-16 (p. 310). For Polsloe see Ethel Lega-Weekes, 'The pre-Reformation history of St Katherine's Priory, Polsloe', *Report and Transactions Devonshire Association*, 66 (1934), 181-99 (p. 196).

<sup>32</sup> The net values are from the relevant entries in the *Valor Ecclesiasticus* (q.v.)



**Table 2.** The net value of England's Augustinian nunneries extant in 1535.

Name of house	Net value in the <i>Valor</i> (in pounds sterling)
Dartford (Kent) <sup>33</sup>	355
Buckland (Somerset)	223
Lacock (Wilts)	210
Canonsleigh (Devon)	197
Campsey (Suffolk)	182
Gracedieu (Leics)	92
Aconbury (Hereford)	66
Goring (Oxon)	64
Cornworthy (Devon)	63
Burnham (Bucks)	51
Harrold (Beds)	40
Moxby (Yorks N.R.)	26
Crabhouse (Norfolk)	25
Lymbrook (Hereford)	23
Flixton (Suffolk)	21
Bristol (Gloucs)	21
Grimsby (Lincs)	10
Rothwell (Northants)	6

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<sup>33</sup> Dartford was a special case. The nuns lived under the rule and habit of St Augustine but, uniquely for England, they belonged to the order of preachers (Dominicans) - see Paul Lee, *Nunneries, Learning and Spirituality in Late Medieval English Society: the Dominican Priory of Dartford* (York: York Medieval Press, 2001), p. 23.

## The Finances of Canonsleigh and their Management

On the issue of the finances of the medieval nunneries, Eileen Power is at her most pessimistic: “In the history of the medieval nunneries of England there is nothing more striking than the constant financial straits to which they were reduced [...] These financial difficulties had already begun before the end of the thirteenth century and they grew steadily worse until the moment of the Dissolution”.<sup>34</sup> She presents a trajectory of steady decline from an already impoverished beginning. Power is not alone in emphasising the financial difficulties of the female houses in England; Snape shares her analysis: “The general poverty of the nunneries seems uncontested [...] The meagre endowment of the generality of the nunneries shows itself even at a glance.”<sup>35</sup> More recent authors such as Platt talk of the extreme and irremediable poverty of the nunneries, born of inadequate endowments.<sup>36</sup> For Power, the nunneries start from a low base, but their succeeding financial woes are compounded by poor management: “Nevertheless it cannot be doubted that that the nuns themselves, by bad management, contributed largely to their own misfortunes.”<sup>37</sup> And to make a bad situation even worse: “To financial incompetence and to the employment of improvident methods of raising money, the nuns occasionally added extravagance.”<sup>38</sup> However, just when Power's position seems absolutely clear, she engages in self-contradiction: “A great deal of this poverty was in no sense the fault of the nuns. Apart from obvious cases of insufficient endowments, the medieval monasteries suffered from natural disasters [...] and from certain exactions at the hands of men”.<sup>39</sup> This briefly emollient passage is the exception. In their study of the nunneries of East Anglia, Gilchrist and Oliva found similar issues: “The relative poverty of the female houses in Norfolk and Suffolk can be explained by

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<sup>34</sup> Power, *Nunneries*, p. 161.

<sup>35</sup> Robert H. Snape, *English Monastic Finances in the Late Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1926), p. 149.

<sup>36</sup> Platt, *King Death*, p. 80.

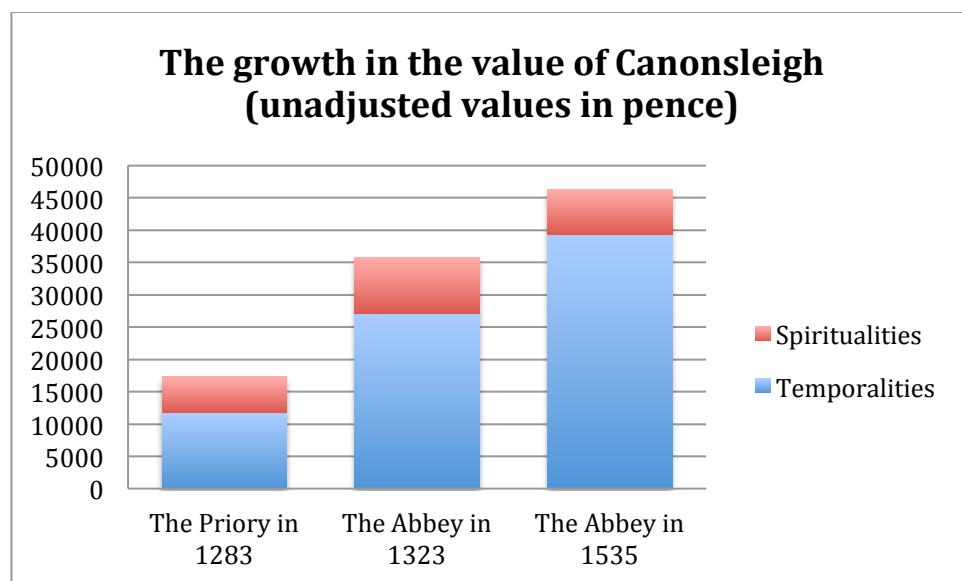
<sup>37</sup> Power, *Nunneries*, p. 203.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 211.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 176.

their small initial endowments.”<sup>40</sup>

This section will therefore examine the finances of Canonsleigh by focusing on three key issues: the endowment of the abbey and whether it could adequately support the population of religious at Canonsleigh; the financial management of the nuns and whether they were good shepherds of their inheritance; the perception of the nuns of Devon as being poor, and the consequences of that. This information will be put within the context of the wider and changing medieval economy. Figure 1 summarises the total income for Canonsleigh at three dates: firstly from just before the re-foundation as a nunnery; secondly from the position in 1323 (but with the later possession of the church of Rockbeare included); thirdly from just before the Dissolution.



**Figure 1.** The growth in the value of Canonsleigh's endowment.

A key consideration when looking at all these numbers is to understand what they actually represent. Terminology such as value, income and revenue are used almost interchangeably by

<sup>40</sup> Gilchrist and Oliva, *Religious Women in Medieval East Anglia*, p. 24.

authors such as Savine and Knowles.<sup>41</sup> However, there is clearly a difference between the income from rents, which is either in cash or a close equivalent, and the valuation of something such as demesne land which is less tangible. The latter may represent an estimate of what such land might fetch if leased out, or it may be a measure of the value of the produce from that land, or possibly a combination of the two. What does seem clear is that the valuation in the *Valor* for demesne land is probably an underestimate. The survey carried out at Glastonbury Abbey by the surveyors for the Court of Augmentations came up with a higher valuation, and their figures were used successfully in the subsequent disposal of the land.<sup>42</sup> In the rest of this section, the term “income” will be used when discussing the wealth of the abbey, although what it incorporates is an amalgam of both cash income and valuation of assets. An additional question is whether a valuation carried out in 1323 can be regarded as comparable to one made in 1535. What the following analysis will suggest is that the figures do appear to show some consistency, and that they can form the basis for some general conclusions, although the caveats raised above must be carefully noted.

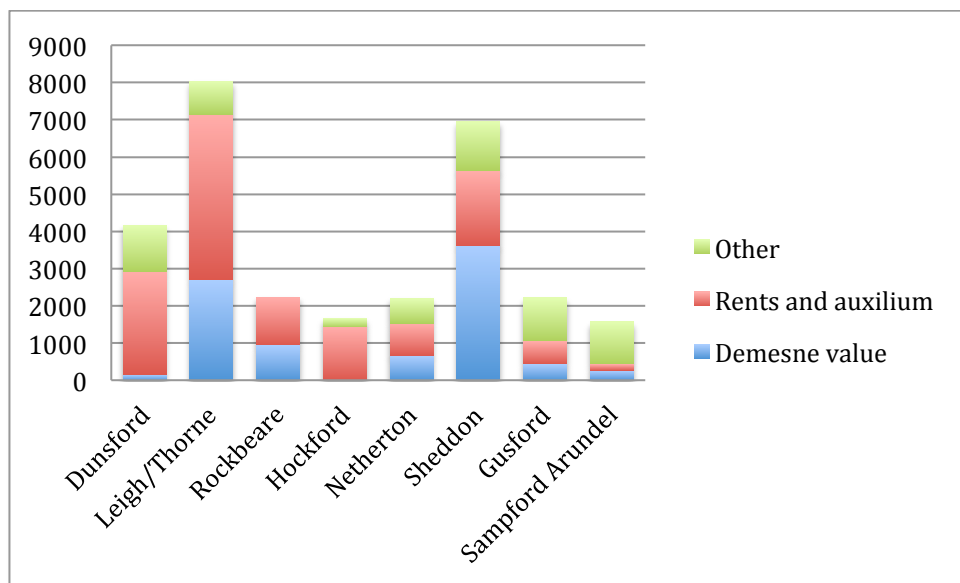
In the above chart the increase in income/value/revenue by 1323 shows up clearly enough, but so too does the shortfall that it represents from the £200 endowment that had been promised (£200 equals 48,000 pence). Only by the time of the *Valor* does the value/income of the abbey reach the intended level. Clearly therefore, unless the nuns wished to endure severe poverty, they needed to consider what number of religious the abbey could support. However before moving on to that issue, some further analysis of the nuns' endowment will be helpful. Figure 2 provides a breakdown of the total temporal income in 1323 by manor (the information for the manor of Hockford does not include any value for the demesne land as this is missing from the source

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<sup>41</sup> Alexander Savine, *English Monasteries on the Eve of the Dissolution* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1909), speaks of “revenues” and “gross income” on p. 4, of “valuation of gross incomes” on p. 11, and on p. 33 of “the income of the monasteries”. Knowles, *The Religious Orders*, iii, pp. 241-259, similarly mixes terms such as income, revenue and value.

<sup>42</sup> Savine, *English Monasteries*, p. 51.

material).



**Figure 2.** The valuation by manor in 1323 (values in pence).<sup>43</sup>

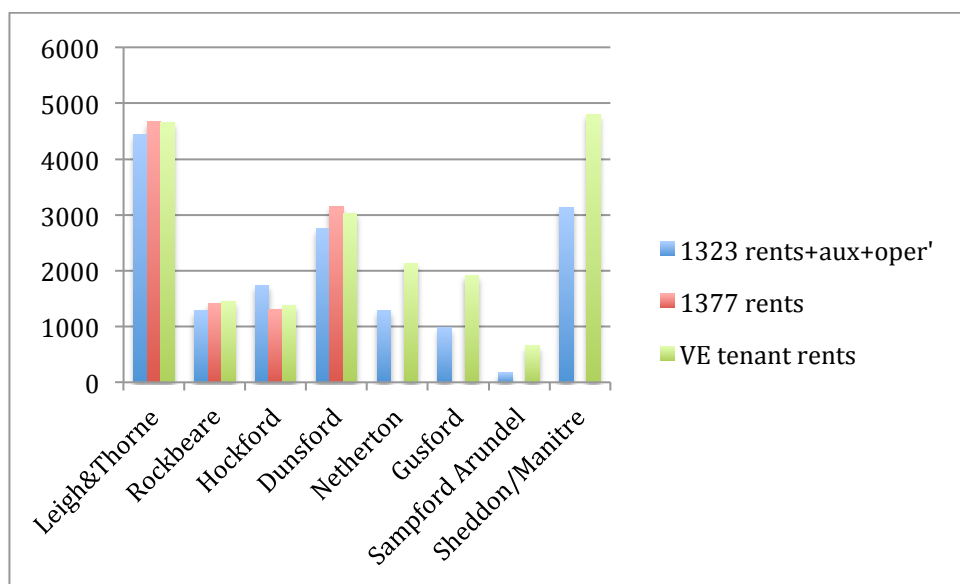
The information for rents contains the money value received from sitting tenants (free, customary and cottagers), plus any sum shown for the *auxilium*.<sup>44</sup> To allow for comparison with the *Valor*, any values given for services or other works by the tenants are shown in the “Other” category within the chart. Note that the proportion of value assigned to the demesne is lower than rents in almost all cases except that of Sheddton.<sup>45</sup> With that manor being in distant Essex, the management of its demesne resources would have been a greater challenge, and if there were to be any manor where a leasing out arrangement would be most beneficial then it would surely be there. The manor of Northleigh has been excluded from the list above as it had a net negative value in 1323, and by 1535 it was no longer listed as one of the abbey's assets. The above chart highlights the significant proportion of income provided by rents and associated services and payments. It also indicates the importance of the home manor at Leigh, and that of Sheddton.

<sup>43</sup> The numbers are taken from the extents survey within British Library, Harleian MS. 3660, ff. 141 to 178v. For a detailed description of the manuscript and its provenance see *Cart.*, pp. xxx-xxxvi.

<sup>44</sup> The *auxilium* was an extraordinary tax paid once a year, and distinguished from ordinary rent (Paul Vinogradoff, *Villainage in England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1892), p. 293).

<sup>45</sup> Bruce M.S. Campbell and Ken Bartley, *England on the Eve of the Black Death* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), p. 87, state that the demesne was typically the second largest component of manorial revenues after rents and services

Safeguarding those rents would clearly have been a priority for the nuns. Given the importance of the rental income as displayed above, it is very useful to see how it changed during the period from 1323 to 1535. Figure 3 shows the development:



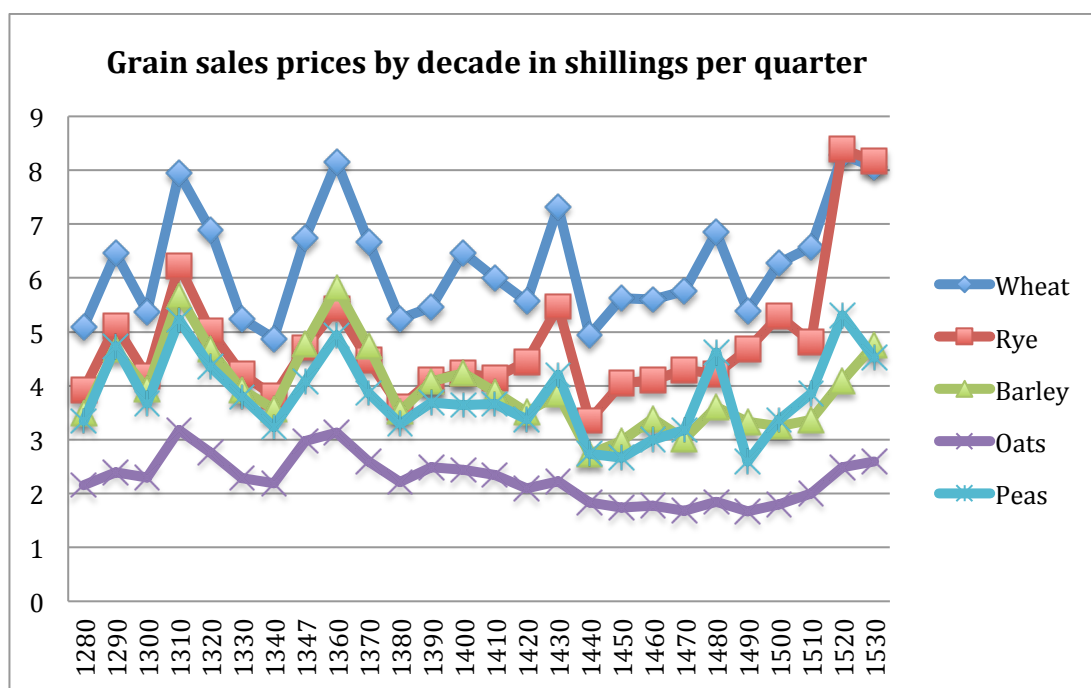
**Figure 3.** The changing income from tenant rents for the Canonsleigh manors (values in pence).

In the above chart no attempt has been made to adjust the numbers for the changing value of the pound over the period. For all of the manors the rental values from the 1323 extents are given, together with the equivalent information from the *Valor*. Four of the manors also have assize rent figures from the year 1377-78. It is interesting to see how, for the first four manors, the overall levels of rent change little throughout the period. However for the second set of four, the numbers show some strong growth. For the manor of Sheddon, there is a special proviso. By 1535 this manor had been farmed out *in toto* by indenture to a William Budde, and the figure shown of just over £20 (4805 pence) is the total annual income as shown in the *Valor*.<sup>46</sup> The proportion of the £20 that represents tenant rents may not be all that different to the 1323 figure. By contrast the increased numbers from Netherton, Gusford and Sampford are from tenant

<sup>46</sup> *Valor Ecclesiasticus*, ii, pp. 328-30. The value incorporates both the tenant rents that have been foregone, plus the value of the demesne lands and any other income.

rents.

The overall picture from the rental income is clearly not a gloomy one. However the value of money, goods and services did not remain stable during this period. Coburn Graves summed up the nuns' predicament rather neatly: "Where nuns owed fixed obligations they prospered, where their income was made up of fixed revenues, they suffered a loss."<sup>47</sup> Thus simply to maintain revenues was not sufficient. Prices were volatile over these two and a half centuries as Figure 4 illustrates:

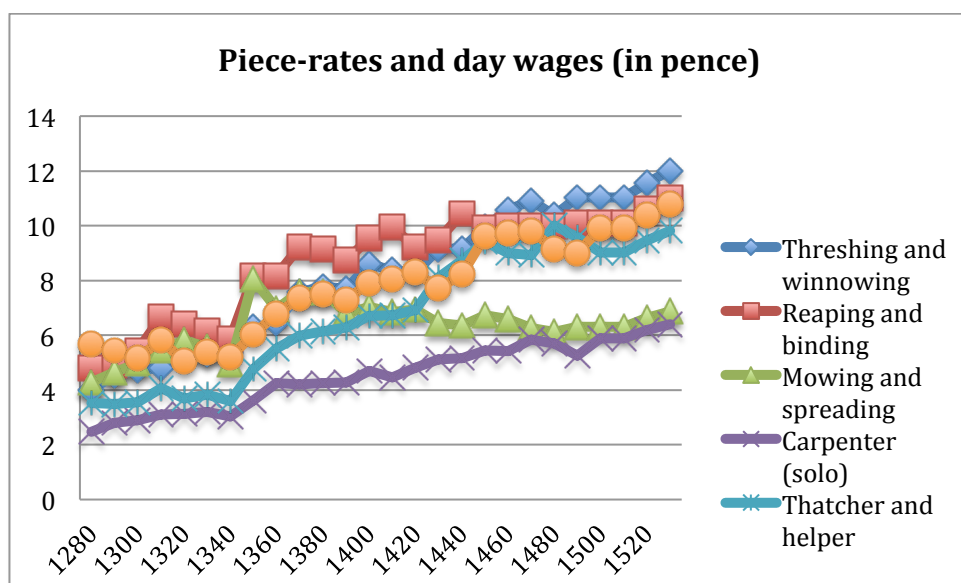


**Figure 4.** Crop sale prices for wheat, rye, barley, oats and peas.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Coburn V. Graves, 'Stixwould in the market-place' in *Medieval Religious Women, Vol. 1, Distant Echoes* ed. J.A. Nicholls and L.T. Shank (Kalamazoo MI: Cistercian Publications, 1984), pp. 213-35 (p. 230).

<sup>48</sup> Prices from David L. Farmer, 'Prices and wages' in *Agrarian History of England and Wales* ed. H.E. Hallam (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), ii, pp. 715-817 (p. 734) and *AHEW* ed. E. Miller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), iii, pp. 431-525 (p. 444) and from Peter Bowden, 'Agricultural prices, farm profits, and rents' in *AHEW* ed. J. Thirsk (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), iv, pp. 593-695 & pp. 814-870 ('Statistical appendix') (p. 857).

While the prices of goods were moving up and down, the direction of costs, especially of labour, was distinctly upwards:



**Figure 5.** The movement in labour costs over the period 1280 to 1540.<sup>49</sup>

The average daily wage rate across England for a carpenter between 1270 and 1520 roughly doubled, rising from 3d to 6d.<sup>50</sup> We cannot know for sure what impact such increased labour costs had for Canonsleigh as no household account rolls have survived. What seems certain is that, to maintain the same standard of living, the income per nun would need to rise. We saw in Figure 1 that the overall value of Canonsleigh's assets between 1323 and 1535 rose from approximately £150 to £200. At £5 per nun in 1323, the income of the time would therefore support thirty nuns. Calculating how many nuns an income of £200 would support in the differing conditions of 1535 is not a matter of simple extrapolation: the question of the changing real value of the nuns' assets and income is a complex one. They were both consumers and producers, and they could adopt strategies to mitigate the impact of rising wage costs by renting out certain assets, increasing rents and other charges etc. Their perception of what was acceptable for their needs might also have changed. We might therefore take a broad and

<sup>49</sup> Prices from Farmer in *AHEW*, ii, p. 768 and iii, p. 471 and Bowden in *AHEW*, iv, p. 865.

<sup>50</sup> Christopher Dyer, *Making a Living in the Middle Ages: the People of Britain 850-1520* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2002), p. 240.



relatively pessimistic assumption that, for the same perceived standard of living as in 1323, double the income would be required in 1535 (matching the level of wage inflation already described). Thus an income of £200 would support around twenty nuns. We know from the pension list that there were in fact eighteen nuns in residence at Canonsleigh in 1539.<sup>51</sup> The numbers at similarly-sized nunneries were comparable. Lacock with a 1535 valuation also close to £200 had seventeen nuns.<sup>52</sup> In East Anglia, the moderately-sized Augustinian priory at Campsey Ash with an income from the *Valor* of £182 had twenty nuns at the Dissolution.<sup>53</sup>

The absolute increase in the value of Canonsleigh's assets has some interesting characteristics.

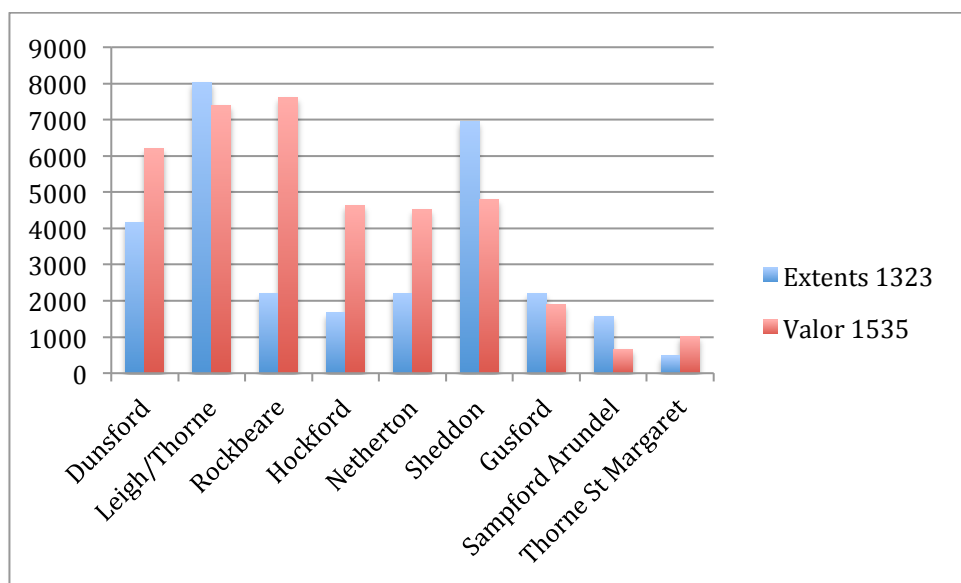
Figure 6 shows the change in values between 1323 and 1535 for most of the manors:

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<sup>51</sup> *Mon. Angl.*, p. 333 fn.q.

<sup>52</sup> Chew, 'The abbey of Lacock', p. 309. A second valuation had raised the income level from £169 to £210.

<sup>53</sup> Oliva, *Convent and Community*, p.41.



**Figure 6.** The comparative value of Canonsleigh's manors (values in pence).

Some of the largest gains are in the Devon manors of Dunsford, Netherton and Rockbeare. The information for the manor of Netherton is shown on Table 3:

**Table 3.** The changing valuations for the manor of Nether-ton (in pence).

Category	Value in 1323 <sup>54</sup>	Value in 1535 <sup>55</sup>
Rent from tenants	732	2097
<i>Auxilium</i> and services	560	-
Demesne value	954	-
Rental of demesne	-	1440
Farm of the mill	-	192
Perquisites of the court	-	795
<b>TOTAL</b>	2246	4524

There have been gains from renting out the demesne land and from the general category of perquisites of the court. However, there has also been a substantial growth in the value of rents (of which only a very small proportion are rents from free tenants), though how and when that was achieved is unknown. Such an increase in assized rent for a manor is not unique. At Tavistock Abbey there was a large rise in rents at their manor of Burrington.<sup>56</sup> Rents also rose by one third between 1374 and 1420 on the manor of Bishop's Clyst in East Devon.<sup>57</sup> These increases run counter to the general view that through most of the fifteenth century rents tended to fall, and that estates struggled against falling incomes from their manors.<sup>58</sup> The nuns would surely have benefited from the success of the broader regional economy of south-west England

<sup>54</sup> British Library, Harleian MS. 3660, ff. 141-142v.

<sup>55</sup> *Valor Ecclesiasticus*, ii, p.328.

<sup>56</sup> Herbert P.R. Finberg, *Tavistock Abbey: a Study in the Social and Economic History of Devon* (New York: Kelley, 1969), p. 256.

<sup>57</sup> Nathaniel W. Alcock, 'An east Devon manor in the later Middle Ages' in *Report and Transactions Devonshire Association*, 102 (1970), 141-187 (p. 142).

<sup>58</sup> Christopher Dyer, *An Age of Transition? Economy and Society in England in the Later Middle Ages* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), p. 30.

during the period 1334 to 1525. The region has been described as enjoying an outstanding increase in wealth, and by the early sixteenth century the nearby town of Tiverton was beginning to prosper from the cloth trade.<sup>59</sup> More important still was the general progress in agricultural productivity of the region, changes which astounded and impressed contemporaries and which allowed rents to rise.<sup>60</sup>

In summary therefore we can see from two detailed documents, the cartulary and extents survey of 1323 and the *Valor Ecclesiasticus* of 1535, how the wealth of Canonsleigh Abbey developed over two centuries. It seems clear that the initial endowment of the house was never sufficient to support the planned contingent of forty canonesses, and the first forty years of the abbey were difficult ones while its endowment was being fulfilled. The value of the assets, especially of the rental income, did grow, and by 1535 the abbey was valued at close to £200.<sup>61</sup>

Whatever the true size of their endowment, were the nuns good stewards of their assets? We have seen that Eileen Power was clear when it came to financial management: the nuns were not effective stewards of their endowment. More sympathetic in general terms to the plight of nuns are recent authors such as Gilchrist and Oliva who believe that “Economic support could be expected through the benefactions of local people [...] suggesting that monasteries for women may never have been intended to be economically self-supporting.”<sup>62</sup> It is certainly noteworthy that wealthy Matilda de Clare left the nuns with an endowment that fell significantly short of the £200 per annum that they would need as the basis for forty sisters. Gilchrist and Oliva believe

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<sup>59</sup> Henry C. Darby, Robin E. Glasscock, John Sheail and others, 'The changing geographical distribution of wealth in England: 1086-1324-1525', *Journal of Historical Geography* 5 (1979), 247-62 (pp. 257, 259).

<sup>60</sup> Thirsk, *AHEW*, iv, pp. 74-5.

<sup>61</sup> Unlike the actions of the monks at Battle Abbey (see Jonathan Coad, *Battle Abbey and Battlefield* (London: English Heritage, 2007), p. 41), there is no evidence that by the date of suppression in 1539 the nuns at Canonsleigh had attempted to run down their endowment or dispose of assets (see Joyce Youings (ed.), *Devon Monastic Lands: Calendar of Particulars for Grants, 1536-1558* (Exeter: Devon and Cornwall Record Society, 1955), p. 59).

<sup>62</sup> Gilchrist and Oliva, *Religious Women in Medieval East Anglia*. p. 35.

that the nuns may have embraced poverty as an aspect of their piety.<sup>63</sup> However the evidence from Canonsleigh suggests a more hard-nosed approach to financial management. We see on a number of occasions how tenacious the abbey could be in pursuing those who owed it money or resources. Six hundred marks were taken from it by Edward I to finance his wars but they were never forgotten, and in the reigns of Edward and subsequent kings the nuns continued to agitate for repayment.<sup>64</sup> It was only in 1331 that Edward III finally cleared the debt by assigning Canonsleigh a sufficient share in the customs duty of Southampton.<sup>65</sup> We see the convent pursuing other debtors with equal resolve. At the end of the abbey's life, there appear to have been few debts outstanding.

In the later part of the abbey's life significant steps were taken to revise the way Canonsleigh was run. The demesne lands for several of the abbey manors were rented out (this must have happened some time after 1377), although control of the overall manorial institutions was retained by the convent. The exception to this was the distant manor of Manytre (as Sheddon was now described) which was leased out.<sup>66</sup> A number of other leases were arranged, especially during the rule of the final abbess, Elizabeth Fowell.<sup>67</sup>

One interesting insight into the financial thinking of the nuns is provided by the brief visitation report from 1492 in Morton's register when thirteen nuns were cited to appear before the visitor. The prioress reported "that they were short of their complete number by three persons".<sup>68</sup> How would they arrive at such an estimate? It may be that they had made a calculation, based on their income and expenditure, that sixteen was the number of religious the abbey could prudently

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<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>64</sup> George Oliver, *Monasticon Diocesis Exoniensis* (Exeter: Longmans, 1846), p. 224. The seizure by Edward occurred in or after 1285.

<sup>65</sup> *Cart.*, p. xiii.

<sup>66</sup> *Mon. Dio. Exon.*, p. 234.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 226; Youings, *Devon Monastic Lands*, M.9; *Mon. Dio. Exon.*, p. 226.

<sup>68</sup> *The Register of John Morton, Archbishop of Canterbury, 1486-1500*, ed. Christopher Harper-Bill (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1991), ii, pp. 76-7.

sustain.<sup>69</sup> We have no injunction from outside to suggest that a specific number had been imposed. Snape's assessment on this issue is characteristically downbeat: "The difficulty was to keep down the number of nuns to something that could be fairly said to be in proportion with the scanty revenues at their disposal. The episcopal registers reveal it as the constant effort of the bishops to prevent the veiling of fresh nuns."<sup>70</sup> Thompson points out that to achieve financial stability, a balance had to be maintained between endowments and the number in the community.<sup>71</sup> In looking at Bungay Priory, Oliva states that the prioress kept a narrow positive margin between income and her expenses.<sup>72</sup> It looks as if a similar approach was being taken by the abbess at Canonsleigh. By 1539 the number of nuns had gone up slightly to eighteen, suggesting that the growing prosperity of the period had allowed an increase in the numbers.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Heale, *Monasticism in Late Medieval England*, p. 8., states that "Most houses sought to maintain an ideal size of community proportionate to their financial resources."

<sup>70</sup> Snape, *English Monastic Finances*, p. 149.

<sup>71</sup> Sally Thompson, 'Why English nunneries had no history: a study of the problems of the English nunneries founded after the conquest', in *Medieval Religious Women, Vol. 1, Distant Echoes* ed. J.A. Nicholls and L.T. Shank (Kalamazoo MI: Cistercian Publications, 1984), pp. 131-49 (p. 138).

<sup>72</sup> Oliva, *The Convent and the Community*, p. 95.

<sup>73</sup> The recruitment of religious generally was showing an upward trend by the early sixteenth century (Christopher Harper-Bill, *The Pre-Reformation Church in England, 1400-1500* (London: Longman, 1996), p. 40).

**Table 4.** The numbers of nuns as recorded for Canonsleigh.

Date	Number of religious	Source	Notes
1284	3	<i>Portman Deed</i> , No. 39; Perceval, 'Remarks', p. 424.	Three nuns are listed as coming from Lacock Abbey to the newly established nunnery.
1314	50	<i>Reg. Stapledon</i> , p. 94.	In his entry dated 8 August 1314, the bishop talks of " <i>sustentacionem Canoniarum in numero quinquagenario</i> ". This seems odd given the original endowment was for 40 nuns.
1410	10	<i>Reg. Stafford</i> , pp. 48-9.	List of nuns at the election of Margaret Beauchamp as abbess.
1449	16	<i>Reg. Lacy</i> (ed. Hingeston-Randolph), i, pp. 344-52.	List of nuns at the election of Joan Arundell as abbess.
1471	14	Perceval, 'Remarks', p. 445.	List of nuns at the election of Alice Parker as abbess.
1492	13	<i>Reg. Morton</i> , ii, pp. 76-7.	Brief visitation report. Agnes Stone, prioress, states "that they were short of their complete number by three persons."
1539	18	<i>Mon. Angl.</i> , vi, p. 346.	Pension list upon suppression.

We have little insight as to how the abbey might have derived additional income from other

sources. It seems very likely that the income from Canonsleigh's agricultural and ecclesiastical holdings predominated. One additional source of income for which we do have at least some information is that from wills and bequests. Even on the small remaining sample of medieval Devon wills, we can see bequests continuing well into the final phase of the abbey's life, demonstrating that it was clearly valued by its local benefactors.

### **The Poverty of the Nuns**

Although we have seen from the above discussion that the income of the abbey did grow during its lifetime, the issue of poverty is one that recurs. There is indeed plenty of documentation that relates how the nuns were poor. One frequently recurring indication is the abbey being excused its payment of clerical taxation. This begins in the register of Bishop Lacy in October 1421.<sup>74</sup> Another recurring example of poverty (or at least a claim to poverty) is the non-payment of papal dues. In 1410, Canonsleigh was three years in arrears.<sup>75</sup> By May 1421 the arrears had increased to six years.<sup>76</sup> However “claims of poverty, particularly when made in the context of avoiding taxation, must be treated with some caution, then as now.”<sup>77</sup> The evidence for periods of financial difficulty at Canonsleigh is therefore strong. However the survival of the house through some very testing times indicates that there must have been a degree of resilience in the abbey's finances, and there must have been an adequate level of financial management in place.

The above analysis has shown how the evidence from Canonsleigh Abbey appears to support and confirm many of the more modern interpretations of the financial life of a nunnery for the late medieval period. We certainly have no evidence of any extravagance in the lifetime of the

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<sup>74</sup> *The Register of Edmund Lacy, Bishop of Exeter, 1420-1455*, ed. Gordon R. Dunstan (Torquay: Canterbury and York Society, 1963), i, p. 86. The two other Devon nunneries were similarly excused.

<sup>75</sup> *The Register of Edmund Stafford (A.D. 1395-1419)*, ed. Francis C. Hingeston-Randolph (London: G. Bell, 1886), pp. 48-9.

<sup>76</sup> *Reg. Lacy* (ed. Dunstan), i, p. 32.

<sup>77</sup> Thompson, 'Why English nunneries had no history', p. 137.



abbey. We can see from the review of the number of religious at Canonsleigh that they reduced themselves to what they regarded as a balanced number of around sixteen religious, rising slightly to eighteen in 1539. We do not know the size of their household as regards servants and other workers, but it seems likely that it was somewhere between twenty and forty (in 1536 Lacock Abbey had 36 servants serving 17 nuns).<sup>78</sup> Perhaps the closest Canonsleigh came to real financial upset was in 1320. This was at the end of a period of great distress in English agriculture. We have no good information about the impact of the Black Death upon the abbey, but some assets appear to have been disposed. It seems that the long-term economic impact led to the abbey making the prudent changes in its practices to balance costs against income. All of this suggests that the picture of the nuns attempting to balance income and expenditure is a sound one.<sup>79</sup> It means that they would seek to adapt to changing circumstances. Thus Power's vision of nunneries beset by financial mismanagement and on a consistent, downward trajectory, is not supported by the evidence from Canonsleigh. The evidence instead points to a sustainable process of adaptation to the challenges that the nuns faced.

### **The Religious Community and their Conduct**

The changing numbers of religious, their social make-up, and their conduct and discipline are all inter-related issues on which Eileen Power and other authors have strong views. "Everywhere this decline in the number of nuns went steadily on during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries" is Power's summary of the trend in the size of the nunneries.<sup>80</sup> Communities were faced with conflicting priorities and struggling to gain members after the plague, while often facing attempts by bishops to keep down their numbers.<sup>81</sup> While maintaining the size of their community after 1348-9 could be a struggle, Power notes that the bishops had to fight against the nuns using their

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<sup>78</sup> Chew, 'The abbey of Lacock', p. 311.

<sup>79</sup> Thompson, 'Why English nunneries had no history', p. 138.

<sup>80</sup> Power, *Nunneries*, p. 215.

<sup>81</sup> Snape, *English Monastic Finances*, p. 149; Platt, *King Death*, p. 79.

reduced numbers to indulge in an extravagant lifestyle.<sup>82</sup> We have seen previously how Harper-Bill detected some increase in clerical recruitment in the period just before the Dissolution.<sup>83</sup> The existence of a slow recovery in numbers is something also pointed to by Oliva in her study from East Anglia.<sup>84</sup> This confirms Harper-Bill's analysis and it is something that Power did not detect.

Looking at the moral state of the medieval nunneries, Power begins with a surprisingly mild statement: "It is difficult to form any exact impression of the moral state of the English nunneries during the later middle age [...] it is necessary to guard against exaggeration."<sup>85</sup> Yet she soon takes a stronger position: "Nevertheless there was a steady movement downhill in the history of the monasteries during the last two centuries and a half before the Dissolution. They shared in the growing degradation of the Church in its head and members."<sup>86</sup> At Canonsleigh we are fortunate to have important statements concerning the state of the monastic community from both near the beginning and from the end of its life. In 1314 Bishop Stapledon was very enthusiastic in his praise of the nuns.<sup>87</sup> Looking towards the very end of Canonsleigh's lifetime, we have the tantalisingly brief statement from the commissioners who arrived to accept the abbey's surrender in February 1539: "... we found there as much conformity as might be desired."<sup>88</sup> There is little sign therefore in 1539 of the accumulated moral decline to which Power alludes. There are however some interesting pieces of evidence from the intervening years that help to provide some balance, and indicate that the nunnery was populated with and overseen by fallible individuals.<sup>89</sup> However, for most of the time it seems possible that the nuns of

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<sup>82</sup> Power, *Nunneries*, p. 215.

<sup>83</sup> Harper-Bill, *The Pre-Reformation Church*, p. 40.

<sup>84</sup> Oliva, *The Convent and the Community*, p. 39.

<sup>85</sup> Power, *Nunneries*, p. 436.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 472.

<sup>87</sup> *Cart.*, 276.

<sup>88</sup> *Cart.*, p. xix.

<sup>89</sup> *The Register of Walter de Stapledon, Bishop of Exeter (A.D. 1307-1326)*, ed. Francis C. Hingeston-Randolph (London, G. Bell, 1892), p. 95; *Cart.*, p. xviii; *The Register of John de Grandisson, Bishop of Exeter (A.D. 1327-1369)*, ed. F.C. Hingeston-Randolph (London: G. Bell, 1894), i, p. 508; *Reg. Grandisson*, ii, pp. 1185-86.

Canonsleigh did live quiet lives of prayer and devotion.<sup>90</sup>

## Conclusion

Over ninety years since the publication of *Medieval English Nunneries*, Eileen Power's work has retained a strong hold on the scholarship of the female houses of the later Middle Ages. Her overarching message is one of decline, identified through three areas of focus, namely finances, morality and organisation. Power describes the decline as a long, steady, downhill movement leading to the "last degenerate years". Her work remains widely quoted in the modern literature, but there has been a reaction against her analysis, especially among a group of revisionist scholars who looked in detail at small groups of nunneries such as those in East Anglia and Yorkshire. They describe convents that may have struggled financially, but were rooted in and valued by their local communities.<sup>91</sup> They highlight change and adaptation by the nuns, but are keen to point out that this should not be confused with a general process of decline. Instead they see it as a sign of vigour.

This study has opted to take one nunnery from a region that has not been widely studied, to assess whether Power's thesis is supported by the evidence. The circumstances of the re-foundation of Canonsleigh from a house for canons to a female one, caused early strains. By the 1330s their endowment was complete although it was hardly adequate for the complement of forty nuns as envisaged by the pope. By the fifteenth century it seems that the abbey had devised a formula that would have allowed for a comfortable though not lavish lifestyle. They appear to have tried to keep their numbers to around sixteen religious, meaning that they could live on an income of over £10 (2,400 pence) per nun. They were active managers of their finances,

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<sup>90</sup> Oliva, *Convent and Community*, p. 74.

<sup>91</sup> The poverty of the Yorkshire nunneries is highlighted in Janet E. Burton, *The Yorkshire Nunneries in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries* (York: Borthwick Institute of Historical Research, 1979), p. 11.

pursuing their debtors with vigour, and especially towards the end of the abbey's life, the nuns seem to have adopted more sophisticated methods of financial management. They were able to raise increased rental income from their lands as seen in the data from the *Valor Ecclesiasticus*. With respect to the morality of the nuns, little evidence has been found to suggest any grave problems. In terms of organisational change or decline, there is little support for Power's darkening picture.

By 1539, the abbey of Canonsleigh was far from being at the low ebb that Power's hypothesis predicts. The picture is not a static one, but one of adaptation through the first half century of the Tudor era. The evidence from Canonsleigh therefore provides convincing support for the interpretation of Oliva, Clark and others that there was change and vitality in the monastic houses right up to the date of their suppression.

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