

GOD'S OWN ACRES

Sitting securely between the Crown and the State, the Church of England owns enormous amounts of land and other capital, supposedly on God's behalf. In this section *The Land* looks into this national institution — a charity — and asks who really benefits?

ADIOS TO THE LANDED CLERGY

In the beginning, Henry VIII gave the Church of England a christening present of around three million acres. How much of that land does it still own? Where did the rest go? asks GILL BARRON. Privatising the Land Registry ensures we will never find out.

Stealing land is difficult to do. You can't exactly roll it up like a carpet and carry it away. But theft is a matter of ownership, and the undercover transfer of ownership of land is, in fact, incredibly easy in a country where the records of who owns what are a jealously guarded secret.

The enormous advantage to landowners of there being no compulsory register of their holdings is a subject that *The Land* has returned to over and over again; in fact every time that successive Tory governments have attempted to privatise the Land Registry. This threat has been going on for years, but now, according to the Chancellor, it is really going to happen, and soon. Quite regardless of the enormous body of public opinion set against this disastrous move, George Osborne will flog off a national asset which brings in £119 million pa clear profit to the Treasury every year.¹ Much more crucially, the partial, but vital data it already holds about the very fabric of the nation will be handed to the highest bidder, and any chance of a universal, transparent, democratic record of landholdings will be lost for ever.

The need for a fully-functioning, and compulsory, register of who-owns-what is vividly illustrated by the case of the Church of England's enormous, and untraceable, landholdings, originally acquired through a Royal landgrab. When Henry VIII dissolved the monasteries, in a clearly premeditated run-up to evicting the Catholic church from England altogether, he took possession of a loosely-estimated² four million acres of prime farmland. He sold some of it, hastily and cheaply, to various of his henchmen, to raise money for his wars. So that was the first slice gone from the original four million acres. But he quickly realised that his new Protestant Church of England would need ongoing upkeep. At a time when virtually all income was derived from owning land, whether as produce or rents, this was the only way to ensure the continuing presence of the Church's army of indoctrination³ across the nation. So he endowed it with the (unquantified) remaining lands, to enable it to support itself. Let's assume he sold a million acres — then the new Church got three. No-one knows, exactly.

It has never been any secret that in Britain, Church and State are one. The monarch is, constitutionally, the head of both. So closely do they work together that the Prime Minister is always a Church Commissioner, and the Monarch appoints two more of them, and also appoints the Archbishops, who in turn are part of the unelected backbone of Government.

Twenty-six bishops sit in the House of Lords, as of right. Recent, feeble attempts to remove the hereditary peers from this half of Parliament never questioned the entitlement of these Church mouthpieces to stay put. They are so deeply embedded in the Establishment as to be untouchable.



Where has all My glebe gone? Around 1.8 million acres of rural land belonging to God, or his earthly representatives - the Church of England's 43 dioceses - has "gone missing" since 1872.⁴

It has always been in the State's interest to protect the Church, to secure its social influence and political support in return. Henry VIII's endowment passed on the unsold remains of monastic and parish land to the parish that contained it, and these acres, known as "glebe" became the source of income for the personal support of the parish priest. As St. Alban's diocesan website⁴ explains:

"Before 1978 an incumbent could keep the rent from the glebe land in his parish and indeed, sell the land and use the proceeds to supplement his stipend. Now all income from glebe land is shared by all parishes in the diocese.

In 1978 the Endowments and Glebe Measure 1976 came into effect. This Measure transferred the ownership and management of glebe land from incumbents to the Diocesan Boards of Finance (DBF). From 1978 onwards all income arising from glebe land has to be used towards the payment of stipends ... In this way, many parishes where there was no glebe land benefit from the land now held by the DBF and all clergy are paid the same stipend. Before the Measure came into effect some clergy who owned a lot of glebe land had incomes far in excess of those clergy who had little or no glebe land."

This sounds fair, and rationalises a messy situation. The key is in the earlier quote: "to keep the rent ... or sell the land". That bygone incumbents (rectors, vicars etc) were allowed to flog off the Church's capital endowment to line their own pockets is extraordinary. So is the lack of any apparent effort to quantify the remaining acres in the run-up to the Glebe Measure in 1976. Sloppy housekeeping? Cover-up? All we can be sure of is that a lot of glebe land had quietly vanished away in the years since Henry VIII. The only record — or milestone — we have between Henry's time and 1978 is the *Returns of Owners of Land* in 1872, which gives a grand total of land owned or controlled by the Cof E and its clergy of 2.13 million acres.⁵ That's 870,000 of the original three million acres gone already. Working out, even approximately, how much more was lost in the years between 1872 and 1978 is going to be tricky, but, hell — someone has to do it.

St Alban's diocese (one of the few, out of 43, which make any public statement of their land holdings) admits to owning

about 3,000 acres of farm land; proceeds from the sale of glebe land are reinvested either in more land and buildings or in quoted investments. The income generated from the glebe land itself comes to about £450,000pa.⁴ Salisbury diocese is another: “In comparison with many other dioceses, Salisbury has a small glebe estate, some 1800 acres, mainly of farmland without buildings”. The income is not mentioned. Spot-checks on other dioceses’ glebe holdings, (Carlisle, York, Norwich, Canterbury and Exeter) yielded nothing; most do not even mention the word “glebe”.

Yet from St. Alban’s and Salisbury’s admissions, we may broadly surmise that 3,000 acres is a feasible average land-bank; and perhaps £450,000 a year a median income. There are 43 dioceses in the Cof E (not counting the 44th, which is “the rest of the world”). So – 43 times 3,000 acres is 129,000 acres. Forty-three times £450,000 is £19.35 million a year. This is guesswork, true, but in the absence of publicly available records we are forced to guess. This country-wide income from land rents is peanuts compared to the covenanted payments from churchgoers – latter-day tithes – on which parishes mainly rely; but even so it must be remembered that this land was originally a free gift from the King, so its capital cost is nil, and its rental value in perpetuity is unimaginably vast.⁵

Back to the “lost land” question. The calculation above yields 129,000 acres, and the Church Commissioners (as described in a later article) admit to owning some 105,000 acres. Let’s round it up to a tidy quarter of a million. Which is around an eighth of the 2.13m acres found by the *Returns* of 1872. The other seven-eighths amounts to around 1.8 million acres. That’s a lot of slippage. Given that the Church *is* the State, and the State is, in theory, the People, it smacks of the usual casual thieving of the “family silver” practiced by the various arms of the Conservative Party, who have always been keen on “privatisation”.

No big surprise there, then. Syphoning off national assets for private gain has always been the way this country is run, or rather, fleeced. But this is where the Land Registry comes in, or should do; its importance is only now being generally realised, just as we are about to lose it into the hands of the very same vested interests who have so long profited from its secrecy and loopholes. If we had had an effective, impartial, and compulsory land registry from the beginning, every transaction of public land into private ownership would have been available for scrutiny; many would have been common knowledge. Probably, far fewer of those back-pocket deals for parish property between Revd. X and Farmer Y would have taken place. Even the Bishop had no way of knowing what his clergy were up to. Land looks the same, whoever owns it.

Now that the Cof E is making most of its land-based income not from agriculture (via tenant farmers) but rather by turning its acres over to urban enterprises such as shopping malls, housing estates, and so on, the capital value of the remaining glebe is massively amplified by the “betterment” of planning



As demand for their Sunday services falls, incumbents are freer than ever to pursue their hobbies on the other six days of the week.

permission. The wealth of the Church of England, including its “charitable” arm, the Church Commissioners, is ballooning; even as demand for its services falls away like melting snow.⁶

As one commentator put it in 1993, “The church’s failure is so enormous that it now treats the country’s heartlands as mission fields, and not the thriving parishes they once were.”⁷ Twenty-three years later, the situation is very much worse. In March this year, the *Telegraph* reported that the Cof E has five times as many buildings as Tesco’s, but unlike Tesco’s they are almost always empty.⁸ What to do with all this real estate and colossal worldly wealth? The first step must be to call for a proper inventory – every diocese, and the Church Commissioners, to catalogue their property within these islands in publicly accessible form at the Land Registry.

The registration of *all* land ownership must be made compulsory. At present no-one can be sure who owns what, so there is no way the land could ever be shared out fairly. Secrecy is power. Landed interests of all sorts will fight to ensure that we never do find out where they hid all that family silver. Without public ownership of the Land Registry, we just don’t stand a chance.

The Church should remember it is constituted as a charity, intended to benefit the people as a whole, not just itself. But if the people have largely outgrown the need for it, it may be time to consider dissolving its assets and returning the proceeds – including all the land it hasn’t so far managed to lose – to a common bank to be used for the common good. God, wherever he or she is nowadays, would surely approve.

1. Editorial, The Guardian 25 May 2016 the-guardian-view-on-the-land-registry-sell-off-hands-off-this-national-asset

2. Cooper, JP *Land, Men and Beliefs*. Hambledon Press 1983. More on this in the following article.

3. Literally – ‘indoctrination’ derives from ‘doctrine’, meaning the official teachings of a religion.

4. Nye, David: *Whatever happened to our glebe land?* www.stalbans.anglican.org/sr-1603-glebe-land/

5. Cahill, Kevin: *Who Owns Britain?* Chapter 12: The Church of England. Canongate 2001.

6. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/27/church-buildings-falling-congregations>

7. Gill, Robin: *The Myth of the Empty Church Society* for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge (SPCK) 1993 p. 278

8. Only 1.4 per cent of the population of England now attend Anglican services on a typical Sunday morning. www.telegraph.co.uk/news/religion/12095251/Church-of-England-attendance-plunges-to-record-low.



THE GREAT ESTATES OF GOD

The 105,000 acres still owned by the Church Commissioners – plus all the ‘glebe’ owned by the dioceses – originated in vast estates farmed by monks, working for the ultimate Absentee Landlord. GLORIA MUNDY looks back at the ecclesiastical enclosure of England.

The ongoing entanglement between Church, Monarchy and State in Britain — a situation that lifts eyebrows in any self-respecting republic — arises from a long chain of events, going back to the Norman Conquest’s installation of monastic orders in a defensive chain of upland farming estates that ran across the North of England from coast to coast. After the Harrowing of the North, when William the Bastard’s troops massacred a large proportion of the native inhabitants of what are now Cumbria, Lancashire, the Yorkshires and Northumbria, an army of occupation was needed to “hold the fort” and keep the surviving locals in submission. Soldiers wouldn’t do — too blatant and inflammatory — but waiting in the wings was an army in disguise. Cistercian monks from Normandy were happy to oblige, in return for land grants, and their territories soon strung together across the hills, reinforced by innumerable sheep.

Monks in the Mist

However, the monastic farming tradition in England and Wales pre-dates the Normans by many centuries. Originally, agriculture seems to have been the last thing on the monks’ minds. Felix, an 8th century monk, described St Guthlac’s quest for the ideal refuge from the world:

Guthlac ... enquired of the inhabitants of the land where he might find himself a dwelling place in the wilderness. A man named Tatwine said he knew an island especially obscure, which oft-times many men had attempted to inhabit, but no man could do it on account of manifold horrors and fears, and the loneliness of the wild wilderness.¹

Perfect! But before long, the drift from reed and thatch towards masoned stone and glorious architecture was in full swing. The Saxon hermits’ encampments evolved quite rapidly into complex, productive farming and social systems capable of supporting quite as many people as the later feudal manors. Archaeologist Mick Aston explains:

“As hermitages developed into monasteries it became impossible to provide all the food and other commodities

for larger communities of monks from the original small or restricted island sites. Improving the productivity of the landscape around was achieved by drainage and enclosure of the marsh and clearance of woodland. ... As time went on, the changing ideals and circumstances of the monks are reflected in the development of the landscape from a wilderness to fully managed, productive countryside.”¹

By the tenth century monasteries had become, in most cases, agricultural hubs, as well as links in the chain of defence against invaders, and centres of learning and experiment. So the ground was already prepared for the Norman plantation.

After 1066 lowland monasteries continued much as before, with mixed farming, including plenty of arable to feed their enormous numbers of servants and dependents, who did most of the physical work, as well as the monks and nuns themselves, who needed ample calories to fuel their essentially passive lives of prayer. They were, famously, not thin people. Friar Tuck was stereotypical. By the middle 1300s, there were around 850 monasteries and friaries in England alone, plus 150 nunneries, housing some 14,000 men and 3,000 women, not counting the “staff”. As the monastic movement expanded, much of the extra land needed to support this growing multitude came from endowments by wealthy families, who gained the “accolade of social respectability in this world and the ultimate insurance policy in the next” from such gifts.² The church’s lands were well integrated into the manorial system, and run feudally, with the Abbott or Abbess in the role of Lord of the Manor. Fair or not, people were needed, and everyone ate.

Woolly Bullies

In the uplands, a different scenario: that Norman innovation, sheep, meant that almost no people were needed to work the land, but vastly more acres were needed to feed the sheep. And sheep breed. Huge wealth, and with it power, accumulated in the hands of the Abbots, enabling them to simply expand their terrain at will. Not surprisingly, exact numbers of sheep, the excuse for enclosure, are unobtainable, but this knotty quote from 1291 implies that there were lots:

“It is... ordained that 900 of the common two-tooth sheep (bidentibus) of the abbey shall be separated, by the view of the merchants before Mid-Lent next, which sheep the monks shall hold of the merchants, and then shall remain in divers places with the two-tooth sheep of the monks in as good pasture and custody of the abbey as the monks’ own two-tooth sheep.”³

Of course there were also native inhabitants, although rather fewer than before the

A re-creation of St Cuthbert’s settlement on Lindisfarne, showing the isolated places favoured by early monks in the days when people could choose to live more or less anywhere.



Peter Dunn

Harrowing of the North, but they were in no position to resist eviction, given that the monks were backed up by Norman military might. Closer to home, outliers of the monasteries – “granges” – were a permanent occupying force. These were smaller farm settlements run by younger monks, who, away from the discipline of their Abbot, were free to disregard their vows, especially chastity. As well as taking over land that had provided local sustenance from time out of mind, they also took liberties with the local daughters, but were unaccountable for the resulting offspring. Coupled with other abuses, and a general relaxation of the original austere ideals, the popularity of monks and monasteries sank, even as their worldly goods increased.

An effort to stop the rot was made in 1279, when King Edward I passed the Statute of Mortmain requiring a Crown licence before gifts of land could be made to a religious house. Before the licence was granted, a fine had to be paid, and any land that was given without a licence was forfeit to the Crown. This effectively reduced the donation of land. Other setbacks included the Little Ice Age (c. 1300-1490), the Black Death (1344), and an epidemic of sheep scab which left Northern monasteries deeply in debt to the wool merchants.² It was not the best time in history to be farming.

Fat Henry's Booty

Nonetheless, by the early 1500s, and the onset of the Protestant reformation, the combined land-holdings of the religious orders had increased to an estimated four million acres.⁵ Much of this had been rough land originally, as benefactors were unlikely to bequeath their best land to God; however, with centuries of cultivation, it had now become highly desirable, especially to the cash-strapped monarch. Following an assessment called the *Valor Ecclesiasticus*, in 1534 the First Fruits and Tenths Act was passed, which taxed the whole clergy 10 percent of annual income. The Dissolution proper began in 1536, with the passing of the Act for the Suppression of the Lesser Monasteries. At this stage of the Dissolution, only 30 percent of the lands and buildings were confiscated; and the monks and nuns who were expelled had financial provisions made for them. Some were transferred elsewhere, and the new owners of the monastic sites were encouraged to retain the lay employees, or compensate them. But strong feelings had been aroused and in 1536 a revolt – the Pilgrimage of Grace – attempted (among other grievances) to restore monastic lands to their previous Owner (God). This uprising failed, bloodily, and by autumn 1538 around 20 monasteries a month were surrendering, “voluntarily”, to the Crown. By 1540 all were gone. Former monastic land was mainly sold to secular owners for a compound of 20 years’ rent, as working farms, with buildings and livestock included. Financial pressures (wars) encouraged Henry VIII to sell cheaply; so much so that many holdings were split up into smaller parcels and sold on quickly for large profits.

Changing Hands

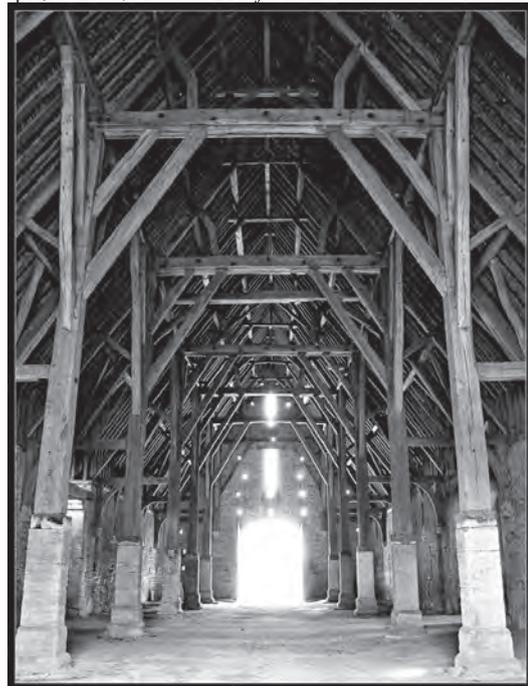
The Church, “reformed” or otherwise, had always played a huge part in the power structures of the State, as “the religious arm of government”. Henry had to ensure that this support to the monarchy would keep functioning. To this end, he gave portions of confiscated monastic lands (found all over the country) to each parish, forming the glebe lands that became the principal endowment of the Church of England. No records



This charming schoolbook image of medieval monastic farming overlooks the fact that the hard labour was left to dependent serfs and “lay brothers”, who received shelter and food in return.

of the total area were kept, and after Cromwell confiscated it again and sold it off once more, the glebe boundaries became even fuzzier. At the Restoration, the Royalist establishment – the Church of England, in other words – managed to buy much of it back again; the tithes that went with the land were a lucrative form of taxation, and steady income, disastrous to lose. In 1704 Queen Anne set up a “Bounty”, a royal charity, intending the proceeds to buy more glebe land to support poor clergy. This fund in time morphed into the Ecclesiastical Commissioners, and in 1976, by Act of Parliament, all parish glebe lands were amalgamated under Diocesan ownership and control. These numberless acres are separate from all the *other* Church of England property, still virtually hidden under the wing of the Church Commissioners. God’s acres? Glebe land? All we know nowadays is that “they have a lot of it”.

1. Aston, Mick: *Monasteries in the Landscape*, Tempus Books 2000
2. R.A. Donkin - ‘The Cistercian Order and the Settlement of Northern England’. (*Geographical Review*, Vol 59, 1969) p. 409. See also www.bahs.org.uk/AGHR/ARTICLES/06n1a1.pdf
3. <http://cms.nottinghamshire.gov.uk/monasteries.pdf> /McIlwain 1993
4. Calendar of Close Rolls, 1288-96, p193
5. Cooper, JP *Land, Men and Beliefs*. Hambledon Press 1983



The sheer immensity of monastic tithe barns bears witness to the productivity of bygone centuries. This one, built c.1310 by Cistercians, is at Great Coxwell, Oxfordshire.