
II

THE MONASTIC ECONOMY

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On numerous occasions the Rule of St Benedict reminds the monks that they are to have no private possessions. But it was assumed that the monastery would have possessions; and this was in no way incompatible with the monastic ideal. Poverty was personal, not corporate. Religious houses became landowners; and their economic practices were affected by a number of factors. First, there was the ethos of the order to which a house belonged. The Cistercians, as we have seen, sought remote sites and rejected all revenue which was derived either from the possession of *spiritualia*¹ or from the work of others. The mendicants were not intended to own property at all, although certain friaries did come into possession of arable land, orchards and gardens in their immediate vicinity.² Equally important factors in the economic development of a house were its size and geographical location and the nature and extent of its estates, and their distance from the mother house. These conditions in turn bear upon the records which were generated, and determine what we can know of the management of monastic estates. On the whole, large houses with sizeable holdings produced more records, and are accordingly much better documented than smaller ones. Thus, the following discussion, which looks more closely at two major aspects of the monastic economy, sources of income and the management of resources, centres on the large houses, which cannot but distort the overall picture.

A discussion of the economic assets of religious houses will lead us to the question of their wealth. How wealthy – or otherwise – were they? Any attempt either to estimate the wealth or poverty of the religious houses of Britain or to evaluate their general contribution to the economy

or agriculture of Britain is fraught with difficulties. The religious houses are so numerous, and their situation over three centuries so varied, that any generalization is impossible. Yet some remarks can be made. In 1291 and again in 1535 the assets of the monastic houses of England and Wales were valued. Both sets of figures must be used with caution. The one which falls within the period under review, the *Taxatio Ecclesiastica* of 1291, has been shown to be inaccurate in some respects, and almost certainly contains omissions and undervaluations;³ yet it may be read as an approximate index of monastic wealth and poverty. The same may be said of the *Valor Ecclesiasticus*, compiled on the eve of the Dissolution of the monasteries. What these valuations show us is that the houses which head the list as the most wealthy were those which had their origins in the years before the Norman Conquest, houses like Glastonbury and Westminster. Some post-Conquest Benedictine houses, notably St Mary's, York, Reading and Durham, and a handful of houses of the new orders, like Cirencester, Leicester, Merton and Fountains, made it into the top league, but they were the exception. The pattern of wealth and endowment had in many respects already been set by 1066. In the twelfth century the scramble for land and rivalry for endowments meant that few new houses were able to achieve the wealth and status of the older Benedictine establishments. In Wales the picture is different because of the absence of monastic houses before the late eleventh century. Using the 1291 taxation as our guide, we can see that the Cistercian houses of Margam and Neath appear to have been the most wealthy, with incomes assessed at £256 and £236 respectively.⁴ Their nearest challengers were Llanthony Prima (£233) and Goldcliff (£172). In general, in both England and Wales the poorest houses were those of the regular canons and Gilbertines, but more especially the post-Conquest foundations for women. With only a few notable exceptions the nunneries failed to achieve a substantial income, and many must have been existing at subsistence level.⁵ The religious houses of Scotland were valued in 1561, when the Crown assumed one-third of the income of all ecclesiastical benefices. In assessing how accurate these figures are likely to be we need to take into account the substantial damage sustained by some houses during the English invasions of the first half of the sixteenth century, and as a result of popular hostility. Nevertheless, these figures may be read as an approximate guide to relative values. They indicate that the most wealthy Scottish communities were the cathedral priory of St Andrews, with an estimated minimum income of £12,500, the Tironensian house of Arbroath (£10,924) and Dunfermline Abbey (£9,630). The foundations for wealth appear to have lain in the endowments of the Scottish royal family in the twelfth century. Houses of friars did not, apparently, rise to

incomes of over £100, and, as in England and Wales, the poorest houses were those of the female congregations; only North Berwick, at £1,800, had an assessed annual value of over £500.⁶

INCOME AND EXPENDITURE

Sources of income

Land for arable and pastoral farming

Land was by far the most important economic resource enjoyed by the religious orders. In many cases houses failed to add significantly to their initial endowments;⁷ others supplemented their benefactions through further grants or through their own efforts. The main period of landed expansion was from the era of foundation to the end of the twelfth century; benefactions continued to be made in the thirteenth century, but a significant watershed was the Statute of Mortmain of 1279, which prohibited the unauthorized alienation of property to religious houses.⁸ Indications of the nature of the land obtained by the religious orders can come from a variety of sources. Sometimes, though not frequently, a charter specified that the land was arable or cultivated land, occasionally indicating its quality: whether it was good, likely to yield profit, mediocre or poor. Other indications of the location of the main arable lands of a house come from account rolls (of which none are extant from before the thirteenth century),⁹ which may show how much and what kind of produce lands were yielding. Arable land supplied food for consumption at a religious house, and any surplus could be sold to buy goods; and it has been suggested that it was a need for arable in the vicinity of a house which prompted the site changes of a number of Augustinian houses, among them Bolton and Lilleshall.¹⁰ Although the majority of houses probably operated a mixed economy, it is likely that those in the corn-rich lands of the South and midlands relied more on arable than houses in the more mountainous North and West. However, the Cistercians had a large number of predominantly arable granges in the North, some with over a thousand acres of cultivated land. Among other orders Bolton Priory in the late thirteenth century produced most of its own corn, relying less than it had done previously on sheep, in contrast to Malton Priory, which concentrated on sheep farming and had to purchase its grain.¹¹ Although in general Wales was a land of pastoral rather than arable husbandry, Welsh religious houses appear to have managed to supply their own needs in normal circumstances. Strata Florida deliberately set out to obtain low-lying land for growing grain on the coastal plain of Cardiganshire as well as further afield in the valleys of

the Wye and Severn.¹² In the late thirteenth century the monks of Margam possessed over 7,000 acres of arable, those of Neath and Whitland over 5,000 acres, and even the small nunnery of Llanllŷr over 1,000 acres. The monastic ploughlands could not, however, meet extraordinary needs, and the famine of 1189 sent the monks of Margam to Bristol to buy corn to feed the starving who gathered at their doors, while in 1234 the abbot of Neath sought and gained permission to buy corn in England.¹³

Many houses, in addition to arable, obtained lands which were more suitable for a pastoral economy, the keeping of cows, sheep and other animals. Grantors sometimes specified the number and type of animals for which land was intended, or gave to religious houses a share in the common pasture of a village, where they were then obliged to co-operate with their neighbours. A pastoral economy became particularly important for houses situated in East Anglia, in the north of England, and in Scotland and Wales, where the terrain was suitable for the keeping of large flocks. In these regions, as we shall see, the White Monks became particularly important as sheep farmers. The geographical divide was not clear-cut, however, and southern houses were also major keepers of animals: cows, sheep and goats for milk and cheese, cows also for their hides and for ploughing, sheep for their fleeces, and pigs for meat, lard and hides. Horses were important for travel and haulage, and are recorded on many monastic estates. The monks of Margam, Neath and Strata Florida bred horses which fetched high prices, and herds are also recorded on the estates of Grace Dieu, Basingwerk, Cwmhir and Tintern.¹⁴ Cattle were very important, indeed may have been as important as sheep on some Cistercian estates, particularly in the North, the Fenlands and Wales, where the marshland provided suitable pasture for cows. The earliest reference to a Cistercian vaccary (dairy farm or breeding station) comes from Byland Abbey, which within two years of its foundation had one at Cambe;¹⁵ and Fountains Abbey gave over the whole of its pastures in Nidderdale to cattle. By the thirteenth century several houses had their own tanneries.

It was, however, as keepers of sheep that the Cistercians have become most famed, and wool was the main cash-crop of twelfth-century Britain; the production and export of this commodity will be treated more fully later in this chapter. Yet although the Cistercians and their emulators were foremost in the development of sheep farming and the wool trade, their importance, or at least their priority, should not be overstressed. Several large Benedictine houses were also major sheep farmers: already in 1086 Ely had flocks of over 13,000 sheep, and the Norman nunnery of Holy Trinity, Caen, grazed 1,700 sheep on Minchinhampton common in

Gloucestershire. The numbers of sheep kept by individual religious houses is impossible to determine with any frequency. The grant of pasture for a thousand sheep, for instance, does not mean that a thousand sheep were kept there; often, as pressure on pasture grew, this was intended to denote an upper limit. Moreover, the occurrence of disease such as sheep-rot and murrain meant that the size of monastic flocks must have fluctuated widely. Occasional numerical references do, however, exist. A survey of 1125 shows that the monks of Peterborough grazed just over 1,600 sheep and lambs, nearly half that number on their Northamptonshire estates.¹⁶ In 1270–80 Meaux Abbey pastured 11,000 sheep on their estates, and at roughly the same date the monks of Beaulieu had flocks totalling over 5,000 sheep.¹⁷

The extension of arable and pasture land

It is generally agreed that the eleventh and twelfth centuries witnessed a growth in the population of Europe. There followed a rise in prices and increase in trade, which in turn led to developments in the way in which religious houses, as landlords, administered their property. An especially urgent need was the extension of land under cultivation, mostly as arable, but also as pasture. In the process of clearance of new lands, of reclamation of fen, marsh, woodland and waste, the religious orders of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries played a major role, in Britain as on the continent. The evidence for monastic activity in land clearance comes from a number of sources. Charters granted to religious houses 'assarts' or 'riddings', that is, areas cleared ready for cultivation; but frequently they received land and permission to assart it as they were able or as they wished. Pipewell Abbey, for instance, received licence to 'assart and reduce to agricultural land'.¹⁸ Although the Cistercians are especially well known in this field of activity, both old and new orders were active. The colonization of Northamptonshire by Peterborough Abbey is well recorded after 1066, and may well have taken place also in the late Anglo-Saxon period.¹⁹ In 1143 the monks received confirmation of all their assarts so far created; and twenty years later they were fined for assarting without licence in four places. Their important manor of Paston in Norfolk was created largely from waste land, and in the area around Oundle nearly a thousand acres were brought into use by the late thirteenth century. Another ancient Benedictine abbey, Glastonbury, was active in extending land under cultivation, not as at Peterborough by clearing forest but by assarting waste around the house, draining meres and building embankments around marshes.²⁰

It has been demonstrated that a number of houses of Augustinian canons were also active in the clearance of land, among them Bristol,

Maiden Bradley (Wiltshire), Darley (Derbyshire), Waltham (Essex) and Merton (Surrey).²¹ However, it is the White Monks who are most noted as colonizers, and it is significant that many place names make their first recorded appearance in the cartularies of Cistercian and Premonstratensian houses, especially in the North, indicating the creation of new areas of settlement and cultivation.²² The precise degree to which the Cistercians were involved in land clearance and the size of their contribution have been much debated; but their role was less prominent in Britain than in some other areas of Europe, for the simple reason that England was by the twelfth century already a well-settled land where the opportunities for expansion were limited. Despite the Cistercian ruling that houses should be 'remote from the dwellings of men', few British Cistercian houses could be called truly remote, and most were on the fringes of settlement.²³ Assarting sometimes took place at the site of a house – the environs of Byland had to be drained, and the abbey of Warden was also known as St Mary *de Essartis*, 'of the assarts'²⁴ – but more commonly the assarting of land was associated with Cistercian granges where lands were cleared to extend the area under cultivation. One of the debated issues is the extent to which the monks resettled land recorded as 'waste' in Domesday Book,²⁵ or how far recovery had already taken place by the time of the coming of the Cistercians. The evidence suggests that over 40 per cent of twelfth-century granges were settled on lands recorded as waste in 1086, although only one grange, that of Pickering (Rievaulx), seems to have been carved totally from waste. In some areas, notably Wensleydale and Airedale, the White Monks appear to have been agents of recolonization in areas depopulated since the late eleventh century.²⁶ One of the advantages to be gained from the opening up of lands was that they were freed from the payment of tithes. In 1132 the White Monks obtained a papal concession that they did not need to pay tithes on any land which they cultivated themselves. So prized was this tax concession that others sought it too, and in the thirteenth century the abbot of Cîteaux complained that certain English nunneries were wrongfully claiming Cistercian status in order to obtain the privilege.²⁷ It can well be imagined that exemption was a cause of conflict between abbeys and parish churches, and the cartularies of many religious houses contain copies of agreements under which the monks made a token payment for tithes. In 1215 the Fourth Lateran Council addressed the general problem and restricted exemption to those lands acquired before the Council and those which had been brought into cultivation by the monks, 'new land' (*novalia*).

All over England Cistercian houses were associated to a greater or lesser degree with the clearance of forest, the drainage of marsh and the

conversion of waste and scrub lands. In the Fens, Sawtry, Swineshead and Revesby were especially active, and in Yorkshire the monks of Meaux drained and banked the lands on their granges in the low-lying valley of the Humber. Wales was also an area which by the late twelfth century was becoming more intensively farmed. Two Cistercian granges, one belonging to Neath and the other to Tintern, were known as the 'grange of the assart', indicating that they were situated on lands which had been newly brought into use. Further evidence for assarting, particularly in woodland areas, comes from the royal pipe rolls, the accounts of the sheriffs of each shire which show the money owed to the king each year. Among other things they note any unlicensed activity; and on forty occasions between 1155 and 1212 Cistercian houses were fined either for wasting (felling trees) or assarting in the royal forests without permission. Some abbeys in Wales as in England fell foul of royal authority: in 1282 Tintern was fined for clearing 200 acres of royal forest without licence.²⁸

Other natural resources

Revenue and resources also came to religious houses through the donation of assets and commodities which could be used or sold for cash. They obtained fisheries along rivers and coasts, which supplied them with a vital element in the monastic diet.²⁹ The Welsh Cistercians enjoyed access to a variety of fish: herrings from their fisheries on Cardigan Bay, eels and trout from the Teifi pools, and salmon from the Teifi and the Wye, from where Tintern supplied its daughter house of Kingswood in Gloucestershire.³⁰ Stixwold Priory obtained the right to take fish from the rivers Witham and Humber at points thirty-five miles from the house.³¹ Saltpans yielded salt for preserving food; quarries provided stone for building; woodland offered valuable pasture for pigs as well as timber for building and furnishing the conventual church, for constructing houses and sheepfolds, for hedging and fencing, and for fuel. Peat was another important source of fuel, and many houses were in receipt of the grant of turbaries. Some religious houses obtained important mineral rights and materials, such as iron ore and charcoal for smelting. The Cistercians of Byland and Rievaulx produced pig-iron in their smithies in the West Riding of Yorkshire. In the thirteenth century Margam Abbey received the right to mine coal, lead and iron, though the evidence for their actually doing so is sparse. Similarly the degree of involvement of the monks of Monmouth, Tintern and Grace Dieu in the iron industry of the Forest of Dean is difficult to judge.³² Tintern had two forges here, one as early as 1141, and one forge at least was in operation in 1267, when the abbey was apparently smelting without licence. The White

Monks of the Scottish abbeys of Newbattle and Culross were pioneer coal-miners.³³

Manors and manorial rights

Land was an especially valuable asset when it was conveyed to a religious house with existing rights and jurisdiction. The basic rural unit of settlement in England was the village, but in terms of organization in much of the country it was not the village that was important so much as the manor. A manor (Latin *manerium*) was not just a piece of land: it was a complex institution, the origins of which are still being investigated by archaeologists and historians. A manor could be co-terminous with a village; on the other hand, a manor might comprise several villages, or a village several manors. There was a variety of patterns. In practical terms a manor comprised land held in demesne by a lord, that is, worked directly on his behalf, and land held by the lord's tenants. The tenants owed service to the lord on the demesne for a certain number of days a year, and rent for their share of the tenanted land, either in money or in kind. A survey of Peterborough's manors made between 1125 and 1128 indicates that each demesne manor provided a 'farm' of cash or grain, or both; the total received was £382 5s. 4d., of which £284 13s. 4d. came from money rents and £97 12s. from grain.³⁴ The transfer of a manor to a religious house, therefore, provided a major economic asset. Because possession of a manor involved financial gain through the work of others it was rejected as a source of revenue by the early Cistercians. It is therefore the Black Monks who are most readily associated with the administration of their lands through manors, particularly in the South and midlands, which in contrast to the North had been heavily manorialized for centuries. Benedictine houses so became important lords of the manor, enjoying the possession not just of agricultural assets and labour, but also of jurisdictional privileges.

The possession of manors was not, however, limited to the Benedictines. The regular canons, as might be expected given the diversity in the size, location and nature of their houses, enjoyed a wide variety of economic assets. Some, like Christchurch, Oseney and Waltham, owned many manors.³⁵ Although the site of remote Llanthony Prima associated it with Cistercian rather than Benedictine practice, the priory's Herefordshire estates were organized through a traditional manorial structure, with the canons being in receipt of the labour services of the peasantry, rent and the profits of manorial courts.³⁶ As in other areas Cistercian rigour began to break down by the later twelfth and thirteenth centuries. When King John founded a Cistercian house his endowment included the manor of Faringdon, and when the monks moved to

Beaulieu in 1204 they retained the manor with all its appurtenant rights.³⁷ It was not just new foundations which succumbed to the temptation to hold manorial rights. In 1230 the monks of Margam took over the vill of Bonvilston, which, although not described as a manor, was in fact a similar settlement with a complex of rights and jurisdiction.³⁸ Indeed, the transfer of labour services to the Welsh Cistercians may have come much sooner, and it has been argued that the granges of Strata Florida were superimposed upon a semi-manorialized Celtic organization of just such rights and dues.³⁹

The manorial system can be seen in the twelfth century at its most comprehensive in the survey of Templar lands in England, compiled around 1185.⁴⁰ The famous Inquest lists all the properties acquired by the Knights Templar in the seventy-five years or so since their introduction into Britain: these sometimes comprised a few acres in a village, and sometimes an entire manor. It clearly indicates, too, the money and labour services due to the Knights as landlords and lords of the manor. A later example of services owed by monastic tenants can be drawn from the records of Westminster Abbey, which give us a detailed picture of the annual dues of a customary tenant on the abbey manor of Teddington (Middlesex). A tenant had to perform three works each week during harvest and three each fortnight for the rest of the year. If he owned a plough he was to plough and harrow three acres for seeding and two for fallow. He mowed the demesne meadow together with the other tenants, for which he got his dinner and 6d. for ale. He was further responsible for finding two men for three boon-works during harvest, who received allowances of food and ale. His renders in kind comprised fifteen sheaves of rye, barley and oats, and a hen at Christmas (shared between two tenants), a bushel of grain at Whitsuntide, and five eggs at Easter. Finally, as money rent he paid 2s. yearly and 1d. per animal for the right of pannage, that is, for pasturing his pigs.⁴¹

Mills

Mills too provided a valuable source of income.⁴² When a religious house came into possession of a mill it could use it for its own purposes; on the other hand it might also exercise the right of multure, that is, charge villagers to have their corn ground there. The Cistercians, in rejecting any such forms of revenue, allowed their houses to have mills only for domestic use. In time, however, they came to accept the grant of mills for use by other than their own communities. As early as 1157 the general chapter reminded the order of the ban on the acceptance of mills, but only a year later Woburn Abbey accepted one from the king. Bordesley, Thame and Warden were among other Cistercian houses which violated

the rule.⁴³ The value to a community of the possession of a mill is demonstrated by a story, told by Jocelin of Brakelond, of how the abbot of Bury reacted when he heard that Herbert the dean had built a wind-mill near one controlled by the abbey:

he boiled with fury and could hardly eat or speak. The following day, after Mass, he told the sacrist to get his carpenters there without delay to demolish it and store the timber in a secure place. On receiving news of this, the dean came to say that he was quite within his rights to act as he had on his freehold land, and that no one ought to be denied the use of the wind. He maintained that he had intended to grind only his own grain there and no one else's, so as not to be regarded as having caused loss to neighbouring mills.

The abbot was not convinced:

What on earth do you think you are doing? It is certainly not without loss to my mills, as you contend, because the townspeople will flock to your mill to grind their grain as they please . . . Go away. Before you get home you will hear what is going to become of your mill.

The abbot succeeded in terrifying the dean so much that he himself demolished the mill before the sacrist's men could get there.⁴⁴

Town property and monastic boroughs

Some of the revenue of monasteries and nunneries derived from the possession of property and other economic assets in towns. Occasionally this was in the form of cash income, like the 40s. annual rent from the revenues of Roxburgh granted by King David of Scotland to Kelso Abbey. More often, however, tenements were granted to the religious, who then either retained the property for their own use, or leased it to tenants. Sometimes monasteries located at a distance from a major urban centre found it convenient to retain property in towns such as London and York for their own use, in order to provide accommodation for monastic officials on business there. It was common, however, for urban property to be leased to tenants, who paid rent either in kind – such as the annual render of a buck, a pound of cumin, a pair of white gloves, and a rose received by Shrewsbury Abbey from some of its tenants – or in money; Matthew Paris tells how John of Hertford, who became abbot of St Albans in 1235, acquired property in London, and then ‘constructed some noble new houses there and raised the rent’.⁴⁵ Several Augustinian houses, notably those which were themselves located in or near towns, obtained urban property. Southwark had a foothold in London early in the twelfth century, and by 1291 apparently held forty-seven properties there; while the London tenements of Holy Trinity, Aldgate, accounted

for around 60 per cent of the priory's income from temporalities.⁴⁶ Two other Augustinian houses, Oseney Abbey and Barnwell Priory, became the largest landowners in medieval Oxford and Cambridge respectively.

In Scotland, by 1296, twenty-four or so religious houses came to possess property in around forty burghs.⁴⁷ Often these properties were of major importance in a monastery's economy; the second largest estate of Lindores (Tironensian), for example, was the burgh at Newburgh which the monks created and developed.⁴⁸ The strongest monastic presence, however, was in the important burgh of Berwick, on the river Tweed, which formed the border between England and Scotland. Here fifteen Scottish houses held tenements, of which Melrose with ten and Kelso with nine were the most prominent.⁴⁹ The fiscal nature of their interests in town property is indicated by the frequency with which it was rented out: only three houses, Melrose, Newbattle and Arbroath, seem to have retained one property for their own use, and a fourth house, Coupar Angus, did so until some time between 1212 and 1240. It is for these very houses that we also have evidence of involvement in trade, and their desire to retain use of their Berwick property rather than to view it simply as a source of income was undoubtedly dictated by the importance of Berwick as a commercial centre.

It was probably because of their growing involvement with trade that the Cistercians, who at first avoided urban areas, increasingly came to own town property. By 1300 seventeen Cistercian monasteries had houses in London. Abbeys in Yorkshire and Lincolnshire concentrated on acquisitions in York, Boston and Lincoln, while the Welsh houses turned to Bristol (where Margam was the most important Welsh monastic landowner), and Cardiff and Chester. An urban toe-hold was also important for those who wished to buy and sell at local markets. By 1225 Strata Marcella had three shops in the market place at Shrewsbury. The monks of Melrose obtained land in Boston on which to build houses, and when these were complete they agreed to share them during fair time with the monks of their daughter house of Holm Cultram.⁵⁰ Stixwold Priory obtained land in Lincoln with a landing stage on the river Witham three miles from the city, and also in Boston, where with one property the nuns obtained the right of free entry and exit for themselves, their servants, horses, wagons and carts, during the annual fair.⁵¹ Privileges within urban areas were also important, and by 1200 Whitland, Neath, Llantarnam and Tintern were all free from toll in Bristol, a concession which had been enjoyed by Margam since 1183 at the latest.⁵²

Thirty towns in England and Wales, known as monastic boroughs, were totally under the control of a religious house. Twenty-five were controlled by the Benedictines and five by the Augustinians. They

included Bury St Edmunds (where the abbey's administration is chronicled in Jocelin's account of Abbot Samson), Burton-on-Trent, Evesham, Tavistock, Winchcombe and St Albans, and among the post-Conquest foundations, Shrewsbury, Durham, Whitby, Selby and Battle, where the borough grew up around the Conqueror's abbey and provided the services which the community needed.⁵³ The monastic boroughs produced revenue from the fines and amercements collected in the abbey's court, rents and rates, and tolls from market and mill. Bury is undoubtedly the best-documented monastic borough. After the division of the revenues of abbot and convent, the borough became the property of the abbey, and thus it was the sacrist rather than the abbot who was lord of the borough.⁵⁴ When this development first occurred is not certain, and the first reference to the sacrist as lord of the borough appears to date from 1145–54. Thereafter he was responsible for the appointment of the bailiffs, overseeing the administration of justice and supervising the gaol and its keeper. Within these boroughs the monastery was an important factor in urban growth. Under Abbot Baldwin (1065–97) five new streets and a new market place were constructed at Bury. Matthew Paris tells us that Abbot Leofstan of St Albans (d. 1064 or 1066) made a number of improvements in the town, including building bridges and improving the road to London, following the tradition of one of his predecessors, Wulfsig (fl. c. 968), who laid out the market place and provided building material for settlers.⁵⁵

The relationship between monastery and borough was seldom free from strain, and underlying tensions sometimes broke into open resistance, as tenants tried to shake off an abbey's authority. Indeed, the existence of monastic boroughs was the single greatest cause of violence in which religious houses became involved. At Bury the townspeople started to look for ways to assert their independence from the abbey from the early thirteenth century: they sided with the sacrist's opponents in the convent during the election dispute which followed the death of Abbot Samson in 1211; and some of them supported the coming of the friars to the town, which, as we have seen, was bitterly opposed by the abbey.⁵⁶ Stimulated by national events, notably the baronial discontent of Simon de Montfort and his followers in the late 1250s, monastic boroughs began to aim at independence and self-government. The townspeople of Reading, for instance, demanded that their gild merchant be recognized by the abbey. At St Albans the townspeople registered their resentment by trying to break the abbey's monopoly on milling, and set their sights on the establishment of a commune. In 1264 the setting up of a gild of youths in Bury St Edmunds led to a violent attack on the abbey and its monks, during which the sacrist and cellarer were excluded from the

town. Discontent in monastic boroughs was to become a feature of the later Middle Ages. The monks did not enjoy their rights and privileges unopposed or unchallenged.

Markets and fairs

A privilege granted by benefactors which was often associated with urban property was permission to hold a market or fair, or to impose a toll on the passage of goods brought for sale; these were valuable concessions. Some of the earliest annual fairs in England are mentioned in the eleventh century in connection with religious houses. From the late eleventh century the monks of Shrewsbury held an annual fair there for three days from 31 July. Nearly two hundred years later the burgesses of the town issued a charter which reaffirmed this right to the abbey, and which makes clear how valuable the grant of a fair could be: during the three days no shops within the town were open for the sale of any commodity except wine and ale. The town's own trade might suffer, but no one was to be prevented from attending the fair. The fair was supervised by the abbey servants, who took for the house all its profits. The great fair at Shrewsbury was not the only one controlled by the monks: in 1256 King Henry III granted them the right to hold a weekly market at Baschurch, and an annual fair there lasting four days from 31 October, and a weekly market at Betton in Hales, with an annual fair of four days, beginning on 20 September.⁵⁷ Income from markets and fairs was not allowed to the Cistercians, but here, as in many other areas of the White Monk economy, early restrictions faded by the late twelfth century. The first and only recorded twelfth-century Cistercian fair was that at Hoo, granted to Boxley Abbey in 1189/90; but four markets and six fairs were obtained by other houses between 1200 and 1250, and twenty markets and the same number of fairs between 1250 and 1300.⁵⁸

Spiritualia

All the sources of revenue so far discussed were classed as *temporalia*. A second category of assets were termed *spiritualia*, that is, they derived from ecclesiastical sources, notably churches and tithes. We have noted how a considerable number of patrons, particularly those of Augustinian houses, transferred parish churches to the ownership of religious houses. As the place where men and women worshipped, and where they received the Christian sacraments, the parish church was part of the ecclesiastical organization of the country, which was itself becoming clarified and defined in the course of the eleventh and twelfth centuries.⁵⁹ What concerns us here is the parish church as a source of revenue. The degree of monastic involvement could vary. A religious house could exercise the

right to choose a rector and present him to the bishop for institution; this was known as the right of patronage, or advowson. The monastery or nunnery, as patron, was normally in receipt of a pension from the church, and also enjoyed the advantage of influence in the parish. The house could, if it so decided, go one step further and act as corporate rector. It would then be obliged to appoint one of its own members who was a priest to conduct services. Financially this brought great advantage, for the house would be entitled to take all the revenues of the church: the glebe land, the offerings of the parishioners, the tithes (a tenth of the produce of land which was paid to the parish church), and other dues such as mortuary fees (payment for burial). In these cases the monastery was said to have appropriated the church. Finally a religious house which appropriated a church but could not provide a priest as rector from its own ranks might appoint a vicar, to whom a proportion of the revenues would be paid, or a stipendiary priest. Though there are instances of the ordination of vicarages in the early to mid twelfth century, they are not common, and it was only after the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 that the system became widespread.

Because of the lack of definition in the wording of many charters, which simply record the grant of a church, *ecclesia*, it is not always easy to discover what monasteries and nunneries did with the churches which they were granted, or what the donors intended. In the early twelfth century appropriation is not always easy to detect, because it is possible that informal appropriations, that is, those not recorded in writing, took place.⁶⁰ It is not until about the end of the twelfth century that charters begin to be more specific and distinguish between the grant of a church and the patronage or advowson, that is, the right of presentation. In addition, in time it became normal practice for licence for appropriation to be sought and obtained (usually on the grounds of the poverty of a house) from the diocesan bishop or from the pope, and it is from among episcopal, and to a lesser extent, papal records that most of our evidence for appropriations derives. Religious houses all over Britain came into the possession of appropriated churches or ones from which, as patron, they drew a pension. Among the Benedictines St Albans enjoyed the tithes of sixteen churches and presented to four more.⁶¹ Westminster Abbey claimed pensions in nineteen churches in the diocese of London by 1167 and in 1189 received licence to appropriate any of them. In 1291 the income from Westminster's *spiritualia* amounted to £273, 77 per cent of which came from appropriated rectories. The total annual value of the abbey was £1,294.⁶² As a New Year present one year Jocelin of Brakelond decided to compile, for presentation to Abbot Samson, a list of churches in which the abbot or convent had rights and the rents which could be

expected when they were farmed out, and he was able to name over sixty-five.⁶³ Durham's Scottish cell of Coldingham received no fewer than eighteen parish churches on the border; the Scottish Cluniac abbey of Crossraguel depended heavily on the possession of parish churches and teinds (tithes) for its income, and the other Ayrshire monastery of Kilwinning (Tironensian) had sixteen appropriated churches.⁶⁴

The Augustinian canons, being a clerical order, were particularly favoured with the gift of churches.⁶⁵ Although the 1291 taxation of Pope Nicholas is a source which has to be treated with great caution, which undoubtedly left much unrecorded, it is of interest as indicating that 40 per cent of Augustinian revenue derived from *spiritualia*. Even if this figure is inaccurate, it still suggests that churches were a significant economic asset. Appropriation in the twelfth century appears to have been reasonably common, and it increased in the thirteenth. The 1291 taxation shows 325 churches appropriated to 120 houses of Black Canons. The *Liber Antiquus* of Bishop Hugh de Welles of Lincoln, dated to c. 1220, gives evidence of vicarages in 126 benefices belonging to the Augustinians in the diocese of Lincoln. Some monasteries derived revenue from churches located at a distance from the house. Llanthony Prima, for instance, enjoyed the appropriated income from fourteen Irish churches, which combined with the proceeds from nine in the diocese of Hereford to form a substantial asset.⁶⁶ The Premonstratensians were at first willing to accept churches only when they could be used as the basis for a new abbey. This ruling soon became a dead-letter, however, and one example of a British Premonstratensian house with extensive interests in parishes is provided by Talley, which had a stake in nine churches and sixteen chapels by 1271.⁶⁷

The Cistercian ban on the acquisition of churches and tithes did not outlast their first twenty years in Britain. In a notorious case (1147) the monks of Barnoldswick (Kirkstall) destroyed the parish church which they claimed interfered with their own worship, an action upheld by the Cistercian archbishop of York and the Cistercian pope. They then proceeded to obtain possession of the patronage of the parochial chapels of the church which were themselves raised to the status of parish churches.⁶⁸ There was no such restriction on the acceptance of churches by the Savigniacs, although at least one abbot, Roger of Byland, followed Cistercian practice in refusing the offer of churches. When the union with Cîteaux took place in 1147 the Savigniacs were allowed to retain the churches and tithes in their control, and indeed accepted new ones. It has been argued that the union led to laxity, and was thus a source of decline and weakness among the Cistercians.⁶⁹ Certainly appropriations became more common after mid-century, and the order as a whole did not

scruple to accept from King Richard the grant of the Yorkshire church of Scarborough, whose revenues were intended to offset some of the costs of the general chapter.⁷⁰

Expenditure and consumption

The economic assets acquired by religious houses provided them with many of the basic necessities of life. They also generated cash, either from rents or services or from the sale of surplus produce. It is appropriate, therefore, before considering how the monastic economy was managed, to look briefly at why cash was required: what constituted the main items of expenditure in religious houses? First, items of food and drink which were not produced on the monastic lands were to be purchased. These might be staple items or more luxurious fare, such as Gascon wine and spices from the East, bought, perhaps, for the entertainment of important guests at the abbot's or abbess's table. The head of a religious house, as we have seen, often invited members of important local families to dine, and was an established part of the social scene. The church and claustral buildings needed wax candles for lighting, and the kitchen and warming house fuel for cooking and heating. Each of the monastic officials required money to discharge his or her obligations: the almoner, for instance, to feed and clothe the poor, or to provide a few pence in charity; the kitchener for implements and cooking utensils; the sacrist for equipment for the church, cloth and plate for the altar, and vessels and vestments for liturgical use; the monk or nun in charge of the scriptorium for skins for parchment and the equipment required for their preparation. Some of these goods, to be sure, could be crafted in the monastic workshops; some expenses, too, could be met by special donations or by utilizing the talents of the monks. Not all houses were as lucky as Bury, however, where the rebuilding of the almonry in stone was partly financed by 'Walter the physician, the almoner', who 'gave a large donation of money that he had made from his medical practice'.⁷¹

Regular expenditure included the payment of servants and hired labour, both at a religious house itself and on its outlying farms, granges and manors, where shepherds, woodsmen and workers in the fields would all be required. The numbers would have swelled at certain times of the year, as at harvest. At the monastery the abbot or abbess sometimes had need of extra staff. Of Abbot Samson of Bury Jocelin records that 'if at any time, responding to the request of some important person or friend, he employed any page-boys or harpists or anyone of that kind in his household, he wisely got rid of such unnecessary extras as soon as an

opportunity arose of travelling abroad or going on a journey'.⁷² Guests evidently did not only require food and drink at the abbot's table, but expected entertainment as well; and not all the abbots were as prudent as Samson in trying to minimize expenditure.

Finally, a monastery or nunnery could be involved from time to time in two major pieces of expenditure: in the purchase of lands, which we shall look at shortly, and in building. Clearly, the latter activity and its associated expenditure fluctuated; at times, sustained rebuilding campaigns were a severe drain on monastic resources, which were called on to provide materials – wood, stone, lead and glass – as well as to pay the workforce.⁷³ But there was also more regular building and repair work to be financed, in the claustral buildings and the monastic workshops, farms, granges, mills, sheepfolds and cattle sheds. This could consume no little money, and Abbot John of Hertford expended over £100 in repairing the mills belonging to St Albans Abbey.⁷⁴ Monastic account rolls – such as the particularly good example from the Cistercian abbey of Beaulieu from the year 1269/70 – illustrate the nature of monastic expenditure, great and small, usual and extraordinary. The 18d. spent that year on the abbey manor of Great Faringdon 'in guarding the roads in the times of fairs and market, lest anyone avoid the payment of tolls' may have been a regular item of expenditure; and the annual stipend of the steward (53s. 4d.), bailiff (13s. 4d.), reeve (26s. 6d.) and catchpole (9s. 8½d.) certainly would have been. But it was surely not every year that the abbey's keeper of the pleas spent 67s. 6d. on gifts to persons 'hastening several pieces of business' through the courts, or 15s. 5d. 'for two chests bought for the safekeeping of charters'. The total expenses of the keeper of the pleas was just one penny-farthing less than his receipts: such balance between monastic income and expenditure was not always easy to achieve.⁷⁵

THE MANAGEMENT OF ECONOMIC RESOURCES

The administration of manors

A religious house which had been granted a manor could do one of two things. First, it could retain the manor in demesne, and cultivate it itself. In such circumstances the manor was usually placed under the administration of a lay reeve or bailiff, who was responsible for arranging for the foodstuff produced on the demesne, and rents in money and kind, to be conveyed to the abbey or priory. Alternatively, the manor could be leased or farmed out to a tenant. After the Conquest a number of tenancies were created to help the monastery fulfil its obligations of military service.⁷⁶ On these and other tenancies a lease stipulated the length of time the land was

to be held by the tenant, the services due and the amount of rent to be paid. Such an arrangement had the advantage of releasing the house from the responsibility of administering the land and of yielding a regular, though fixed, cash income. In the first part of the twelfth century leasing out of Benedictine estates was common with respect to both urban property and rural manors. The York abbey of St Mary's for example, leased many of its properties in the city and its rural holdings to tenants for a mixture of services and cash rents. In 1176 all of Peterborough's manors appear to have been leased out.⁷⁷ More than thirty manors of Westminster (one-third of those mentioned in Domesday Book) were farmed out in the late twelfth century.⁷⁸

During the twelfth century, however, the disadvantages of this system became apparent. Prices were rising, but income from fixed rents remained stable, and tenant rather than landlord benefited from the sale of surplus food at market. From around 1150 monastic landlords began to attempt to take back into their own direct exploitation lands which had been rented out at a fixed charge. Leases which expired were not renewed; and on occasion a religious house went to law to regain possession of its estates. This was not always an easy task because of the length of time which had elapsed since the creation of a tenancy. The abbey of Bury St Edmunds hoped, on the death of Adam of Cockfield around 1198, to repossess three manors which the family had held for rent. However, after going to law the monks failed to dislodge Adam's heirs, because it was judged that he and his father and grandfather had held the manors in fee farm for over one hundred years. The monks were unable to resume the manors as demesne and had to be satisfied with an annual rent.⁷⁹ At Peterborough a move towards direct management of manors and estates can be seen under Abbot Benedict (1177–93), and among the first lands to be reclaimed as demesne was Biggin Grange, the large manor created from forest assart. The vacancy account of 1210 shows that by that date all the abbey manors had been brought back into direct exploitation.⁸⁰ The process of reclamation of the abbot's manors at Bury began under Samson (1182–1211), and the pages of Jocelin's chronicle allow us to see an energetic abbot at work on his manors.⁸¹ The writer's only regret was that Samson was not as solicitous over the manors belonging to the convent. Elsewhere the process of reclaiming manors was slow. Westminster's manor of Deerhurst, given by Edward the Confessor and farmed in fee between 1138 and 1157, was not repossessed until purchased back in 1299. The manor of Hampstead, originally granted by King Æthelred and fee farmed in the twelfth century, was redeemed between 1246 and 1258.⁸²

The taking back of lands into demesne and a move towards direct

farming led to a revolution in estate management which is discernible both in the ways in which financial affairs were managed at the abbey or priory and externally, on its manors. As we have seen, in the post-Conquest period and into the twelfth century there developed in Benedictine houses a system of administration through obedientiaries: monks were given a particular area of responsibility, and received and expended revenues for that purpose. Thus the revenues of Tavistock's appropriated church of Milton Abbot were assigned to the sacrist and the almoner. The Essex manor of Paglesham was granted in the early twelfth century to the almoner of Westminster for alms and pittances.⁸³ Each obedientiary appointed his own bailiff on his manors, and received the income himself. This led in many cases to inefficiency and waste, examples of which at Bury are chronicled by Jocelin of Brakelond. One dispute occurred in 1197 when the abbot ordered the prior to pay the cellarer an additional sum of £50 per annum to supplement his income, which the cellarer thought inadequate. The cellarer still failed to end the year 'in the black', and the abbot turned to his monks for advice on how to deal with the large debt which had accumulated:

Many cloister monks were glad to hear these words and half-smiled to themselves, saying in private that what the abbot had said was correct. The prior put the blame on the cellarer, and the cellarer blamed the guest-master. Each man made excuses for himself.⁸⁴

And so the monks sought a solution to the financial problems of the abbey, which had arisen largely from the decentralization of its finances. Even very small houses, such as Brecon with only eight monks, had a prior, sub-prior, cellarer, chamberlain, sacrist and almoner, all in receipt of their own income.⁸⁵ The disadvantages of the obedientiary system, then, were a lack of central policy for economic management and the consequent danger of waste, inefficiency and abuse.

What we see in the thirteenth century, in the wake of a movement to high farming, is accordingly the development of a central system for managing the economy. Canterbury was early in the field of improved financial management. A central treasury emerged at Christ Church from the 1160s, and a regular audit from 1225.⁸⁶ A parallel development was the redefinition of the relationship of the administration of manors to the central economy. This is also well documented at Christ Church, Canterbury, where the major revolution in estate management was the work of Prior Henry of Eastry (1285–1331).⁸⁷ The most important priory estates had long been grouped into four custodies, east Kent, the Weald and Romney Marsh, Essex, and the counties of the Thames valley, over each of which was placed a warden, who had a supervisory role; much

power for deciding policy on individual manors and in financial matters was left to the local serjeants and reeves. Under Henry of Eastry the wardens were exclusively monk-wardens, and their administrative and financial powers were greatly increased. They appointed and supervised bailiffs or reeves for each of the manors, and presented their accounts at the priory. The system was not without its dangers, for although the monk-wardens were supposed to be resident at the priory, they might easily stay on the manors and slip into the lack of discipline associated with non-residence; they were, however, more accountable. The manorial accounts submitted by the monk-wardens were audited at the priory by a group of senior monks who ran the central treasury, and decided general policy with regard to the estates. The prior acted in consultation with both the monk-wardens whose manors he toured and the senior monks. During his long period of office Henry of Eastry turned the priory deficit into a healthy profit.

Similar developments took place at other Benedictine houses. From the late thirteenth-century account rolls of Peterborough Abbey we begin to get a clearer picture of how its estates were run. Two monk-wardens were, as at Canterbury, responsible for the management of the estates, although they were associated with a lay steward. The abbey manors were grouped into three areas (the Soke of Peterborough, Northamptonshire, and Lincolnshire) each under a lay bailiff who organized both the labour services of customary tenants and also the stipendiary labour which became necessary: cowmen, shepherds and ploughmen and so on. Biggin Grange in the early fourteenth century employed twenty-five full-time and three part-time workers who cost the abbey over £50 per annum.⁸⁸ Elsewhere there was variation on this general method according to the size of the house, the location of its estates and whether they lay in a compact area or were scattered. Some houses employed a single lay steward of the estates, who travelled around the monastic property and reported direct to the cellarer. Late thirteenth-century Oseney, an Augustinian house which organized its estates through manors, divided its lands into bailiwicks which were administered by a number of officials who presented their individual accounts at the abbey.⁸⁹ Despite local variations it is clear that the most important developments in the exploitation of monastic estates in the thirteenth century, that is, in the era of high farming, were the establishment of a common treasury and committees of audit, which replaced the decentralized obedientary system. These developments encouraged more concentrated and efficient farming, as they allowed manors to specialize in the production of commodities, and for livestock to be moved from one manor to another.⁹⁰

The Cistercians and the grange economy

Right from the outset the Cistercians avoided the dangers associated with the decentralization of administration through obedientiaries by entrusting financial power to a single cellarer.⁹¹ But the differences in economic practice were more fundamental than that, for the White Monks aimed to operate outside the existing manorial system and deliberately rejected the kind of labour services on which the Benedictines relied. They therefore did not administer their estates through manors, but evolved a system of farming through granges. Their distinctive grange economy came to be emulated by other groups and orders, who acquired lands on the fringes of settlement, notably the Premonstratensians and Gilbertines, but also the Augustinians and, in some instances, the Benedictines. When a Cistercian house acquired substantial holdings in a district, a grange, or farm, was established from which the surrounding arable was farmed and the pasture lands controlled. In order that monastic discipline should not be undermined, Cistercian regulations stipulated that granges were to be no more than a day's journey from the mother house; thus the lay brethren who supervised the grange were able to return to the mother house for the offices on the greater festivals. This ruling supposed that estates would not be too far distant, but gradually the acquisition by some abbeyes of far-flung property meant that it was ignored. Byland abbey, for instance, created an important grange at Bleatarn, over sixty miles from the abbey across the Pennines in Westmorland.⁹² The dispersal of granges was swift. Fountains Abbey, founded in 1132, established its first grange at Aldburgh in 1145/6; Meaux created seven granges in its first twenty years; and by the close of the twelfth century the eight Yorkshire houses between them controlled seventy-four granges.⁹³ The first task in the creation of a grange was to acquire and consolidate land. Where the monks were operating within an existing pattern of settlement, some depopulation took place, with the peasants being resettled or absorbed into the community as lay brethren. This took place at Meaux's home grange (North Grange), Pipewell's West Grange, at Byland and at Barnoldswick (Kirkstall). In the interests of economy and efficiency, efforts were made, through gift and purchase, to consolidate land holdings within the area of a grange. The activities of successive abbots of Meaux, which have been described as 'calculated and empirical', are well documented in the abbey chronicle. It took a mere twelve years, from 1160 to 1172, to consolidate Moor Grange; and in the face of opposition from interested parties, other landowners were expelled from areas of the East Riding which came to be covered by a network of granges.⁹⁴

Each grange was provided with a set of buildings which would have

varied according to the nature of the terrain and dominant form of agriculture. Some monastic chroniclers noted when grange buildings were built. The fourth abbot of Meaux was said to have 'constructed very many buildings in granges';⁹⁵ and Abbot Richard Dunham of Louth Park (1227–46) built in his abbey's granges 'halls and chambers, dormitories and dining-rooms for guests, and barns, cowhouses and sheepfolds'.⁹⁶ The buildings of the grange were substantial, although archaeological investigation as well as documentary research has modified the earlier thesis that granges were 'mini-abbeyes'.⁹⁷ Some grange buildings, like Cawston Grange of Pipewell Abbey, were indeed conceived on a lavish scale, but generally the essential buildings comprised living quarters for the lay brethren with dormitory, kitchen and bakehouse, a chapel or more modest oratory, a granary, threshing barn, and pens for the animals. Some granges had sheds for the storage of wool; however, the most important building would have been the barn, where grain was stored before transport to abbey or market. The fine thirteenth-century barn of Beaulieu Abbey at Great Coxwell (Berkshire), which served as the focus of the Faringdon estates, survives to show how large and imposing the grange barn could be. The buildings were often enclosed, and varied in extent. Neath's grange at Monknash was at the centre of over a thousand acres of arable, and comprised an enclosure of over one mile square, surrounded by earthen banks; the grange buildings included a granary over 200 feet long, a dovecot and three mills.⁹⁸

Some granges were predominantly arable; others, although a minority, like Strata Florida's Cwmystwyth grange, were largely pastoral. Most, however, operated a mixed economy, like another Strata Florida grange, Mefenydd, where oats were grown below the 250-metre contour and sheep farmed above it.⁹⁹ Some had more specialized activities. At North Grange of Meaux there was a tile-kiln, and tanners and smiths who, between 1235 and 1249, were transferred to the abbey and to Wawne Grange.¹⁰⁰ Granges were staffed by lay brethren, one of whom, in overall charge, was known as the granger. The extent of Cistercian lands meant that there was no way that they could be cultivated 'by the labour of their own hands'. In practice, even an abbey with a large number of lay brethren could not have staffed its granges entirely from among their ranks, and on most granges the *conversi* would have numbered only a handful who supervised peasant workers. Non-manorial lands carried with them no customary labour, and the Cistercian statutes eschewed gifts of serfs and villeins. Nevertheless the White Monks did, on occasion, accept grants of villagers and their families and services. This was not sufficient to provide either permanent or seasonal labour for the harvest, and the monks had to rely on hired workers. The Cistercians were

therefore dependent on local labour, possibly in some cases (as at Thorpe Underwood Grange of Fountains Abbey) provided by those who had been dispossessed of their land. Archaeological evidence suggests that the Cistercians settled peasant labourers on the edges of their remoter granges where there was no labour to hand. The earthworks of Cayton Grange of Fountains Abbey and at Braithwaite (Jervaulx) are suggestive of two settlements, the grange enclosure and houses for peasant cultivators and hired labourers. Croo Grange (Meaux) shows surviving earthworks to the west of the grange buildings which probably represent peasant accommodation.¹⁰¹ This is the reverse of the view of the White Monks as depopulators; 'resettlement' rather than 'depopulation' might better describe their activities here.¹⁰²

As the monastic expansion of lands continued unchecked in the twelfth century there was a real danger of overlap of interests. The Cistercians themselves had early decided that granges of different houses should not lie within two leagues of each other. In 1164 they reached a similar agreement with the Gilbertines: no house of either order was to have a grange or sheepfold within two English leagues of each other. Many nunneries had granges, particularly those which styled themselves Cistercian. Stixwold, for instance, operated a grange economy: the nuns controlled eight granges where they carried on a mixed farming, the production of cereal crops and the rearing of sheep.¹⁰³ The Yorkshire nunnery of Swine received a grant of pasture in Spaldington for the grazing of cows, sheep, mares and foals, with twelve acres of land on which to construct a grange.¹⁰⁴ Even the Black Monks came to have properties which approximated to the Cistercian grange, especially in areas newly cleared. The monks of Peterborough received a confirmation in 1189 of an assart of 400 acres near Oundle, which they called at first the 'New Place', and later La Biggin or Biggin Grange; it was to become one of the largest of the abbey manors.¹⁰⁵ The Benedictines of Crowland established granges on the Lincolnshire lands which they had brought into cultivation.¹⁰⁶ By 1301 the Benedictine nuns of Yedingham had a grange at Sinnington which had been built around the grant of the church and odd parcels of land; and the nuns and canons of Sempringham consolidated estates at Woodgrange (Bulby) out of a total of eighteen grants.¹⁰⁷ And so we could multiply examples of houses of all orders which emulated the Cistercian grange economy, the classic element of which was the consolidation of estates, free from all customary service and farmed directly using wage labour supervised by a few lay brethren or (in non-Cistercian houses) monks.

As the thirteenth century wore on, the grange economy changed. From being a 'demesne farm, directed by lay brethren and worked by a

dependent peasantry'¹⁰⁸ granges came to be leased. Until 1208 the general chapter insisted on upholding the original prohibition of the leasing of granges to lay people; in that year, however, it allowed houses to rent out their distant lands. The response to this relaxation evidently caused concern, for in 1214 and again in 1215 the original ban was renewed. However, pressure was increasing for permission to take lands out of direct production, and in 1220 this was given: the general chapter allowed abbeys to rent their granges and other lands for a term of years if they were considered by senior monks to be 'less useful' to the house. The White Monks were, accordingly, considering steps which were entirely the reverse of the economic trend among Benedictine houses: the general chapter permitted the leasing of lands which were being farmed directly at the time when the Black Monks were trying hard to bring back rented lands into demesne.¹⁰⁹ It is not entirely clear why the Cistercians should have turned to the leasing of lands in the early thirteenth century when they could have hoped to benefit from the same kind of economic advantages – a labour glut, low wages and high prices paid for produce – which had brought many Benedictine houses to direct exploitation of their estates. It may be that a clue lies in the general chapter's ruling of 1208 allowing *distant* lands to be leased. Was it perhaps a desire to preserve monastic discipline, indeed adhere to the ruling that granges should not be more than a day's journey from the abbey, that made them consider taking dispersed estates out of direct farming? And was it, perhaps, the difficulties, which some houses evidently encountered, in controlling and supervising the lay brothers which reinforced the wisdom of this course of action? Or was it that, when abbeys needed ready money, it was easier and quicker, if, in the area of high farming, in the long run less profitable, to lease for cash than farm land directly? Certainly it seems unlikely, in the early thirteenth century, that abbeys were simply unable to staff and work the demesne. British Cistercian houses seem not to have taken advantage of the general chapter's ruling in great numbers before the late thirteenth century. Meaux Abbey started to rent out its granges in 1286. The grange economy of Furness was apparently intact in 1292 but began to break up shortly afterwards. Fountains Abbey probably held all its granges in direct production in the late thirteenth century, but like many northern houses it suffered particular financial problems because of the damage its estates sustained during the Scottish wars, and it was for this reason that the monks sought permission in 1336 to lease three of the abbey granges to lay persons. By 1363 fifteen out of twenty-three granges of Fountains were leased to tenants. It was therefore in the fourteenth century, rather than the thirteenth, that the greatest changes took place in the Cistercian economy, and that granges came to be leased in any numbers. The

process was accelerated, indeed partly caused, by the decline of the class of lay brothers. Even before the Black Death decimated the population and led to a shortage of labour, the numbers of *conversi* had dropped, as would-be recruits sought employment in the secular market rather than in the service of a religious house.¹¹⁰ As I have argued earlier, there is evidence of discontent among the lay brethren by the late twelfth century; and it was thus a combination of labour problems, economic pressure and social unrest which led to a widespread practice of leasing and to the break-up of grange estates.

Religious houses as traders and exporters

Under the more intensive direct farming method with its improved techniques, food was grown to provide surplus for sale in the markets of Britain and abroad. Corn from monastic lands was sold in the markets of London; the houses of Kent exported grain to Flanders; Glastonbury sent cheeses for sale in Southampton and Winchester.¹¹¹ The most important commodity in which the religious houses traded, however, was wool. For generations before the coming of the White Monks the English Benedictines had kept flocks of sheep and surplus wool must have been sold, but there is little evidence for widespread or organized trade. The contribution of the Cistercians to the production of wool was highly significant, and under their management sheep and wool became the principal cash-crop of the monasteries of Britain. Contemporaries noticed this, and in 1193 the historian William of Newburgh remarked that wool was 'the chief part of their substance'. The Cistercians settled for the most part in areas which were outside the manorial economy, and came into possession of vast tracts of upland and moor suitable for the keeping of flocks: in Northumbria, Yorkshire, the Welsh hills and Scottish uplands, and in the Cotswolds. Based on their granges, a relatively small force of lay brethren could organize the keeping of large flocks. At appropriate locations within the grange the monks constructed *bercariae*, sheepfolds. The well-documented abbey of Meaux had, in the 1280s, 2,000 sheep at Sutton Grange accommodated in eight *bercariae*. Part of the importance of the Cistercians lay, therefore, in the ubiquity of their sheep pastures and the size of their flocks. But there was more to it than this, and in many aspects of sheep farming the Cistercians were innovators. Whereas the Benedictines sold mixed fleeces, the Cistercians graded them and sold wool of varying quality. They also paid attention to problems of breeding, nutrition and disease. They became entrepreneurs, and far from relying on their own wool, their lay brethren bought up the stock of small producers to supplement their own yield. As early as 1157 the general chapter forbade such purchase of wool for resale, but the prohibition

appears to have been ignored. The crop was also boosted by tithes, and wool from these three sources meant that the Cistercians became the most important monastic wool producers in Britain.

It became the practice for merchants both native and foreign, or their agents, to visit and inspect the flocks of sheep on Cistercian estates. They were then able to assess the potential of the wool and offer a price for the year's yield. After shearing, the wool was taken to a central wool house for cleaning, sorting and packing. Meaux's wool house was at nearby Wawne Grange; Beaulieu had a collecting point some three miles from the abbey; while the nuns of the Benedictine priory of Arden, who possibly did not have a facility of their own, used the wool shed of Byland Abbey. On at least one occasion Dundrennan Abbey stored its wool at a grange of Holm Cultram.¹¹² It is clear from contracts which have survived from the thirteenth century that some houses (such as Fountains, Rievaulx, Meaux and Vaudey) were expected to prepare the wool at the abbey; other contracts specify that the merchants were to send in their own men. A contract of 1275, for instance, stated that Darnhall Abbey was to supply twelve sacks of *collecta* as good as that supplied by the monks of Dore: this wool was to be dressed at Hereford by a man sent by the merchant for whom the abbey was to find board and lodging for as long as the work took.¹¹³ After dressing and packing the wool was delivered, generally at the expense of the vending abbey, to a sea port for export to the continent. Those houses which had secured urban property would have found it useful in the context of both storage of wool and the accommodation of officials.

It will be clear from this description that Cistercian wool was bought in advance after the merchant's agent had inspected the wool 'on the sheep'. It was but a small step from this to agreeing to a sale further in advance. A house would pledge its wool for a number of years to a purchaser, for an agreed price. This could be to the advantage of the monastery, but there are many instances in which it backfired, and the monks or canons were obliged to compensate the purchaser when the yield had been poor. Monastic chroniclers were quick to note when disease such as murrain decimated their flocks. In the year 1269/70 the monks of Beaulieu lost over half their lambs and 16 per cent of their adult sheep through disease.¹¹⁴ These problems were exacerbated when the wool yield had already been bought and paid for. The practice of pledging wool in advance was an understandable but unfortunate one. Its dangers were recognized by the general chapter, which in 1181 made an attempt to limit advance sales to one year. This was, however, unsuccessful. The earliest British instances of the practice of selling in advance appear to relate to sales to local dealers. In 1194–5 Martin son of Edric paid £5 to

the Crown for a quick judgement in his claim against the nuns of Swine for six sacks and four stone of good wool and four sacks of other wool, as well as ten marks, which may well have been sold to him in advance.¹¹⁵ The practice is more commonly recorded in connection with overseas trade. In response to a government enquiry of 1275 the abbey of Meaux said that it had sold its wool for the next two years to the Scotti merchants of Piacenza, who had paid an advance of 400 marks, but for the ten years after that the wool was pledged to the Cerchi of Florence, who had paid an earnest of 1,600 marks.¹¹⁶

The Cistercians probably supplied wool to English weavers in towns such as Lincoln and Stamford, but the evidence is stronger for their export to continental markets. Various pieces of evidence help us to identify those houses most prominent in wool export, and the importance of this activity for their economy. The movement of abbey goods for sale was aided by freedom from the payment of tolls. The monks of Rievaulx Abbey, for instance, enjoyed freedom of movement for themselves and their goods, as early as 1133. King David I of Scotland granted similar liberties to May, Cambuskenneth, Dryburgh, Dunfermline, St Andrews and all the Cistercian houses; later kings confirmed these privileges.¹¹⁷ These may initially have been intended to cover local movement to market, but came to apply to the wider trading activities of the monks; many grants date from the second half of the twelfth and the thirteenth century, when such activities increased. By the late twelfth century many houses had secured tax concessions abroad – in the 1180s, for instance, the count of Flanders granted the monks of Melrose freedom from tolls there – and there are references to twelve houses, among them Beaulieu, Boxley and Buildwas, owning their own ocean-going vessels.¹¹⁸ From the thirteenth century comes evidence which ties these concessions more definitely to the wool trade. Royal licences were issued to trade abroad; and in 1224–5 fifteen Cistercian abbeys received permission to export wool.¹¹⁹

Other evidence comes from lists of wool-exporting religious houses compiled by foreign merchant houses. One, deriving from Flanders, has been dated not later than the 1260s.¹²⁰ It lists some 102 abbeys, priories and hospitals in Britain with wool available for sale overseas. No amount is given, but the list supplies, for half the houses, the price which their wool would command. Top of the list was the Welsh house of Neath, whose wool was valued at £50. Many of the houses had their wool valued at between £30 and £40, and the price given for the wool of Byland Abbey (£38) actually accords with what the monks received for wool sales in 1259. A later document (which has been dated to the years between 1281 and 1296), the *Pratica della Mercatura* of the Italian merchant

Francesco Balducci Pegolotti, lists some sixty-five British houses supplying Flemish and Italian merchants.¹²¹ Although its evidence has to be treated with extreme caution as regards the actual amount of wool available for export and its value, Pegolotti's list is a useful indicator of those houses which were active in the wool trade. Most of the houses concerned (85 per cent) were Cistercian, with several Premonstratensian and Gilbertine ones; and the greatest producer appears to have been Fountains Abbey, with seventy-six sacks available for export. The biggest producer among the non-Gilbertine nunneries was Stixwold, which had fifteen sacks for sale; from these and other figures it has been estimated that the flocks of the nunnery may have numbered 1,500 sheep yielding seven or eight sacks of wool, and that almost as much again for export derived from *collecta*.¹²² Pegolotti's list demonstrates the importance in wool production of north Yorkshire, the midlands and the Cotswolds, and shows that the Lincolnshire and Yorkshire houses were close rivals.

The production and export of wool was crucial to the well-being, even the survival, of many Cistercian houses. They, and to a lesser extent the Gilbertines and Premonstratensians, were so noted as wool producers that in 1193 one year's wool clip was confiscated from each of their houses as their contribution towards Richard I's ransom. Wool could be a source of wealth and of cash income with which to finance capital expenditure, such as building. It could also make the Cistercians a source of revenue for others: King John managed to mulct 24,000 marks from the Cistercians during the Interdict (1206–13), his financial exactions causing some houses temporarily to disband. However, a close dependence on one crop had obvious drawbacks, and the scab epidemic of the 1270s and 1280s brought several Cistercian houses to the brink of bankruptcy.¹²³ The Cistercians were pioneers in the large-scale production of wool and its export overseas, but their pre-eminence did not last. By 1300 their share in the production of the national wool crop was probably about one-sixth, less than it had been a century before.¹²⁴ Not only were the White Monks facing rivals from among the older monastic orders, but flocks on the pastures of the secular aristocracy had come to be as numerous as their own.

The land market and the money market

There were many occasions on which even the wealthiest and best-endowed religious houses failed to balance their income with their expenditure, borrowed money, and ended up in debt. Sometimes this was the result of mismanagement or incompetence. Abbot Hugh of Bury (1157–80) was no manager, and seeing the financial situation growing daily more desperate, he

sought refuge and consolation in a single remedy: that of borrowing money, to maintain at least the dignity of his household. In the last eight years of his life, sums of £100 or £200 were regularly added to the debt every Easter and Michaelmas. The bonds were always renewed, and further loans were taken out to pay the growing interest.

The problem spread:

from the top downwards, from the ruler to the ruled, so that before long each obedientary had his own seal and pledged himself in debt as he chose, to both Jews and Christians. Silk copes, gold vessels, and other church ornaments were often pawned without the consent of the convent.¹²⁵

Sometimes income was simply not sufficient to meet extraordinary needs, and perhaps the most obvious of these was building. At a time when the Cistercian economic ethic was at its purest, in the 1130s and 1140s, when the monks worked their own lands through the grange in order to live 'by the labour of their own hands', they were beginning to indulge in massive and costly building programmes. Money was necessary to pay for both material and skilled and unskilled labour. As the decades wore on, cash needed to be generated for other purposes, to develop overseas trade and to buy land to consolidate granges. Members of all orders came to make a contribution to the land market, and instances of purchase of estates could be found from all major houses. They bought in order to build up estates; and they sold or leased in order to shed distant and not easily exploited lands. One instance will suffice: between 1222 and 1307 Westminster Abbey bought six major and many minor properties. Capital had become available through more efficient management and direct farming to make possible this participation in the market.¹²⁶

Monastic involvement in the money market can be seen in other ways. During the period 1159–71 the Cistercian abbeys of Louth Park and Roche had borrowed money from the financier and merchant William Cade of St Omer, and were in his debt to the tune of 70 marks, and 22 pounds of wool and 2,200 fleeces respectively.¹²⁷ When Aaron the Jewish money-lender of Lincoln died in 1186, nine Cistercian houses were recorded as being in his debt, and three years later the king pardoned them a total debt of 6,400 marks for a cash payment of 1,000 marks. The chief debtor was Rievaulx, and it has been suggested that this abbey and others (Newminster, Kirkstead, Louth Park, Revesby, Rufford, Kirkstall, Roche and Biddlesden) were perhaps acting together to borrow money from the Jews.¹²⁸ This practice may illustrate houses borrowing money to finance their building, but there may be another reason, and it is worth while returning for a few moments to the Yorkshire house of Meaux for a glimpse of the involvement of the monks in the world of finance.

William Fossard, a benefactor of Meaux, persuaded Abbot Philip to accept land in Wharram le Street in return for discharging his debts of over 1,800 marks to the Jews. The abbot was a little alarmed at the prospect, but agreed when Aaron of Lincoln offered to forgo 500 marks if the abbey took on the debt. Tempted by Wharram, and two other parcels of land which were offered as pledges, Philip agreed to pay back Fossard's debt at a rate of 40 marks a year. Unfortunately for him, Aaron died shortly afterwards and the Crown called in his debts. When the 500 marks which had been remitted were demanded from Fossard, he explained that the abbey had sole responsibility for the entire debt. Eventually, after a long and costly court case, the abbot proved his point. What this incident shows us is a Cistercian abbey venturing far beyond primitive economic ideals into the world of lending and borrowing. The acquisition of Wharram was far from being a straightforward purchase of land but a conscious decision by Abbot Philip, albeit against his better judgement, to enter into the money-market.¹²⁹ Meaux was not alone in this, and there are other instances of monastic houses taking over the debts of the laity.¹³⁰ Monastic borrowing from the Jews was therefore linked to the acquisition of encumbered estates.¹³¹

We have already met religious houses as securers of loans from their patrons.¹³² In other instances they appear to have acted as a kind of private bank, where money could be held in relative security.¹³³ Of all the monastic orders who made a contribution to international finance, however, that of the Knights Templar is perhaps the most remarkable. The estates of the knights in the West were exploited solely for the cash which they could generate, and the major part of this income was destined for the upkeep of the order in the East. From early on, then, the knights developed a system of collecting, storing and transporting large sums of cash. They became known as international bankers and financiers and were used by many outside the order. Their houses were used as a kind of safe-deposit; it was in the London Temple, for instance, that King John stored the Crown jewels in 1204–5. The knights became money-lenders; in England they advanced loans to King John and to his son Henry III. They were also a part of the system of national taxation, as money raised in taxes was collected at the Temple before being transferred to the Exchequer. The knights' contribution to international finance was innovative and important.¹³⁴

But what, finally, was the significance of the monastic contribution to that economic activity with which they were most frequently engaged, agriculture? To find an assessment which applies across the board is difficult. One conclusion might be that with an important exception, that

of the Cistercian grange, the monastic orders introduced no innovations: in terms of the way in which they were managed there was little difference between ecclesiastical estates and those of the great lay lords. Change, notably the return to high farming, might be documented earlier on ecclesiastical estates than their lay counterparts, but both were subject to the same economic fluctuations of prices and wages. However, such a conclusion undoubtedly underplays the part of the religious orders in economic developments of the period. Members of all orders made a contribution to the opening up of marginal lands, and in the creation of granges and the attempt to consolidate demesne farming the White Monks were pioneers. 'A new scientific agriculture began with the Cistercians and their imitators, and it is to their initiative that we owe, among other things, the first establishment of many of those farms on the hills and on the flood-plains of our rivers that have survived intact as units to this day.'¹³⁵ Colin Platt here rightly emphasizes the monastic contribution to the development of the British landscape. The twelfth- and thirteenth-century economy of Britain owed a great deal to the religious orders, not least because they were large farming corporations, and economic forces of the thirteenth century favoured those landowners who were engaged in agriculture on a large scale.