

# THE SOMERSET ESTATES OF THE VICARS CHORAL OF WELLS

BY ROBERT G HILL

Throughout the medieval period, North Somerset had several well-managed large estates mostly in ecclesiastical ownership. This paper examines the management and fortunes of a small scattered Somerset estate of some 800 acres, which unlike other ecclesiastical properties survived the political and religious upheavals of the 16th/17th centuries and remained in the unbroken ownership of Wells College of Vicars Choral for some 500 years (1348–1866).

## THE FOUNDATION OF WELLS CATHEDRAL AND THE VICARS CHORAL

In 909 the Saxon King Edward the elder subdivided the large Wessex diocese of Sherborne by designating the Wells minster church of St Andrew as the cathedral for the new diocese of Wells. In 1148 the cathedral was rebuilt and reorganised with new statutes based on those in use at Salisbury Cathedral. Bishop Robert (1136–1166) appointed the first Dean and Chapter with 22 supporting residentiary canons who had been endowed with prebends (Lat. *praebenda* – a pension) the income for which came from estates scattered throughout the diocese.<sup>1</sup>

Later each of the canons became responsible for the provision of a vicar (Lat. *vicarius* – deputy) to undertake cathedral choir duties. These men were the first Vicars Choral, who either lived with their respective canons or lodged in the town. It was the responsibility of each canon to maintain his Vicar Choral in proportion to the wealth of his prebend.

The numbers of the Vicars Choral fluctuated; by the early 14th century there were 50 vicars for the 51 stalls (including one stall for the bishop) constructed in the new Chapter House (c.1306) and later in the Quire (c.1325).

In 1220, Bishop Joceline amended the customs and statutes of the Cathedral to give the Vicars Choral daily allowances in cash instead of kind whereby 'each vicar to have a penny a day instead of the bread' (*quotidians*).<sup>2</sup> By the 13th century the Vicars Choral received payment not only from their respective canon's prebendal estate, but also from special services such as obits or masses. In 1298, the average wage received by a Wells Vicars Choral was £4 0s 0d per annum. This compared favourably with the salary paid to the 52 Vicars Choral at Salisbury Cathedral who, under their constitution of 1214, received a fixed annual payment from that canon's prebend as well as one penny a day from the cathedral chapter.<sup>3</sup>

## THE FOUNDATION OF THE COLLEGE OF VICARS CHORAL AND ITS ENDOWMENTS

In 1348, Bishop Ralph of Shrewsbury, following a petition from the Vicars Choral, obtained from King Edward III letters patent to incorporate the Vicars Choral styling them as '*Collegium novi Clausi Vicariorum infra libertatem Wellensis*' and to build for them suitable houses. Above all, the letters patent granted the college the right 'to settle lands and revenues for their maintenance'.<sup>4</sup>

Bishop Ralph built 42 bachelor houses and a common hall for meals which formed a college quadrangle, known as the New Close, now known as the Vicars' Close. The bishop endowed the College with lands at Congresbury and Wookey each of which provided an income of £5 0s 0d per annum. Bishop Ralph's generosity marked the beginning of a concerted effort to endow the Wells Vicars Choral with properties, not only to maintain the new College buildings but also to improve their salaries. In 1355 the Vicars Choral acquired the Wellesley estate near Wells, in 1361 the Christopher or New Inn in Wells High Street, and in 1371 the gift from Sub-dean Nicholas de Pontesbury of properties in Southover, Wells.

In 1384, Bishop Harewell granted the College the advowson of the church of Kingstone (near Ilminster), valued at 20 marks.<sup>5</sup> The estates gradually increased, with gifts of land at Martock in 1413,<sup>6</sup> manors of Exton and Newton Placey (now known as North Newton, near North Petherton) in 1437, together with the advowson of Newton Placey and Hawkridge churches 'for the use and profit of the Vicars Choral'.<sup>7</sup> Despite the increase of endowments, within 100 years of its foundation the Wells Vicars Choral were in serious financial problems because there was insufficient income to maintain the college buildings or to improve salaries. In 1463, Bishop Bekynton, the most generous of all the 15th century bishops, purchased from Lady Hungerford for £280 a small manor at Cheddar and Shipham which had a rent roll of £8 11s 0d. The bishop repaired the Close houses and hall, built the college chapel and made a new outside staircase to the hall. He added, adjoining the hall, a tower with muniment room (for the storage of estate leases), a chequer room (where tenants paid their rents) and, underneath, a treasury. In 1459, the college buildings were completed with the 'chain bridge' which linked the Vicars' Hall to the chapter house steps.<sup>8</sup> Further endowments were given to the Vicars

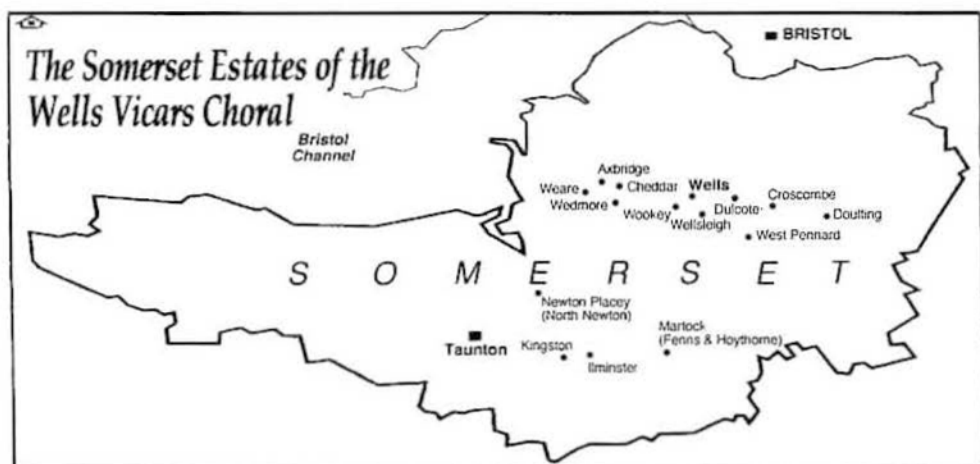


Fig. 1 The Somerset Estates of the Wells Vicar Choral



Plate 1 The Exchequer Room in the Vicars' 1420 offices at Wells, with washbasin, fireplace and great chest. Here the rents were received. Through the door into the Muniment Room can be seen the medieval filing cabinet where estate deeds were kept. Below the Muniment Room is the Treasury which was used for the storage of money and valuables.

Choral with lands at Heythorne (Kingsbury Episcopi, near Martock) in 1437,<sup>9</sup> at West Pennard in 1453/4,<sup>10</sup> Dulcote (near Wells) and Long Sutton in 1424.<sup>11</sup>

#### COLLEGE ADMINISTRATION

Bishop Bekynton not only improved the endowment income for the College of Vicars Choral, but in 1459 he set up statutes for the smooth management of the estates and internal administration. These decreed that on St Mathew's Day (Sept 21st), members would meet in the Vicars' Hall to elect their officers for the forthcoming year – two principals, one receiver or escheator responsible for the collection of the estate rents, and two Vicars Choral to act as auditors who would present a 'true account of the exchequer' to the College between St Andrew's Day (Nov. 30th) and Christmas Day (Dec. 25th).<sup>12</sup> Each of the Vicars Choral, with the exception of probationers, was expected to serve in these offices. For 400 years, until the transfer of the estates to the Ecclesiastical Commissioners in 1866, this remained the method of administration used by the College.

#### THE REFORMATION

No major changes were made during Henry VIII's reign either to the doctrine or liturgy of the Church of England, and, since Wells Cathedral was a secular foundation, services con-

tinued without a break. In 1549, the first English Prayer Book was introduced replacing the medieval round of daily services with Matins, Evensong, Litany and Holy Communion.

The first major change affecting the finances of the Vicars Choral came in 1547, when Edward VI suppressed chantries, obits and anniversary masses. It had long been the tradition at the Cathedral to collate the Vicars Choral to certain chantries as chantry priests. These duties provided valuable extra income augmenting their stipends by 20–30 shillings a year. The King's Commissioners did grant to the Cathedral the sum of £79 18s 9½d to provide pensions for displaced chantry priests of which the Vicars received a small share.

The greatest long term changes for the Vicars Choral came in 1549, when the Crown approved the marriage of clergy; financially, the young Vicars needed an adequate income to support a family, and socially, each family required two of the small bachelor houses for adequate living accommodation, whilst the former collegiate life of meals in the Vicars' Hall only took place on special college anniversaries.

### PRE-REFORMATION ESTATES

In 1534, Henry VIII ordered a survey of all ecclesiastical incomes known as the *Valor Ecclesiasticus*. The Wells Vicars Choral were listed as having an income of £208 11s 2d, comprising £136 1s 10d in stall wages from the canons' prebendal estates, and £66 14s 3d from estate rents. The 10 Vicars Choral each received from this income £20 17s 3½d per annum.

The estate income was made up as follows

Wells	£10 0s 9d	Cheddar	£8 5s 9½d
Wellesleigh	4 19s 10d	Newton Placey	6 13s 9½d
Wedmore	2 13s 4d	(West) Pennard	1 9s 0d
Kingstone	20 0s 0d	Martock (Heythorne)	9 1s 1d
		Weare	3 0s 8d
		Total	£66 14s 3d <sup>13</sup>

### THE ELIZABETHAN CHARTER 1591

By the time of Queen Elizabeth I (1559–1603), the Vicars Choral faced a crisis of confidence. They were an independent corporation, whose estates provided most of the income for their salaries; yet they were responsible to the Dean and Chapter for their duties in singing the Cathedral services. Nathaniel Chyles, the 17th century historian of Wells Cathedral, described the crisis as a 'debate of differences over the Dean and Chapter's efforts to assume control over the college and its estates'.<sup>14</sup>

The Vicars petitioned Queen Elizabeth for confirmation of their rights and privileges as set out in the early charters of Bishops Ralph of Shrewsbury and Thomas Bekynton. After an enquiry by a Commission, on 25th November 1591 Queen Elizabeth granted a Royal Charter,<sup>15</sup> which defined the College of Vicars as 'one body corporate and politique for ever' and confirmed that 'they may or be able to get, receive, appropriate, have, enjoy, possess, grant and demise mannors, lands, tenements, parsonages, tenths, advowsons of churches profits easements and hereditments'.<sup>16</sup> Nathaniel Chyles summed up the royal Charter 'there being nothing added to them; nay tis well there was nothing taken from them'.<sup>17</sup>

The Charter listed the properties from which the Vicars had been receiving rents for the

previous twenty years. Whilst it does not always give details of acreages or rents, the Charter does provide the first post-Reformation survey of the college estates:

*Manors*

Newton Placie (North Petherton)  
Cheddar  
Wellesleigh (near Dinder, Wells)

*Advowson*

Rights of presentation to the benefices of Hawkridge and Kingstone

*Lands / Tenements in Wells*

Wells – including Vicars' Close houses (42)  
Tenements (33)  
The Christopher or New Inn (1)  
Horrington (near Wells)

*Lands in other Somerset parishes*

Heythorne & Fennes at Kingsbury Episcopi (near Martock)  
West Pennard: land called Huddexers  
Kingstone (near Ilminster): 60 acres  
Pres[t]leigh (near Shepton Mallet): one tenement  
Theale (near Wedmore): farm called 'Chamberlainshams' (now Pillham)  
Weare (near Axbridge): land called 'Almers Hammes'  
Nether Weare (near Weare): 2½ burgages  
Croscombe (near Wells): 3 tenements  
Dinder (near Wells): 2 acres of land called 'the Meade'  
Polsham (near Wells): 3 acres in the parish of St Cuthbert, Wells  
Easton: a tenement in the parish of St Cuthbert, Wells

The 1591 Charter also confirmed some important details of college administration:

*Appointments*

The Dean and Chapter were confirmed as having the right, within three months of a Vicars Choral vacancy, to make an appointment, subject to ratification by the principals and members of the College of Vicars.

*Numbers*

The number of Vicars should 'not be under 14 and not exceed 20', from which two would be elected on St Mathew's Day (September 21st) as principals, and five as seniors.

*College Visitor*

The Bishop of Bath & Wells was nominated visitor of the College 'to exercise all such and the same jurisdictions, ordinances, powers and authorities of visiting, and of doing whatsoever else belongs to the office of a Bishop'.

The Elizabethan Charter not only gave the College continuation of their rights, but also a new meaning and purpose which could only be revoked by a subsequent Act of Parliament.<sup>18</sup> It did not resolve their financial problems or put an end to outstanding differences between themselves and the Dean and Chapter.

## 17TH CENTURY ESTATES

By the early 17th century, the College of Vicars' Choral owned some 800 acres of land in Somerset comprising:-

*Wells and Wellesleigh*

At Wells the properties in this urban centre comprised mostly houses, stables, barns and in the High Street, the Christopher or New Inn and Shambles. The Wellesleigh estate consisting of land in and around the villages of Dinder and Dulcote was administered as the Manor of Wells, Wellesleigh and Dulcote, whilst in the large out-parish of St Cuthbert's, there were scattered land holdings at Easton, Polsham and Horrington.

*Manors: Newton Placie and Cheddar*

In the south Somerset parish of Newton Placie (North Petherton) there were 250 acres, mostly rich pastureland, and some 20 houses. At Cheddar, under the southerly slopes of the Mendip Hills, the estate consisted of 90 acres, mostly rich pastureland, 20 houses and a water grist mill. The Vicars' Choral property comprised small land holdings, the largest field being of 8½ acres. The 33 tenants of the manor also had valuable grazing rights on the hill and moor which helped to make Cheddar an important West Country cheese making centre in the 18th century. Included within the jurisdiction of the Cheddar Manorial Court was property at Weare (near Axbridge) which consisted of 2½ burgages at Netherweare and 50 acres of pasture adjoining the main highway.

*Kingstone*

Situated near the Dorset border, the Vicars Choral held the right of presentation to the living of Kingstone parish church together with a compact estate, mostly arable, of some 60 acres which, because it adjoined two other large estates at Dillington, near Ilminster (Lee-Lee family), and the Hinton St George estate of the Pouletts, was usually leased to one of these neighbours as a complete holding.

*North West Somerset*

The Vicars Choral owned small amounts of pasture land, fairly compact, in the parishes of Wedmore and West Pennard.

## THE CIVIL WAR (1642–1660)

The Civil War and Commonwealth, when the Church of England, bishops and cathedral deans and chapters were abolished, brought the Vicars Choral the greatest sufferings and hardships which they ever had to face in their history. In 1643 episcopacy was abolished, and following the execution of Archbishop Laud in January 1645 the traditional diocesan administration ceased throughout England and Wales. Parliament, in the same year, replaced the Book of Common Prayer with a Directory of Public Worship. Wells Cathedral was closed following the last recorded brief meeting of the Chapter on 28th March 1644/5. Subsequently the College of the Vicars Choral was dissolved and the Vicars were dispersed without work or homes. Between 1646 and 1654 the state confiscated and sold property belonging to the Crown, bishops, deans and chapters and their corporations to help repay existing government debts incurred during the Civil War. Cromwell, by such confiscation of Crown and Church lands, instigated the greatest change of land ownership since the dissolution of the monasteries by Henry VIII. In 1649, Parliament set up a commission (under a surveyor-general, Col. William Webb) to survey all Crown and Church lands with a view to selling off the estates. A survey was made of Wells Vicars' Choral estates between March and July 1649 on the authority of the 'Act in Commons of England assembled in Parliament for the abolishing of Deans, Deans & Chapters, Cannons, Prebends'. The estate survey was probably undertaken in the same way as that of the bishop's estates, by a local jury before a panel of Parliamentary Commissioners.

The Parliamentary Survey<sup>19</sup> gives valuable information about the Vicars Choral Estates in the mid-17th century, including details of demesne lands, copyhold rents, dues, chief



rents, fines charged upon renewal of leases and leaseholders lives, together with proposed revised rents based on the current property market value.

The rents totalled £113 1s 8d. The Commissioners proposed rent increases that would have brought in an income of £642 8s 2d.<sup>20</sup> There is no evidence to suggest that the proposed rent increases were carried out. In the case of Cheddar, rents remained unchanged from the late 15th century until the Ecclesiastical Commissioners sold the properties in the late 19th century.

During the 15 year period of the Commonwealth, little is known about the estates. Lease books cease between 1643–1660, court rolls between 1638–1660 and account books between 1642–1662. It would appear from the post-Reformation problems that some of the Vicars Close houses were 'sold away'.<sup>21</sup>

## THE RESTORATION – KING, CHURCH AND VICARS CHORAL

Charles II's return from exile on 29th May 1660 marked the restoration not only of the monarchy but also of the Church of England. The Wells Vicars Choral had for over fifteen years been disbanded and without work or home. When the Cathedral services were eventually restored in 1660/61, only five members of the original pre-Commonwealth Vicars Choral were left.

Sometime during 1660/61 the estates of the Vicars Choral, like those of the Bishop and Dean and Chapter, were handed back to the original owners. Gradually the traditional pattern of estate management through manorial courts returned, and the first draft lease was made on 24th January 1660/61 for property at Dulcote (near Wells). In spite of the financial problems facing the Vicars Choral, there appears to have been no attempt to bring rents or new leases into line with 17th century land values as proposed in the 1649 survey, except for the Christopher Inn in Wells High Street, when the Vicars Choral in granting a new lease to John Cordwent in 1661, increased the annual rent from £7 4s 0d to £11 4s 0d. The survey had recommended £12 16s 0d. The Vicars Choral of Salisbury Cathedral, faced with a similar financial situation through low rents, had been advised by their bishop not to renew any leases until 'all the lives had run out and then only renew at an improved rent'.<sup>22</sup>

It would appear that Wells Vicars Choral did not benefit from such sound financial advice given by their visitor, the bishop. Like the Cathedral, the Vicars Close properties had suffered considerable damage at the hands of the Puritans to the extent that many of the houses were either in a ruinous condition or had been sold by the Parliamentary Commissioners. The College of Vicars, without any financial resources, was unable to meet the heavy costs of dilapidations. In 1663, it petitioned the Bishop as visitor for permission to 'lease out Twelve of the most decayed howses for the terme of One and Twenty yeares without any fines at all onely for smale Rentes to persons of goode & honest reputacion as will covenant to rebuild them at their owne proper Costes and charges', since 'in the tymes of the Late Troubles most of our howses in Close hall were defaced uncovered & extreame ruinated which neither wee the nowe Vicars Chorall nor our Successors are any wise able to rebuild or repaire haveinge but a smale yearely maintenance for us & our families & haveinge noe Benefactors nor likely to have any to helpe us in this case'.<sup>23</sup> This policy of letting out surplus houses continued until the dissolution of the College in 1936.

The petition to Bishop Piers gives a graphic description of the situation at Wells during the Commonwealth: 'All the Bishoppes, Deanes and Chapters Lands & howses together with all the Lands and howses of the Corporacions of Vicars Chorall & petty Cannons belonging to the Cathedrall Churches were sold away & the purchasers of them did goe on to demolish their howses & to sell the materialls thereof amongst which your petitioners did extreamely suffer & were turned out of doores plundered & imprisoned & were reduced

to greate want & poverty untill it pleased Go[d to] restore this Land to her antient & flourishinge estate by the Restauration of our most gracious & dreade Sovereigne Kinge Charles the Second unto his kingdomes & the Church of Engla[nd] unto her anciently established goverment & the Bishoppes Deanes & Chapters Chorall Vicars & petty Cannons to there former rightes and habitacions. Amongst which your petitioners (blessed be God) doe nowe enjoy there howses, Lands & Colledge againe.<sup>24</sup>

## THE 18TH CENTURY ESTATES

The 18th century saw the farming industry taking advantage of a boom in agriculture to feed a population which had risen from some 5 million in 1701 to 8.7 million in 1801.<sup>25</sup>

In April 1754, the Vicars Choral undertook a survey of their estates identical to that made in 1649 – listing acreages, leaseholders' lives, value of heriots, fines and a proposed rent revision. The rent roll for 1754 was shown as £133 15s 4d with a proposed market rent of £658 8s 4½d, an increase of 388%, whilst landholding had increased by 72 acres [see Table below].<sup>26</sup> It is not known why this survey was ever carried out, since the Vicars Choral appear never to have made any attempt to improve their income either by revising rents, or by changing from medieval copyhold for three lives to a fixed term lease.

Comparison of 1649 and 1754 estate surveys.

Estates	1649 Survey			1754 Survey		
	Acreage	Rent	Market Rent	Acreage	Rent	Market Rent
		£ s d	£ s d		£ s d	£ s d
Cheddar	83	8 5 2	82 9 3	106	8 1 6	82 9 9
Kingstone	64	17 11 11	30 18 1	65	18 0 0	66 0 0
Martock	84	10 4 4	93 7 9	87	10 3 10	90 12 3
Newton Placie	251	10 13 1½	216 10 6	267	11 13 8	243 13 0½
Wells	44	48 3 6	95 3 0	41	49 8 8	88 11 8
Wellesley } Wells						
St Cuthberts out parishes – Easton etc.	228	7 8 9	49 13 0	241	7 13 8	50 0 4
Weare	50	3 13 4	38 16 8	50	3 6 8	36 13 0
Wedmore						
Pennard						
Polsham	65	8 1 8	35 12 0	84	6 2 4	35 11 4
Total	869	114 1 9½	595 10 9	941	133 15 4	654 8 4½

## LEASES

The copyhold lease was an ancient form of manorial land tenure. 'Copyhold' referred to the tenant's title to his land as set out in the manorial court rolls, of which he received a copy upon admission to the land. The lease would contain references to the payment of a fine upon becoming a tenant, and a heriot – usually a best beast or chattel due to the lord upon



the tenant's death. The Wells Vicars Choral copyhold leases were usually for three lives – e.g. tenant, wife and child. It was obligatory for the tenant, upon payment of a fine, to attend the manorial courts for the payment of rent on Lady Day (25 March) and Michaelmas (29 September). The revenue from the estate courts was taken back to Wells by either the reeve or the College receiver.

Following an order from Bishop Lake in 1616, the College Vicars were required to approve all leases and receive the tenant's fines upon the renewal of leases. He decreed, as visitor of the College, that 'no lease or grant be sealed with the Common Seal but in the Common Hall and that ye principalls for the time being do give warning by the Receiver of the House to all Vicars perpetuate to be there present at the time and do publicly make known what fines and conditions they have there agreed'.<sup>27</sup> The bishop also instructed that all leases were to be recorded in a Register Book. Subsequently, records of estate leases commence in 1617.

## LEASE CONDITIONS

Leases were made by the Vicars Choral with these conditions:

### *Subletting*

No tenant was allowed to 'grant, alienate, sell or assign or set over' property for more than one year without obtaining permission from the Vicars Choral.

### *Repairs*

All properties were leased on condition that the property was maintained in good repair. Failure to carry out repairs could, after due warning from the manorial court, lead to a fine or repossession of the property. Leases for certain large estates, such as for the 50 acres called Allmersham at Weare (near Axbridge) were conditional on 'sufficiently repairing, sustaining, maintaining and keeping the mounds, bounds and hedges, ditches and fences'.<sup>28</sup>

### *Timber and Minerals*

All leases contained a restrictive clause covering timber and mineral rights; timber could not be felled or sold without permission except on larger estates like Chamberlainshams at Wedmore where the tenant was granted permission to cut timber for 'hedge boot, hay boot, plough boot, gate boot, and barn boot, without making waste thereon' (*bote* = O.E. right to take wood from the common for repairs).<sup>29</sup> The Vicars reserved all rights and access to quarry for coal and stone.

### *Rent Arrears*

A clause stipulated that repossession of a property would be carried out if rents were paid late; leases contained various time limits for late payments ranging from 14 to 30 days.

### *Manorial Courts Attendance*

It was obligatory for the tenant to attend the local manorial court – 'yielding, doing and performing suit service and attendance to and at all and every court and courts of the said Principalls kept at and for their manor'. Failure to attend required an 'essoyn' or excuse which could incur a penalty fine of 3d or 6d.<sup>30</sup>

### *Tenant's Attorneys*

Each lease nominated two people, chosen from manorial tenants, to serve as attorneys for the leaseholder in case there was any dispute with the landlord.

## ESTATE EXPENSES

Administration costs often appeared to be high and could be as much as £120 per annum, against a rent roll of £200 per annum. For example:

Apart from administrative expenses, the College incurred local and Government taxes. They also made generous allowances to tenants for rent arrears during times of poor harvests or disastrous weather conditions:

1701	Cheddar tenants expenses and allowances (rent roll £9 12s 5½d)	£2 0s 1½d
1701	Martock tenants expenses and allowances (rent roll £10 3s 4d)	£4 5s 0d
1724	Total [estate] deductions for tenants	£9 8s 1½d
1811	Deficiency on Cheddar rent and land tax	£3 12s 4d

*Taxes / Tenths*

The Vicars Choral paid an ancient tax called the 'Tenths' (Kings or Crown 10th) of £7 5s 7d p.a.

*Property Tax*

The College paid property tax on the Vicars' Close properties e.g. 1809 £2 17s 10d

*Poor Rate*

The Close houses occupied by the Vicars Choral incurred Poor Rates levied by the local council from 1601 to 1834:

1778	£9 15s 0d
1812	£16 12s 0d
1815	£20 5s 0d

These outgoings for local and government taxes must have meant a serious loss of income when the estate revenues had remained unchanged for centuries.

## LAND TAX

In 1692, The Crown levied the first Land Tax on estates and personal property. The rate, ranging from 1s to 4s in the £ was based on the annual value of property. In 1798, the rate was finally fixed at 4s in the £.

Example of payments:

1693	£10 12s 8d
1780	£ 9 19s 8d
1806	£ 9 19s 8d (£2 4s 0d for Wells Christopher Inn)

In 1806/07, the Vicars Choral, with money raised from land sales, commenced redeeming this tax based on a 15 year purchase price. Some 40 years later in 1846, the College instructed the steward 'to redeem all land tax not yet redeemed'.<sup>31</sup>

Subsequently, annual payments to the Government were reduced in 1814 to £5 7s 0d and in 1839 to £2 7s 0d. At the same time as the tax was being redeemed, the Vicars Choral commenced levying the annual tax upon their large landowners which provided an additional source of income.

Examples of Land Tax income:

1807	£12 7s 8½d
1812	£45 2s 8½d
1860	£66 12s 8½d

## ESTATE MANAGEMENT – THE MANORIAL COURT

Manorial Courts, customarily held twice a year, were used not only for the collection of rents and heriots, but also to support the steward or reeve in enforcing management of the estates such as keeping properties in good repair, cutting hedges, clearing ditches and controlling grazing upon the commons. The courts also resolved difficulties that arose between tenants.

Each court elected 12 tenants to serve as a jury whose responsibility it was to bring to the steward's attention matters concerning tenants and the estate, to witness the courts' decisions and to uphold customary practice. The manorial jury did not have the jurisdiction of a modern jury in deciding cases.

The traditional court on the Vicars' estates was known as the Court Baron which all freeholders and customary tenants of copyhold leases were obliged under the terms of their leases to attend.

The courts were held either at the village inn or at a tenant's house; the 1649 Parliamentary Survey for Cheddar noted that the court was held at Wilmot's house.<sup>32</sup>

In 1801, Mr William Tripp was appointed reeve for the manor of Cheddar 'in consequence of his taking upon him the said office the Cheddar Courts shall in future be held at his House'.<sup>33</sup>

The Vicars Choral 17th century court rolls are in a fragile condition and do not survive in continuous runs. However, those rolls that do exist provide a valuable insight into Somerset farming methods, social conditions and estate customs.<sup>34</sup>

By the 18th and 19th centuries, the court rolls had become formal and stereotyped accounts of estate business. Management of the scattered Somerset estates must have been difficult for the College of Vicars without the help of a full time professional steward. In spite of the efforts by the courts to enforce the conditions of copyhold leases, the rolls frequently record tenements and farm buildings to be in a 'ruinous state'.

### *Permission to sublet*

It would appear that the tenants occasionally sublet their properties. Under the terms of a lease permission had to be sought from the manorial court:

*Cheddar Court 24th April 1622:* Two tenants, Thomas Gill and Thomas Marshall, were licensed to sublet their tenements for half year on payment of 1s.

*Cheddar Court 26 April 1622:* Licence granted to Thomas Cullett to sublet tenement for the following year – 12d

Licence to Thomas Gill to grant tenement for coming year for 2s (note in margin 'he doth now dwell upon it 25 March 1623'.)

### *Proof of copyhold to property*

Occasionally tenants were asked to prove their rights to a property:

*Newton Placey Court 16 October 1622:* John Willes has not shown his writing by which he claims one acre of land near Stockmore as commanded – fined 6s 8d.

This request was again made at the court on 23 October 1623 and John Willes was

fined 40s for not having shown his 'writing for an acre of land at Stockmore as ordered at the last court'.

#### *Property repairs*

Tenants of the estates were obliged under the terms of their lease to repair their properties. It would appear from the court rolls that this was not always done:

*Cheddar Court 21 October 1622*: 'We present that the mill house of William Reeve is in need of repairs to the roof – fine 2s; and the bake house of William Cullecke (fine 3s 4d) is in disrepair in walls and roof, and also the roof of outhouse of Henry Addams is in disrepair 2s; to repair before the next court or fined 1s'.

#### *Land management:*

*Newton Placey Court 15 May 1622*: A survey made by the presentment of 6 persons made a view and set bounds to the scrubland [*scrobum*] of Marques Yen[da]l 'the far end of which cuts into the land and trees of the said John Lewis because the aforesaid Marques is making a authorised enclosure' – penalty 12d.

*Newton Placey Court 23 April 1623*: The bounds between Newton Wroth and Newton Placey to be surveyed.

*Newton Placey Court 30 April 1663*: George Cox to 'restore ground which he has ploughed away on the headland between the two landlords before 29 September' – fine 10s.

#### *Felling of Lord's timber*

*Newton Placey Court 3 March 1623/4*: Following the death of tenant Richard Palmer 'there were felled upon his tenement by Robert Goodden and Edward Sully of Newton fower Oakes a litle before his death and presently after [of] which three of them were tymbler trees worth 25s. And the same were seized upon to the Lordes use and the bayliffs are thought fit to arrest them.'

#### *Livestock management*

*Newton Placey Court 15 May 1622*: The court decreed that 'none doe comonly or purposely suffer their Cattell to goe about the highe Waye' – penalty 2s. It is ordered 'that none doe suffer their pigges to goe unringed on payne of everie pigg soe taken and impounded to forfeite 3d Whereof to the driver 1d.'

#### *Damage to the Pinfold*

*Newton Placey Court 16 October 1622*: Thomas Masters narrowed the pinfold (the pound for stray animals) so that 'it was only half the size that it was hitherto in the memory of man.' He is fined 6d and is to enlarge it as much as he can without detriment to his newly erected house – penalty 10d.

#### *Flooding*

The lands at Newton Placey were subject to flooding from two nearby rivers, the Tone and the Parrett, which merge together at Burrow Bridge. Consequently flood prevention was of priority concern at the Manorial Court.

*Newton Placey Court 15 May 1622*: The court forbade anyone to tear up a bay 'to bee made at Moone lane to keepe the Water in Richard Raphes ditch from annoyeing the waye.' Forfeit 3s 4d each.

*Same Court*: It is ordained 'that the Tennantes of Newton Wroth do dyke their ditches against Heathefeilde Lane before Whitsunday next upon payne of 3s 4d a peece.'

*Newton Placey Court 16 October 1622*: Order 'that John Edwardes or his Tennant

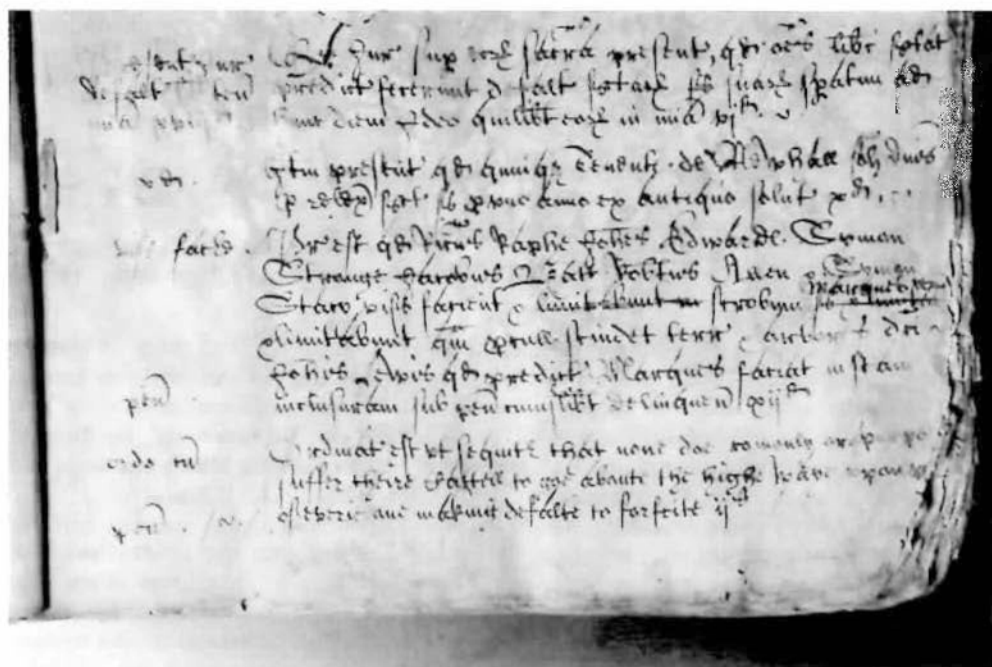


Plate 2 A Newton Placey Court Roll, 15 May 1622 showing a survey of 6 persons concerning scrubland of Marques Yen[dal] (see 'land management') and regulation of stray cattle (see Livestock management).

George Collerd and all other where neede is, doe rayse theirer bankes and stopp theirer gutters against the Millbrincke that the water breake not into Nor[th]more vales only in the moneth of Februarie on payne of everie one offendinge to forfeite 3s 4d'.

## MANORIAL CUSTOMS

Manorial Court rolls and copyhold leases occasionally refer to the 'customs of the manor' – the ancient system of rights and obligations. In the case of Cheddar, there was one recognised set of customs observed by each of the five manors which 'hold and agree in one and ye same custom', indicating that these customs could have originated before the 13th century when Cheddar was a single royal possession. Of these Cheddar customs, the three most commonly referred to in copyhold leases and court rolls are:<sup>35</sup>

### 1. Copyhold lease for a widow

When the last of the three copyhold lives was a woman and she married, the husband became the 'head tenant'. If she was a widow, she became the tenant of the property which then extended the copyhold from 3 to 4 lives. No heriot was due upon the death of the husband since he had held the lease in 'right of his wife'.

### 2. Purchase of a copyhold for children

If a tenant purchased a copyhold for 3 children but failed to admit the last child 'to a tree or ten foot of ground as ye usiall custom is soe to doe', should the last life marry and die before succeeding to the copyhold then, 'his or her marrier have noe right to enjoy ye custome'.

For example in a Cheddar lease of 18 July 1661, Maria Lacount, widow, surrendered her title to one water mill and 2 acres of land adjoining upon which John Isack took over said water mill to hold to John Isack and Charles his son for their lives. Charles was admitted tenant of '13ft. of garden and one apple tree in the garden'.<sup>36</sup>

### 3. *The Lord's heriot*

If a man or woman holds property from more than one lord, then upon their deaths the lord of the property where either of them are living at the time of their deaths has the right to claim 'ye first choise of their goods for an heriot'.

At Newton Placey, there are two examples of customs mentioned in the manorial leases:

#### 1. *Accommodation for Vicars Choral*

*Newton Placey lease 27 January 1750:* to John Moss of Wells: 7 acres of land of tenement called Jackrells and 7 acres of old auster and 2 acres meadow over land in Moonlane and a tenement known as Heads and 11 acres meadow: total rents 17s; Heriot 40s 'To provide sufficient meat, drink and lodging for two nights for three of the Vicars and their steward and Hay, Straw and Fodder for their horses and so in like manner once in every Ten years'.

*Newton Placey lease 18 June 1747:* to Richard Derhams of Lyng, yeoman: lease of messuage or tenement with adjoining Barton and Orchard, one acre situated at Moon Lane and three acres lying at Broadmead 'shall according to the custom of the said manor provide sufficient Meat Drink and Lodging for two nights for two of the Vicars and their stewards' and hay, straw and fodder 'for their horses and so in like manner once in every Ten years afterwards during the said Term and also shall and will from time to time during the said Term at his and their own proper costs and charges'.

#### 2. *Living upon a tenement*

*Newton Placey lease 30 April 1663:*

'Custom if any tenant dies before Lady Day the next possessors to pay seed and earth. If he live after our Lady Day then to enjoy the benefit of the corn as it is sown. Custom is that no man is to buy out the estate of any tenant either possession or reversion before he has the refusal thereof'.

*Newton Placey lease 30 April 1663*

'Item: It was the custom of the manor that all who have copyhold tenants are to live upon them or obtain licence not to live on a tenure'.

## 19TH CENTURY AGRICULTURE

The Napoleonic Wars (1795–1815) brought prosperity to west country farmers who were encouraged to modernise their agricultural practices and cultivate more land to meet the need for increased food production brought about by the loss of foreign imports and a rising population. Land owners had enclosed commons and wastes in order to bring more land into production: this resulted in some progressive landlords taking the opportunity to improve their rent returns. On some of the Vicars Choral estates, parishes had taken steps to enclose common lands – Wedmore 1778/85, West Pennard 1787, Weare 1796, Newton Placey 1798 and Cheddar 1801. However there is no evidence from this period of agricultural boom that the Vicars Choral either raised rents or attempted to change from the ancient three lives copyhold lease to a fixed term lease. John Billingsley, the Somerset agricultural pioneer, commented in 1795 on landlords' failure to improve rents: 'some gentlemen' he wrote, 'from the best of motives, have been long in the habit of letting their estates at the old rents, though the price of the articles of produce has, in the course of 30 years, advanced one third at least'.<sup>37</sup>



The following three examples show how rents on different types of properties had remained unchanged from the 17th century until the Ecclesiastical Commissioners took control in 1866.

1. *Cheddar Grist Mill* (Mill house and orchard) described in 1875 as having an 'undershot wheel, 5 feet broad working one pair of stones'.

Year	Tenant	Rent	Fine
1463	Thomas Shete	£2 6s 8d	?
1610	Wm. Reeve	£2 6s 8d	?
1740	John Sayer	£2 6s 8d	?
1759	Joseph Jeffery	£2 6s 8d	£160
1806	Betty Durban	£2 6s 8d	£60
1860	James Ford	£2 6s 8d	£388

Rents recommended by the Surveys of 1649 and 1754 were £8 0s 0d per annum.

2. *Kingstone Estate*

A compact estate with Parsonage, barns, 66 acres and receipts of all tithes.

Date	Tenant	Rent	Fine
1615	Joanne Osborne	£17	?
1688	Henry Tripp	£17	£90
1735	Henry Palmer	£17	?
1754	Rev. E Lovell	£18	£1,400
1792	Geo. Lovell	£18	£420
1804	Earl Powlett	£18	£400
1833	G Lovell	£18	£900
1841	John Lee-Lee	£18	£1,200
1857	John Lee-Lee	£18	£2,000
1864	John Lee-Lee	£18	£500

Rents recommended by Surveys were: 1649, £72 per annum, and 1754, £140 per annum.

3. *Overweare Estate, Weare near Axbridge*

A compact agricultural holding of 4 closes totalling 50 acres.

Date	Tenant	Rent	Fine
1621	Thomas Wall	£3 6s 8d	£25
1661	Thomas Wall	£3 6s 8d	?
1682	George Wall	£3 6s 8d	£132
1717	Betty Card	£3 6s 8d	£126
1747	Thomas Hinchcliff	£3 6s 8d	£40
1803	Thomas Hinchcliff	£3 6s 8d	£500
1847	John Carde	£3 6s 8d	£500
1864	William Day	£3 6s 8d	£497 10s

Rents recommended by Surveys were: 1649, £36 13s 4d per annum, and 1754, £36 13s 0d per annum.

## FINES

Copyhold rents on the Vicars Choral estates, in spite of inflation, had remained largely unchanged over the centuries, possibly because of a tradition that rents were fixed by cus-

toms of the manor.<sup>38</sup> Landlords were able, however, to make use of dues or fines, payable upon a new lease, to bring in additional income. It has not been easy to assess accurately the value of the College of Vicars' income from this source since the tenants' leases, College copy lease books and Receiver's accounts all consistently fail to record the actual amount of fines, but instead use the phrase 'upon payment of a competent sum of English money'.

It was not until the 19th century correspondence was examined that the scale and importance of fines as a source of income was realised. In the Report by the Cathedral & Collegiate Churches Enquiry of 1854, it was reported of the Wells Vicars Choral income that 'it was extremely difficult to state the just average of their income, arising as it chiefly does from fines on the renewal of leases of their estates which are held almost entirely on lives. The amount is therefore very variable. If in a long course of years the average may be computed at £80 p.a. in some years the amount is very small'.<sup>39</sup>

The returns to the Cathedral Commission of 1854 show that the College of Vicars Choral of Wells received, for the period 1846–1853, £1648. This comprised £290 10s from fines on leases held for years and £1557 13s 7d from leases held on copyhold lives. The total income from fines provided an extra £52 3s 9d p.a. for each of the Vicars Choral.<sup>40</sup> In the period 1852–1861, the total income from fines was £5678 6s 0d providing £51 15s 0d per annum for each Vicar Choral compared with their salary of £60 6s 0d derived from estate rents and cathedral fees.<sup>41</sup>

A study of the Bishop's estates, which had been managed by a permanent professional steward, shows that in the late 16th century large fines were charged to offset the loss of revenue caused by a reduction of the estates at the Reformation and the effects of inflation. Fines from the Wells properties totalled £187 1s 8d in 1597 and £135 13s 4d in 1599 whilst the Bishop's Banwell estate brought in £371 3s 4d in 1597, £278 4s 0d in 1598 and £327 10s in 1599.<sup>42</sup>

Using information from the Vicars' Bargain Books of draft leases, and from Rent, Minute and Lease Books, it has been possible to assess their income from fines on leases, which increased considerably in the 19th century as a result of the Vicars Choral taking professional advice for the assessment of fines. The College minutes in 1804 noted that fines for the renewal of leases were being calculated by 'tables of calculation', whilst in 1808 the Vicars Choral received the advice of a Mr William Morgan of the Equitable Assurance Office in Blackfriars, London to settle a dispute over a new lease at Dulcote, near Wells.<sup>43</sup>

After 1840, there was a substantial increase in revenues from fines – the average during 1830–39 was £421 per annum whilst in the period 1841–44 it was £482 per annum. This can be attributed to the College using a new system for calculating fines. In 1843, the Minutes make a reference to the College asking the steward to calculate the value of a fine by 'Inwood's Tables'.<sup>44</sup> William Inwood (1771–1843) had published in 1811 'Tables for the purchasing of estates, freehold, copyhold or leasehold'. Although such tables had been published in the late 18th century, Inwood was the first to produce a method of calculating lease fines based upon logarithmic tables. Inwood's method was to use a compound interest multiplier (in the case of the Vicars' Choral estates this was usually 5%), together with the ages of the copyhold lives, multiplied by the current annual property value. The property value was often provided by the manorial steward or professional surveyor, since the last property valuation had been made in 1754. This method was invaluable for small estates such as the Vicars Choral who relied upon amateur or part time estate managers.

The method of calculation used set the level of a fine when a lease was either renewed or lives added. Inwood's Tables calculated the equivalent number of years it would take to get back the principal, at a 5% rate of interest, based on the ages specified in the lease. This figure was then reduced by the equivalent years of any existing leaseholder(s). To calculate the fine, the clear annual rent value of a property was then multiplied by the net equivalent years.

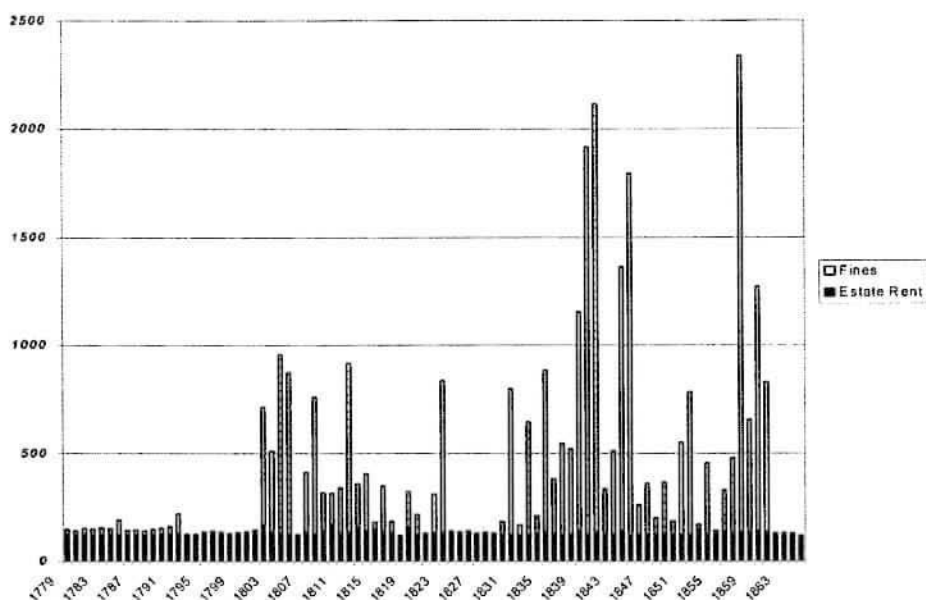


Fig. 2 Wells Vicars Choral Estate Fines and Rents (1779–1866). The graph shows revenue increases from fines following new methods of assessment in the early 1800's whilst rents remained unchanged.

Examples of calculation methods used:

Lease 19 November 1861 to Charles Lemon, Cheddar (pastureland 1a 3r 28p) to replace 2 lives on a lease dated 1809 rent 1/- per annum, land tax 1/- per annum.

	Ages in years of lessors	By Inwood's Tables Equivalent Years
Proposed leaseholders	11–20–70	17
Less existing leaseholder	70	6
Net equivalent years at 5% tables		11
Calculation of Fine		
Net equivalent years	x Annual rent	Total Fine
11	£3 17s 0d	£42 7s 0d

Lease 25 September 1861 to add 1 life to lease dated 1840

Mr Geo Hardacre, Cheddar (moorland 3a 1r 14p) rent 3s, land tax 3s.

	Ages in years of lessors	By Inwood's Tables Equivalent Years
Add lease holder	50	11½
Less existing leaseholders	50–51	7½
Net equivalent years at 5% tables		4
Calculation of Fine		
Net equivalent years	x Annual rent	Total Fine
4	£8 10s 0d	£34 0s 0d

The Vicars Choral denied tenants details of the reasons and methods of calculating 19th century fine increases and tenants sometimes refused to accept the proposed change. Only after negotiation would a new figure, acceptable to both parties, be agreed, e.g.:

1857	Kingstone Estate	Fine requested: £2402	Agreed fine: £2000
1860	Cheddar Mill	Fine requested: £450	Agreed fine: £388
1864	Over Weare Estate	Fine requested: £567	Agreed fine: £487 10s

#### ESTATE MANAGEMENT (1591–1866): AN APPRAISAL

The mandate for the Vicars Choral to own and manage estates was given to them in the 1591 Elizabethan Charter, which confirmed the collegiate body, its rights, independence, and, above all, the authority 'to get, receive, appropriate, have, enjoy, possess, grant and demise manors, lands, tenements, parsonages, Tenths, advowsons of Churches, profits, easements and hereditaments whatsoever'.<sup>45</sup> The estates, scattered across Somerset, had provided over the centuries a small but assured income which was enough to guarantee a basic but increasingly inadequate salary for members of the College. The land holdings in some parishes consisted of small acreages which, with low rents, were uneconomic. This situation could have been improved if such small parcels of land had been consolidated or exchanged with the co-operation of other landlords and made into larger more profitable holdings. The Vicars Choral failed to take any action in land management that would have resulted in an improved estate income.

The College of Vicars was a sympathetic and, at times, generous landlord giving rent allowances to small tenants who suffered considerable hardship in years of famine, poor harvests or adverse weather. The Vicars Choral could never overcome the problem of late rents which should have been paid by Michaelmas Day (September 29th). These were often not received at Wells until after the annual audit day on December 21st, although leases contained clauses stipulating the landlord's right to repossess a property upon late payment. They had long been accustomed to the fact that their estate income of around £300 p.a. was not sufficient to provide a basic salary for the choirmen as well as cover repairs to the Wells properties and make improvements to estate buildings. The blame for this financial situation must to some extent rest with the College who, without any endowments since the Reformation, should have administered its estates with a more professional and long term management approach and taken steps, like other large landowners, to maintain the value of estate income in line with inflation and land values.

From 1591 to 1866, the Vicars continued to use outdated medieval methods. Their officers responsible for the estates – principals, receivers and auditors – were elected to serve for one year only, which inhibited any long term planning or management of the estates. The officers seemed to lack basic information about the estates; they appeared to be without maps or current land valuations, and ultimately relied upon the advice of a local manorial reeve or steward, himself usually a tenant, to provide current land values as the surveys of 1649, 1754 and 1840 became obsolete. At the end of their year of office, the officers signed the annual accounts with the words 'having taken (or obtained) their *Quietus*'. The officers' discharge sounded like a relief that the management was now someone else's responsibility, and not theirs.

#### RELATIONSHIP WITH THE CATHEDRAL CHAPTER

The independent attitude of the College of Vicars Choral often brought it into conflict with the Dean and Chapter who professed themselves unaware of the College's financial situ-



Fig. 3 Wells Vicars Choral Estate Income and Expenses (1591-1866). The graph illustrates the high estate expenses in comparison with total income which consisted of fees, rents, bequests and, from 1811, land tax. Fines were not included.

ation. Dean Goodenough, in 1835, wrote that the Chapter had 'no exact knowledge of the Vicars' incomes, having no control over their accounts'. In the opinion of the Dean, the problems being experienced by the College were due 'to the consequences of their having separate estates managed by themselves' since they 'are much worse off than if the same estates were vested in the Dean and Chapter or in the Commissioners (Ecclesiastical) and they received an equivalent for their quarterly or half year payment'.<sup>46</sup> The longstanding mistrust and suspicion between the College and the Dean and Chapter implicit in the 1591 Charter led to a lack of co-operation between the two bodies. Throughout the centuries, the accounts show that there was never enough surplus income to carry out estate improvements, except for the small rents from the Vicars' Close houses which were used solely for repairs in the Close.

#### 19TH CENTURY REFORM

In February 1835, the Prime Minister, Earl Grey, set up the Ecclesiastical Commissioners to enquire into the state of the Ecclesiastical Church in England and Wales and, in particular, to consider the revenues of several dioceses. In 1849, Parliament gave the Commissioners permission to form the 'Estates Committee' with power to sell, purchase, exchange, let or manage church estates on behalf of the Commissioners. From 1835 a series of questionnaires were sent out to cathedrals, seeking, amongst many other matters, information on the numbers, pay and role of Vicars Choral. Wells Cathedral Chapter replied that there were 3 priest and 8 lay Vicars Choral, each receiving an average wage of £80 a year. The replies to the

Commissioners provide valuable details of the financial problems which continued to confront the independent Vicars.

#### COMMUTATION OF CATHEDRAL AND COLLEGIATE ESTATES

In 1863/4, Parliament empowered the Commissioners to commute the estates of cathedrals and their corporations of Vicars Choral or minor canons which, with the consent of their visitors (in the case of Wells, the Bishop) were to transfer their lands and hereditaments to the Commissioners.<sup>47</sup> As early as 1852, the Wells Vicars Choral had approached the Ecclesiastical Commissioners with a view to their taking over 'the whole of the possessions and pay such income per annum as may upon examination appear just and fair'.<sup>48</sup> The request was turned down since the Commissioners did not at that time have the powers to 'enter into arrangements of the nature proposed'.<sup>49</sup>

In 1865, the estates of Wells Cathedral were transferred to the Ecclesiastical Commissioners in exchange for a fixed annual income. In the following year, agreement was reached with the Vicars Choral for the transfer of 'the whole of their estates and property, subject to all charges'. The Vicars were entitled to receive fines agreed upon for the renewal of two leases and 'each of the present vicars shall be entitled to occupy the house in the close now occupied by him free from rent'.<sup>50</sup>

The agreement was sealed by the College of Vicars Choral on 21st September 1866 and their estates and property, with the exception of the Vicars Close houses, chapel and hall were transferred to the Commissioners for an annual payment of £880 (based on 11 vicars each receiving £80 p.a.). The patronage of Kingstone Church was transferred to the Dean and Chapter. The benefits from commutation of the estates for a fixed income were short lived; by 1873, the Dean and Chapter had increased the number of Vicars Choral to 14, which meant each only received 1/14th share of the Commissioners income (£62 17s 2d), with the Dean and Chapter making up the salary to £80. At the same time the Vicars' remaining income which comprised rents from Close houses and fees from the Dean and Chapter was insufficient to cover the upkeep of the Vicars' Close, chapel and hall.

Parliament and the Ecclesiastical Commissioners were laying plans for further church reforms which would include the dissolution of the collegiate status of the Vicars Choral. As early as 1882, the Bishop of Bath & Wells, the college visitor, had foreseen this eventual change when he replied to the Cathedral Commissioners' questionnaire that it might be 'desirable that the College be abolished and the existing rights of members done away with'.<sup>51</sup>

Parliament in 1919 approved legislation for the Church of England to have its own legislative assembly, which was known as the National Assembly of the Church of England. In April 1926, a commission led by the Bishop of Oxford came to Wells on behalf of the Church Assembly to inquire into the affairs of the Cathedral and the College of Vicars. A statement was presented to the Commission by the Vicars Choral expressing their concern that 'the mind of the commission is towards abolishing of all Corporations of Vicars Choral'. The College was despondent about the situation and 'wondered if there is any other corporation in England from which so much can be required and which receives comparatively so little in return'.<sup>52</sup>

Finally, in 1931, the Church Assembly approved 'The Cathedrals Measure', which under Statute XII decreed that in common with all other cathedral colleges, the 'Priest Vicars and lay Vicars shall be known collectively as the College of Vicars of the Cathedral Church of St Andrew in Wells, but shall have no corporate rights, possessions or duties in virtue of that designation'.<sup>53</sup> The chapel and college hall 'together with contents, books, muniments and plate, formerly in possession of principals, etc.' passed to the Dean and Chapter, while the Vicars' Close houses were transferred to the Ecclesiastical Commissioners. On Sep-



tember 30th 1936, agreement was reached between the Dean and Chapter and the Vicars Choral for the dissolution of their ancient college. When the Vicars Choral put their seal of approval to the agreement for the transfer of their estates to the Ecclesiastical Commissioners on 21st September 1866, little had they anticipated that 70 years later their 500 year old college would be dissolved.

For five centuries, the Somerset estates had remained intact in spite of religious and political upheavals of the Reformation, the dissolution of the monasteries and the Civil War. The estates, endowed in the 14th and 15th centuries, were not large in comparison with those of either the Bishop or the Dean and Chapter, and never provided an adequate income to maintain the Wells College buildings, provide satisfactory salaries or fund any improvements necessary to the estate properties. The estates did provide a guaranteed income, which however small, had since 1348 made the College of Vicars Choral independent of the Cathedral Chapter in that they were responsible for their own salaries.

In tracing the history of the estates, it does become apparent that over the centuries improvements could have been made in their management if only the Vicars had possessed the will to change from their medieval methods to a more progressive approach in keeping with the conditions of the times. This did eventually happen, when the Ecclesiastical Commissioners took over control in 1866; they surveyed and valued the properties, and only renewed leases at 19th century land values. The 19th and 20th century church reforms brought about far reaching changes which not only stripped the College of the estates, but also of their independence which had been so vigorously upheld since the Elizabethan Charter of 1591.

The College of Vicars Choral was founded primarily as a College of choral singers whose sole purpose was to assist the Dean and Chapter in the daily worship at the Cathedral. The management of their estates was a task that was only undertaken out of necessity to support themselves financially. Nathaniel Chyles, writing after the suffering and hardship of the Civil War, said of the Vicars Choral that 'We may perceive if we reflect on the Honour and worthiness of their founder, the number and quality of their Benefactors, the Vicars Choral of this Church not to have been such pitiful Fellows, and inconsiderable persons, as some would now have them'.<sup>54</sup> Throughout the centuries since their foundation in 1348, the College of Vicars Choral had perpetuated their founder's ideals, not perhaps as estate managers, but as music makers in the daily services at Wells Cathedral.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My grateful thanks to the Dean & Chapter of Wells Cathedral for use of both documents and photographs (kindly taken by Richard Neale) and to Mrs Frances Neale, the Cathedral archivist.

#### ABBREVIATIONS

H.M.C.	Historical Manuscripts Commission
S.R.O.	Somerset Record Office
S.R.S.	Somerset Record Society
V.C.H. (Som)	Victoria History of the County of Somerset
V.C.H. (Wilts)	Victoria History of the County of Wiltshire
W.C.L.	Wells Cathedral Library
W.V.C.	Wells Vicars Choral

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AUTHOR:

R. G. Hill, Manderley, 