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Philanthropy, economy and society in north east England: The Middle Ages, 1100-1500

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Abstract

This paper surveys the history of philanthropy in the North East of England from the time the North East was brought under Norman control (thirty years or so after the Conquest of 1066) to the end of the fifteenth century. Our purpose is to understand philanthropy in the context of the economics, politics, beliefs, values and social practices of the time. With government effectively de-centralized and wealth very unevenly divided, the conditions existed for major philanthropic initiatives, especially in the two and a half centuries before the Black Death. There were seven main loci of activity, three religious, two religious-secular, and two secular. Philanthropy helped both in fulfilling religious obligations and in increasing the social standing of donors. Building, repairing, extending, adorning, and endowing churches and chapels counted among the most favoured of philanthropic causes. Care for the poor, sick and elderly was another religious injunction placed upon the wealthy by the medieval church. Furthermore, across the region, landed, clerical and entrepreneurial philanthropists played a leading part in creating the infrastructure that made economic and social progress possible.

Keywords

Philanthropy, Economy, Society, North East England, Medieval history, Chantry, Almshouse

Introduction

At the time of the Norman Conquest of England, in 1066, the North East, bounded by the river Tees in the south, the river Tweed in the north, the Pennine watershed in the west, and the North Sea in the east, was a thinly populated agricultural region with few notable towns other than Bamburgh, the seat of the Earl of Northumbria, and Durham, from where the Bishop of Durham ruled over the extensive landholdings accumulated over centuries by the community of St Cuthbert (Lomas, 1992: 1-19). The entire population of England, estimated on the basis of the Domesday survey of 1086, was about 1.71 million, of which an estimated 20,032 souls were spread across the North East, 7,732 in Durham and 12,300 in Northumberland (Broadberry et al, 2015: 3-45). The North East, in effect, was part of a geographically extensive buffer zone between Scotland to the North and the more prosperous parts of England south of the Tees (Lomas, 1996: 3-33).

The whole of northern England was contested territory before the Conquest, and it remained so for centuries down to the union of the Scottish and English crowns in 1603, when James VI of Scotland became James I of England. Just how to shore up the northern frontier of his newly acquired kingdom was a problem for William I (1028-1087), and it continued to be so for his descendants as a succession of Scottish Kings laid claim variously to parts of Cumbria, Northumberland and Westmoreland, countering English claims to the border counties of Scotland and overlordship of the entirety of

mainland Britain, before King Robert I (the Bruce, 1274-1329) finally won recognition for Scotland as an independent nation in 1328 (Lomas, 1992: 32-53). Decisions taken by William I and his immediate successor, his son, William II (1056-1100), about how best to manage the threat of turbulence in the north had profound and lasting consequences for the economy, society and politics in the North East (Lomas, 1992: 54-74).

Economy, society and politics

Three policies were crucial in establishing a framework for governance within which a rich assortment of political dramas was played out over more than five centuries. First, after an initial period of accommodation with the former Saxon ruling elite, there followed a thoroughgoing process of subjugation, beginning with the legendary 'harrying of the north' (1069-70), which within 50 years saw the old landowning elite almost entirely displaced by incoming Normans (Lomas, 1992: 20-31). Second, exceptionally within England, the powers of the Bishop of Durham over secular as well as religious matters within his territories was confirmed under King Henry II (1133-1189) as a means of securing stability in the region (Lapsley, 1900: 27-30). Third, the defensive capability of Northumberland was enhanced by the building or improvement of a string of castles by the Crown (Newcastle, begun 1080, and Bamburgh, confiscated from the Earl of Northumberland in 1095), the Bishop of Durham (Norham, begun 1121), and major landowners bound to the Crown by military obligations, as at Alnwick (in place by 1136) and Warkworth (in place by 1157). In all, twelve castles were operational by 1200 (Lomas, 1996: 54), each of which was progressively strengthened through the addition of towers and turrets as stone replaced wood as the favoured material for fortifications.

Norman rule in the North East, as elsewhere in England, built on the existing structures and practices and modified and enhanced these when necessary to achieve territorial control. The system was strictly hierarchical, all land belonging ultimately to the King, granted to tenants-in-chief in return for feudal services, principally the supply of knights in times of war (Lomas, 1992: 20-31). The tenants-in-chief (Barons) and their tenants (Lords of the Manor) formed the aristocracy, and under them, the land was worked by the peasantry, itself divided by into classes with different rights and obligations (Hinde, 2003: 19-21). Landed estates were composed of a variable number of townships, the basic unit of economic organization, made up of an ordered group of dwellings around a village green, which was surrounded by fields for growing crops, pasture, woodlands and uncultivated moorlands (Lomas, 1992: 92-103). The arable fields, in turn, were divided into strips of a fixed size. Each dwelling within the township had attached to it a number of arable strips and access rights to pasture, woodlands and other communal resources. In the North East, the *bondsmen* who with their families worked the land typically held between 15 and 30 acres in arable strips, growing crops of wheat, barley, rye, oats and peas. They lived in rectangular wooden framed dwellings divided into two rooms, one for the family, and the other for animals. Each dwelling had its own garden area used variously for growing fruit and vegetables and keeping fowl. The land was worked using oxen as the main beast of burden. Surplus produce could be sold and traded for cloth, utensils and other goods at fairs and markets (Biddick, 1985; McCord & Thompson, 1998: 39-45). Rents were paid to landowners in varying combinations of cash and labour service on the *demesne* farm worked directly by the lord of the manor. Some cottagers who held little land might be paid in cash or produce, as were blacksmiths, millers, and other

tradespeople. At the bottom of the social scale were slaves, who were treated as chattels, and known in the North East as *neifs*.

The great landowners of England, the nobility, owned many estates, often spread across the country, totalling in many cases over 100,000 acres. They were *rentiers* whose income came from the rents paid by tenants and collected by their agents. The wealthiest of them, in comparative terms, were among the richest people ever to have lived. Indeed, according to Beresford and Rubinstein (2007: 7-20), the all-time wealthiest person in Britain was the Norman lord, Alan Rufus (d. 1093), who fought at the Battle of Hastings, and was rewarded with estates worth £81 billion in current money. Alan Rufus was one of many first-generation Anglo-Normans and their descendants to profit handsomely from the Conquest, such that Britain's all-time rich list is dominated by them. In the North East, the present Duke of Northumberland, [Ralph Percy](#), is a descendant of William de Percy, who arrived in England in 1087 (Lomas, 1999). The power and wealth that went with concentrated land ownership are crucial to understanding the nature and composition of philanthropy in medieval England.

Crucial also is the role played in society by organized religion and its relationship to government, landowning and wealth. The Catholic Church, hierarchically and systematically organized, offered a powerful means of bringing order to the realm and instilling beliefs that ultimately justified the existence of the rigidly stratified social order imposed under Norman rule. At the time of the Conquest, England was already divided into diocese presided over by Bishops, which in turn were divided into parishes under the authority of a rector assisted by lower ranking salaried priests. At the top of the church hierarchy was the Archbishop of Canterbury, appointed by the Pope, anointed as successor to St Peter as supreme head of the Roman church (Barlow, 1979). In the North East, the diocese of Durham comprised the parishes of both County Durham and Northumberland, a situation that prevailed until 1882 when Newcastle became a separate diocese. One of several peculiarities within this basic pattern was that the Archbishop of York, who technically ranked higher in the church than the Bishop of Durham, counted Hexham within his diocese. The income of the church, which flowed upward through the hierarchy, came from three main sources: tithes, the right to extract 10% of the value of agricultural production; rents from lands owned by the church at the parish and diocesan levels; and, charges made by priests for services such as baptisms, marriages and funerals (Lomas, 1992: 104-121). The funds generated were used to pay the salaries of clergy and build, maintain and adorn churches. Any surpluses, which could be very large, flowed into the hands of the main office holders, rectors of parishes and bishops of dioceses, to be used at their own discretion, effectively as personal income. The extraordinary wealth and power of the Bishop of Durham stemmed not only from tithes and rents, but also possession of the greatest franchise in medieval England, covering 687,684 acres, over which he exercised secular as well as religious authority, and with it the right to collect royalties, dues and fines of different kinds (Lomas, 1992: 75-84).

A third factor critical to any understanding of philanthropy in medieval England is the rise of boroughs, urban settlements, and within them the skilled workers and merchants who comprised the emerging entrepreneurial class of England (Casson & Casson, 2013: 58-61). Boroughs were created by the crown and first-tier barons to facilitate trade and economic development, thereby increasing their own revenues from rentals, dues and taxation (McCord & Thompson, 1998: 50-57). The essential features were the establishment of a borough court as a legal forum for administration and freedom for

burgesses to produce and sell goods and services. Towns in England already played a pivotal role in English society before the Black Death, at the centre of networks of production and domestic and international trade (Miller & Hatcher: 2014). In all, 24 boroughs were created during the Middle Ages across the North East, most notably at Newcastle, which quickly emerged as the economic capital of the region, largely on account of its military and administrative centrality, the zealously guarded privileges enjoyed by its merchants, and the cohesiveness of its political elite (Lomas, 2009: 311-15; Purdue, 2011: 22-48). In Northumberland, rival boroughs like Alnwick, Corbridge, Hexham and Morpeth failed to grow at the same pace as Newcastle, and equally aspirants like Bishop Auckland, Bernard Castle, Darlington, Durham, Gateshead, Hartlepool, Stockton and Sunderland in County Durham failed to grow as vigorously as Newcastle. Collectively, however, the boroughs were pivotal to economic expansion in the North East following the Conquest, when the population of England increased from an estimated 1.71 million in 1086 to a peak of 4.81 million prior to the tragedy of the Black Death in 1348, which resulted in a sudden decline to about 2.60 million in 1351 (Broadberry et al., 2015: 3-45). Further plagues and disasters meant the population declined still further to a low point of about 1.9 million in the mid-fifteenth century. The pattern of boom and bust was more exaggerated in the North East than elsewhere in England. In the peaceful times between 1086 and 1290, it is estimated that the combined population of County Durham and Northumberland increased more than tenfold from 20,032 to 223,574, with 75,490 in Durham and 148,084 in Northumberland at the later date. There ensued a dramatic collapse down to 1377 when the population is estimated at 24,587 for Durham and 30,389 for Northumberland, a total of just 54,976 (Broadberry et al., 2015: 25). With an average annual rate of decrease in population between 1290 and 1377 of 1.80% for Northumberland and 1.28% for County Durham, the two counties can be seen to have suffered a sharper diminution than any other county in England, where the annual average rate of decline was 0.74%. How can this record collapse be explained? The answer must lie in a combination of plague and the horrors of war inflicted on the region by Scottish raids and invasions led by King Robert I of Scotland during the early decades of the fourteenth century, which drove people to leave the region for settlements in less hazardous parts of the country. That Northumberland, given its proximity to Scotland, suffered the most is hardly surprising (Lomas, 1996: 38-44).

An important conclusion follows from this brief history of economy and society in the North East during medieval times. This is that the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and the fourteenth century prior to the great pestilence, were propitious times for philanthropic initiatives aimed at social betterment. A long period of economic expansion, with more land occupied and more goods bought and sold, meant that those in positions of economic power – landowners, church leaders and entrepreneurs – enjoyed steadily rising incomes, giving them the wherewithal voluntarily to take action in pursuit of the public good. In this, they were motivated by economic goals reinforced by religious beliefs and social norms. The Catholic Church taught that wealth dictated a duty to care for others and the obligation to provide for the poor. To pursue wealth for its own sake was sinful because it led men to succumb to vanity, pride, and covetousness, whereas the act of giving to others was redemptive, helping the benefactor find favour in the eyes of God. Thus, the wealthy, however worldly, should try to see themselves as temporary custodians of God's riches and act in the communal interest by giving to the church and the poor (Feingold, 1987).

Philanthropy in England with Reference to the North East

Medieval philanthropy is often viewed as almost entirely religious, both with respect to objectives and motivations, and certainly the Catholic Church loomed large in the hearts and minds of Kings, the nobility and the gentry who together constituted the ruling elite. It would be mistaken, however, to regard these people, from whose ranks the philanthropists of medieval England were mainly drawn, as unworldly. They were economically and politically engaged and economically and politically animated. Religion may have figured high in the scheme of things, but it was just one part of a bigger picture. The Normans who migrated to Britain and their successors had the ambition to conquer, settle and develop the lands conferred upon them by the King as a means prospering on earth as well as in heaven (Postan, 1973). Elite philanthropy of whatever type – religious, religious-secular or secular – invariably served to help fashion and control society. In this venture, selfish motives, religious motives and humanitarian motives were intermingled and impossible to separate, then or now (Jordan, 1959).

Religious philanthropic causes

Widespread acceptance of this doctrine meant that philanthropy helped both in fulfilling religious obligations and in increasing the social standing of donors. Building, repairing, extending, adorning, and endowing churches and chapels counted among the most favoured of philanthropic causes for landed aristocrats. They were not alone, church-building was the natural domain of church leaders, as in Durham, but Kings and the upper echelon of the nobility were involved alongside manorial lords providing for their parishes. McNeil estimates that at the peak of building in the thirteenth century, £60,000 was expended each year on construction, the modern-day equivalent of £600 million (McNeil, 2006: 9-22). Endowing land to provide rental income for priests followed naturally as new townships were created and existing townships enlarged. Establishing a *chantry* by endowment of property enabled more priests to be appointed to a living in return for saying prayers of intercession for the donor. In endowing chantries, the rich were driven by the desire to limit their time in purgatory, when the soul was purged of sin after the death of the body. Meritorious actions on earth such as almsgiving and the celebration of masses, together with intercessionary prayers by priests or the honest poor, were intended to reduce suffering in purgatory (Burgess, 1987).

In the North East, where many ancient churches continue in use, there is good evidence of philanthropic gifts for building and decorating churches, as at St Michael and All Saints, Felton, where the church was built by the [Bertram](#) family in the twelfth century and the Lady Chapel added by [Sir Roger Mauduit](#) in 1331. Lomas (1992: 104-22), having conducted a thorough review of the evidence, shows how numerous aristocrats of varying stature brought new parish churches and 117 affiliated chapels into existence before 1300, after which church building virtually ceased with the sudden shrinkage in population. He also finds evidence of chantries in wills and other documents. In Northumberland alone, there were 42 chantries in existence prior to banishment and confiscation by Henry VIII (Lomas, 1996: 112-13). Chantries were especially favoured by the merchant community of Newcastle (Brand, 1789), with 11 at the parish church of St Nicholas (founded c. 1091) and a further 16 spread between the affiliated chapels of All Saints (founded c. 1286), St Andrew (founded c. 1218), and St John (founded c. 1287).

Philanthropy in support of religious orders of monks, nuns and friars offered further opportunities to prepare for a place in Heaven. By 1066, all ancient monasteries of the North East, other than the

Community of St Cuthbert, then in residence at Durham, had become extinct following the destruction of Viking raids. The incoming Normans were strong supporters of religious orders as the ultimate expression of devotion to God, and as sites of family patronage (Stöber, 2007). In Durham, the priory was thoroughly reorganized by Bishop William de St-Calais (1081-1096), and the new cathedral, begun in 1093 and completed in 1133, was placed under monastic control. Cells of Durham monks were supported at Finchdale, Monkwearmouth and Jarrow. In Northumberland, the first mover was Earl Robert de Mowbray (d. 1125), who in 1088, before his deposition in 1095 by William II, generously endowed the monastery of Tynemouth as a cell of St Albans abbey in Hertfordshire. Five more monasteries were endowed: Hexham (c. early 11th century) by the Archbishop of York; Brinkburn (c. 1130) by lord of Mitford, [William Bertram I](#); Newminster (1139) by lord of Morpeth, Ralph de Merlay; and, Alnwick (1147) by Eustace, son of the lord of Alnwick. In addition, somewhat less well-endowed nunneries were founded by landowners at Lambley in South Tynedale, Holystone in upper Coquetdale, and St Bartholomew's in Newcastle. Besides the initial endowments of rent bearing properties, monasteries and nunneries served as magnets for further bequests from religiously inspired philanthropists. The financial security that resulted ensured their survival over the next four centuries until dissolved by Henry VIII between 1537 and 1540, at which point the priory of Durham had a complement of 66 monks and an annual rental income of £2,150, the equivalent of £1,687,769 in 2018. The various orders of mendicant (begging) friars that became established in Newcastle and other urban areas in the thirteenth century, such as the Dominicans (Blackfriars), Franciscans (Greyfriars) and Carmelites (Whitefriars), never enjoyed the same wealth or lavish incomes as their monastic brethren. They were, however, held in high regard for their contribution to the community, and the surviving documentary evidence shows them to have been beneficiaries of numerous acts of generosity, as on 8th January 1299 when the Whitefriars "received 16s 8d for their pittance of two days, by the hands of brother Roger de Felton, on the King's arrival in Newcastle" (Brand, 1789).

Religious-secular philanthropic causes

Care for the poor, sick and elderly was another religious injunction placed upon the wealthy by the medieval church. To distribute alms to the poor, in effect food or money, was one of the most basic obligations of Christianity (Seal, 2013). It is impossible to gauge the full extent of alms giving in medieval England as so much of what was given was on a casual, everyday basis. In its more institutionalised forms, philanthropy involved the setting up of hospitals and almshouses, the terms often used interchangeably to describe a variety of functions. A hospital, for example, might be established to care for lepers, or the sick or the elderly, but eventually came to be associated with the provision of residential accommodation for elderly, poor people (Rawcliffe, 1984). Christ's Hospital at Sherburn near Durham, for example, was founded by [Bishop Hugh du Puiset](#) in 1181 to care for lepers, but soon took on the role of taking care of elderly clerics. It was so well endowed that it remains today as a residential care home and maker of grants to elderly people in need. The same applies to the Hospital of God in Greatham founded in 1273 by [Bishop Robert de Stichell](#). Many other long-lived hospitals and almshouses, however, in contrast to these two wealthy foundations, depended for their continued existence on the philanthropy of the many, not the few. The St Mary Magdalene Hospital in Newcastle, founded in 1250, now part of [St Mary Magdalene and Holy Jesus Trust](#), is a case in point. Another, and one of the best documented examples is St Mary's Hospital in Newcastle, founded in the reign of Henry II (1133-1189) by Asselack of Killnhowe "to serve God and the poor". The antiquarian John Brand lists details of 14 benefactions made between 1251 and 1347, including that in 1304 by

John de Lisle of “a messuage [dwelling house], four shops and a rent of 16 shillings”, and another in 1343 by “Joan, widow of Nicholas de Ellriker” who “remitted to the fraternity... all her right in the lands and tenements, which reverted to her as her dower after the death of her husband” (Brand, 1789). The medieval hospital and its chapel remained in service until demolition in 1861, when its remaining assets were used to build new homes for 17 “brethren” at Rye Hill in 1868. A further 40 studio apartments were built in Benwell in 1982. It is a remarkable tribute to the generosity and foresight of our forebears that the Hospital of St Mary the Virgin Almshouse Charity continues “to provide inexpensive sheltered accommodation for single elderly gentlemen” (Charity Commission, 2018) some 840 years or so after its foundation.

Medieval philanthropists also displayed foresight in other aspects of community life. Literate, educated people were in short supply both as priests of the church and to serve in secular administrative roles, leading Orme (2006) to conclude that “by the end of the middle ages there were hundreds of schools, supporting a highly literate society.” The provision of schools was necessary, and in this Leach (1969 [1915]) has shown that it was the secular clergy, not monks, who took the lead by attaching grammar schools to cathedrals and collegiate churches, and admitting boys pursuing learning for different future careers, not simply the priesthood. Durham School, founded in 1414 by [Bishop Thomas Langley](#), is given as a specific example of the creation of a school “quite outside of the monastery, a real public grammar school with which the monks had nothing whatever to do either in being taught or teaching in it, maintaining it or managing it” (quoted in Miner, 1962: 17). The Bishops of Durham enjoyed exceptional wealth and exceptional power and here it was directed unequivocally toward the public good, as the forerunner in the North East of the later great push toward mass literacy in which philanthropy was to play such a crucial role (Cannon, 2016).

Secular philanthropic causes

More immediately and more generally across the region, landed, clerical and entrepreneurial philanthropists played a leading part in creating the infrastructure that made economic and social progress possible (Miller & Hatcher, 2014: 135-80). Bridges, roads, market squares, municipal buildings, wells, water troughs and drinking fountains, and in places town walls and gateways, were all in varying degrees the objects of philanthropic initiatives. [Bishop Hugh du Puiset](#)’s commissioning of the Elvet Bridge in Durham in 1160 is a well-known example. Less well-known is that the medieval bridge over the river Coquet at Warkworth, built after 1379, was the bequest of a Newcastle merchant, John Cook (Lomas, 1996: 116). In Newcastle, the munificent merchant and four time mayor, [Roger Thornton](#), is remembered for his many contributions to the town, including provision of a sturdy defences at the West Gate in 1405 (Mackenzie, 1827), besides endowing his hospital for the poor, the *Maison Dieu*, and supporting several churches through chantries, provision of stained glass, and the large quantities of lead needed to remake roofs (Purdue, 2011: 44-45).

It is easy to form the impression of medieval philanthropy as one of simply the rich giving to the poor to redeem their immortal souls. In a pious age, there was some truth in this, but, like any caricature, it is misleading. First, because it overlooks that the actors concerned were often complex individuals with mixed motives, of which simply caring for others, desiring progress, and cherishing communities and institutions were surely also important. Second, and perhaps even more significant, is that everyday philanthropic acts, though rarely leaving a mark, are known to have been commonplace

among ordinary people in town and country. Judith Bennett (1992), for example, observes that top down philanthropy was insufficient to have helped most ordinary people cope with the inevitable trials and tribulations of medieval life. How, then, did they manage to survive and to some degree prosper? The answer is that ordinary people had their own bottom up form of communal philanthropy known as “ales”. An ale was a social gathering with fun and games at which food and drink were sold to attendees at deliberately inflated prices to yield a cash surplus for a beneficiary. Ales were ubiquitous throughout medieval England as a form of communal entertainment and as a mechanism for generating funds. They were held for different purposes such as “help-ales” to assist people who had fallen on hard times, “bride-ales” to endow marrying couples, “church-ales” to maintain churches and chapels, and “parish-ales” to fund municipal improvements. Ales were often frowned upon as a source of drunkenness, and they “excluded vagrants, strangers and others among the desperately poor from assistance”, but they were effective because the poor “did not have to rely exclusively upon the institutions of the generous rich” (Bennett, 1992: 41).

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